Full-Time Enrollment in the First Term of Postsecondary Education

Summary

*Full-time enrollment in the first term of postsecondary education* is associated with higher rates of postsecondary attainment, particularly for students entering community colleges. Students who enroll full time are better positioned to attempt and earn postsecondary credits in their first year of study and maintain momentum towards a credential.

Background

In recent years, national attention has turned to improving college completion, and full-time enrollment is one malleable factor that is associated with higher attainment rates. It is important that students are aware of how their choices about full-time versus part-time enrollment may affect whether they earn a credential and how long it will take to do so. This information is particularly important as college costs continue to rise and some students may consider enrolling part time in order to earn money to pay for college.

*Research Highlights*

Students who enroll full time throughout their postsecondary careers are more likely to earn a bachelor’s degree compared with their peers who do not enroll full time. Among those who first attended a four-year institution, the six-year attainment rate for bachelor’s degrees for students who enrolled continuously full time is 69 percent, compared with 48 percent for students with mixed full- and part-time enrollment (Radford, 2008:11). Students who enroll full time will earn an award more quickly and incur lower costs compared with students with less intensive enrollment.

Among beginning postsecondary students in 1995–96 who first attended a community college, students who attended full time in the first term had higher rates of bachelor’s and associate’s degree awards. The six-year attainment rates for bachelor’s and associate’s degrees were 17 and 21 percent, respectively, among those whose first term was full time, compared with 4 and 12 percent for those who started part time. Among beginning postsecondary students in 2003–04, the equivalent rates were 17 and 18 percent for first-
term full-time enrollment, compared with 6 and 11 percent for first-term part-time enrollees (Horn and Skomsvold, 2011: Table 5B).

**Indicator Details**

**Operational Definition**

This measure is operationally defined as having enrolled full time in the first term of postsecondary education after high school graduation. Enrollment intensity (full-time and part-time) was determined and reported by the postsecondary institution. See immediate enrollment for the definition of first term.

**Data Sources**

Full-time enrollment in the first term of postsecondary education was constructed from state postsecondary records for in-state public institutions, supplemented by National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) records for private and out-of-state institutions. NSC records identify students as being enrolled full time, half time, or less-than-half time.

**Related Measures**

*Immediate enrollment* counts all students enrolled either full or part time in a postsecondary institution in the first term following high school graduation. *Enrolled continuously in postsecondary education for 2 years or earned an award within 2 years* indicates whether students were enrolled continuously in postsecondary education for two years after their initial enrollment or earned a postsecondary credential within that time. For purposes of the pilot, we also developed measures for 3, 4, 5 and 6 years of continuous enrollment. The standard time period for reporting credential attainment is 150 percent of “normal” time, which for a bachelor’s degree is six years. A complete list of postsecondary measures created for the pilot can be found in List of Pilot Variables.

**How to Use the Measure**

Full-time enrollment in the first term of postsecondary education is a useful early indicator of potential postsecondary success. Such enrollment is associated with postsecondary attainment, particularly for students entering community colleges. Full-time enrollment helps students attempt more credits and maintain momentum towards a credential.

The measure can be constructed for students attending state public postsecondary institutions and, if NSC data are used, attending private and out-of-state institutions. The meas-
ure can be used to describe an overall cohort or to compare full-time enrollment rates across groups of interest.

**Prompting Questions**
Users may find it helpful to think about the following questions:

- What differences in full-time enrollment do you see among demographic groups?
- Are there systematic differences in full-time enrollment rates by the type of postsecondary institution students attended?
- How do postsecondary persistence and completion rates compare for students initially enrolling full and part time?
- What kinds of information would be most helpful for students deciding whether to enroll full or part time?

**Presentation**
This section describes lessons from the pilot about how to present information about postsecondary enrollment intensity effectively to state, district, and school audiences. State and local staff who are thinking about how to use the rich source of information in their state longitudinal data systems (SLDS) may find the examples presented here a useful guide for their own practice. These examples were developed through extensive conversations with, and iterative review by, stakeholder advisory groups in the three participating pilot states.

