

Trying to Fit In: Barriers to Degree Completion for Part-Time Graduate Students

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Introduction

Navigating any higher education system can be difficult for students. Every school and program has its own set of rules and expectations. Unfortunately for some students, getting through a program from orientation to graduation can be more of a challenge if they move through the program in a non-traditional way. Countless studies have already been conducted in the area of adults or non-traditional students in undergraduate education. However, little scholarship is devoted to looking at students pursuing graduate degrees and even less is devoted to students in part-time graduate programs or students completing full-time graduate degrees at a part-time rate.

I first noticed the differences between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students while working in an undergraduate student advising office. Older adult students trying to finish their degrees often struggled in different ways than younger 'traditional' undergraduates. This observation aligns with what has already been studied in the literature. Currently I am finishing a part-time graduate degree, while still working full-time in student services. Throughout my program, I have noticed some differences between how full-time and part-time students at the same university persist through their degree programs.

While all graduate students feel frustration and barriers, there are different barriers to starting and completing a graduate program part-time while attending a traditional research university. Often times, graduate programs and services at large research universities are set up for full-time graduate students. Although some programs are offered specifically for part-time students, many on-campus services and resources can be scarce for this student population. Non-traditional graduate students are forced to navigate through a system that was not set up for them. I plan to study this specific group, part-time graduate students, though some of the same lenses (financial aid, working as students,

campus community) that have traditionally been used to focus on other student populations through a survey of students at one large urban Midwest research institution.

Project overview

This research explores factors that affect the persistence of part-time graduate students and how the part-time students at this university experience moving through their programs. I focused on factors graduate students feel are their biggest barriers, then looked specifically at which of those barriers are especially difficult for the part-time student population. I conducted a survey to explore barriers cited in the literature and compared answers given by a sample of full- and part-time graduate students at one university. Although all graduate students experience barriers to degree completion, part-time graduate students at ‘traditional’ research institutions often follow a non-traditional path to degree completion and therefore face increased and unique barriers to completing their degrees, different from their undergraduate and full-time graduate counterparts.

Significance

As the need for further education for work credentials continues to increase, so will the number of fully employed adults who enroll in part-time graduate programs (Kimmel, Gaylor, Grubbs, & Hayes, 2012). The landscape of higher education is changing (Selingo, 2013), and many schools around the nation are changing to meet the specific needs of non-traditional students (Hagedorn, 2005). If ‘traditional’ research institutions intend to attract working adults to graduate programs, there will need to be an increase in awareness of the barriers these students face while pursuing graduate degrees part-time in

their institutions. Understanding what current part-time graduate students feel are the largest barriers to their success will help faculty and staff better serve these students.

Research questions

To start this project, I considered the following questions:

- What do part-time graduate students at this university feel are their largest barriers to degree completion? Research and surveys often ask students questions based on what they assume students' barriers are. I am interested in how the students themselves perceive their own barriers.
- Do these barriers match those reflected in the literature? Issues like institutional fit (course times, on-campus services, campus community/cohort), balance (work, life, school), and financial (cost of attendance, student loans) are often cited as student barriers.
- Are there differences in how full-time and part-time graduate students answer the survey questions and does that mean they have different barriers to degree completion? If there is a large difference in the survey responses between full- and part-time students, we can begin to understand what services may have the greatest impact on this student population.
- What institutional changes can be recommended to increase part-time student success in degree completion? The main goal of this research is to explore barriers and hopefully alleviate or eliminate them.

Roadmap for the paper

In this paper I will first provide an overview of barriers traditionally associated with graduate and part-time graduate students. I will then explore the survey methodology and analyze how part-time graduate students responded to questions about barriers to their degree completion. Using Hagedorn's (2005) square-peg theory for adult learners navigating a traditional university setting, I will argue that part-time graduate students are non-traditional students, attempting to navigate a higher education system that is not set up for them.

As non-traditional students, they experience different barriers to degree completion than their full-time graduate and undergraduate counterparts, and therefore may require different support systems. I will show why increased or even different support for part-time or non-traditional graduate students is important. I will end the thesis by providing some recommendations to help graduate programs retain and support part-time students so they can work to successfully complete their programs.