**Standard Display**
The standard reports included in the pilot web tool, *Advance*, combine a graphical display, a table containing demographic detail, the option to switch between percentages and counts, state-specific variable definitions, notes about the data and interpretation, questions to prompt thought and action, and the ability to export results to a PDF document or Excel spreadsheet. As seen on the next page, the graphical display for *postsecondary enrollment status or intensity* is a pie graph with slices for the percentage of a selected cohort who enrolled full, half, and less-than-half time. Below the graph, a table shows additional detail, first repeating the overall result (total row) and then disaggregating results by three student demographic characteristics of general interest: gender, race/ethnicity, and economic disadvantage status. Definitions of terms and symbols and other related information appear to the right of the graph and table to provide context and
support in understanding and interpreting the results. See the Sample Advance Report to view all standard report components.

To protect student privacy, results based on less than a state-defined minimum number of students were suppressed and replaced with a footnote indicating small numbers. Typically, the state practice for suppressing assessment results in public reporting was followed (a minimum of either five or ten students for the states participating in the pilot). Users can toggle between “Percentages” and “Counts” in the table to obtain the number of students upon which each percentage is based. This helps users interpret results appropriately, since results based on small numbers may be more volatile than those based on larger numbers.

**Enrollment in postsecondary education for 2008 high school graduates, by location, type of institution, and enrollment status**
Enrollment in postsecondary education for 2008 high school graduates, by enrollment status in fall 2008 and selected student characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Enrolled full-time</th>
<th>Enrolled half-time</th>
<th>Enrolled less than half-time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Percentages</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically disadvantaged</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not economically disadvantaged</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reading the table: Sixty-seven percent (67%) of the 2008 high school graduates who enrolled in postsecondary education immediately following high school graduation enrolled full time, while 30% enrolled half time and 3% enrolled less than half time. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of female graduates who enrolled immediately were enrolled full time, compared with 63% of their male classmates.

**Comparative Display**

Users often gain insight by comparing their school’s or districts results with results for similar schools or districts. For example, how does postsecondary enrollment intensity compare among districts with similar proportions of economically disadvantaged students, English Language Learners, or proficiency rates on the state’s 8th grade math test (a measure of achievement prior to high school)?

An effective presentation can be constructed by grouping schools or districts in a state into deciles according to the characteristics of interest. For example, schools or districts within a state can be grouped into deciles based on the percentage of their students who were ever identified as economically disadvantaged in grades 8–12. Each decile represents 10% of the schools or districts in the state. The first (lowest) decile includes the 10% of schools or districts with the lowest percentage of students ever classified as eco-
nomically disadvantaged, while the tenth (highest) decile includes the 10% of schools or districts with the highest percentage of students ever classified as economically disadvantaged. Similar measures can be created for English Language Learner populations or 8th grade proficiency rates.

A bar chart can be used to illustrate how a school or district compares to similar schools or districts on selected characteristics. The following figure shows a comparative display for part-time enrollment during the first term of postsecondary education. The table shows additional detail.

Percentage of 2009 graduates enrolled part time during the first term of postsecondary education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Your district</th>
<th>Similar economically disadvantaged population</th>
<th>Similar English Language Learner population</th>
<th>Similar proficiency rate on the 8th grade math test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Percentage of 2009 graduates enrolled part time during the first term of postsecondary education, by selected student characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Percentages</th>
<th>Your district</th>
<th>Similar economically disadvantaged population</th>
<th>Similar English Language Learner population</th>
<th>Similar proficiency rate on the 8th grade math test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/ Pacific Islander</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically disadvantaged</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not economically disadvantaged</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

— Too few to report.

Reading the table: Forty-six percent (46%) of the 2009 high school graduates from your district enrolled part time during their first term of postsecondary education. In comparison, 52% of the 2009 graduates from districts with similar economically disadvantaged populations as your district enrolled part time; 34% of the 2009 graduates from districts with similar English language learner populations and 42% of the 2009 graduates from districts with similar 8th grade proficiency rates enrolled part time. Forty-eight percent (48%) of the 2009 high school graduates in your district who were female enrolled part time, compared with 43% of their male classmates.

Trends Over Time

Examining trends over time provides information on the consistency of results and whether postsecondary outcomes are holding steady, increasing or decreasing. Simple line graphs may be used to illustrate trend data as shown below.
Percentage who enrolled full time the first term of postsecondary education, among 2006–2009 high school graduates

Sources