Chapter 1: Survey of Student Barriers

In August 2010, an open letter offering tips and advice to new graduate students was posted on the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* website. Just one month later, another post was created for the website, this time an open letter to part-time graduate students. In the article author Mark Sample points out that the previous letter was, “geared toward full-time PhD students” and that many people pointed out in the comments that, “ whether they’re working on an MS, an MA, an MFA, or even a PhD, part-time grad students have their own set of concerns, their own challenges to navigate.” While barriers for part-time graduate students are recognized as an issue, it is hard to find literature that focuses on this population of students.

Countless studies have been conducted, theories analyzed, and models developed in an effort to better understand and serve students in higher education. A large portion of the literature focuses on the persistence of the ‘traditional college student,’ a student pursuing a four-year undergraduate degree immediately after high school. Some studies have focused on older adults or ‘non-traditional’ students pursuing bachelor’s degrees, and on graduate students, usually in full-time programs at the doctoral level. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2013 there were 1.66 million full-time and 1.24 million part-time post-baccalaureate students (master’s and doctoral students as well as professional students in law, medicine, etc.) enrolled in degree-granting institutions within the United States (2015). This means that there are nearly as many part-time students as there are full-time students at the graduate level; however, literature for this group of students is difficult to find.

Since the literature specific to part-time graduate students is sparse, I looked to the literature focused broadly on graduate students and literature focused on non-traditional

adult students in undergraduate programs to get an idea of some of the issues that may face these groups of students. Although not usually focused on the part-time graduate student population, those two areas in the literature were a helpful guide to determine common student barriers, help inform what questions I should ask in my survey, and also illustrate a need for additional research in this area.

Higher education is changing, and the “one-size -fits all” model of college no longer works for today’s students (Selingo, 2013). More and more students are electing to follow a non-traditional path through their degrees. Levine & Dean (2012) have described the current generation of undergraduate and recent graduates as facing the worst economy “in recent memory,” and as a result, many students are working while in school, taking fewer credits per term, and spending more time on their degrees. In graduate education, students not only work while in school but also juggle competing priorities like family and financial responsibilities (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Fairchild, 2003; Kasworm, 2012; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Many students are no longer motivated by the same need to enroll in a degree program, as the focus for students has shifted from seeking academic degrees to obtaining the skills necessary to advance in work careers (Kasworm, 2012). As the motivations for students enrolling in programs change, we need to work to understand the new student population better (Hegarty, 2011).

Many institutions are set up for a ‘traditional’ undergraduate population and may neglect adult students that are looking for evening, weekend, and online courses (Kasworm, 2012). Further, institutional factors like full-time fee structures even if attending part-time, campus locations, and daytime-only course offerings can be additional barriers for students (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Even if courses are offered at ideal times like at night, on the weekend, or online, campus services and staff may still only be available

during the daytime (Kasworm, 2012). Because student populations are changing (attending part-time, older/adults), students are struggling to fit the mold of the traditional student. This struggle includes finding support and socialization with their peers (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Programs set up using a cohort model, either officially or unofficially, offer a strong sense of support. However, part-time students are often unable to take advantage of relationships formed as part of a group or cohort due to the limited time they spend on campus with classmates and instructors (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012).

A common struggle for adult students (undergraduate and graduate) is balancing work, life, and school. In a study on full-time doctoral students, Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala, and McFarlane (2013) explored how difficult it can be for students to be successful in school and maintain a balance between school, on-campus work, and life. Several studies have explored the effects home responsibilities such as child activity schedules, childcare, and family time have on students (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Fairchild, 2003; Kasworm, 2012; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). These studies show that these factors have a negative effect on students because they add priorities that compete with the student's academic study. It can be difficult to schedule and pay for courses while balancing a family's schedule and budget (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Lack of support from family, work, and sense of not belonging with other students also has adverse effects on student persistence (Bates & Goff, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012).

While balancing family and school life is cited as a difficulty for students, working while attending school is specifically cited as one of the biggest barriers students face (Bates & Goff, 2012; Moro-Egido & Panades, 2010; Ritt, 2008; O'Conner & Cordova, 2010). Adults may have difficulty leaving full or part-time employment due to financial needs, but many still wish to pursue an advanced degree for greater career mobility (Kimmel, Gaylor,

Grubbs, & Hayes, 2012). One driving factor for the increase in students attending graduate school at the part-time level is employer-sponsored tuition assistance, where an employer agrees to pay for all or part of a student's tuition while the student is employed with the company (Bednar & Gicheva, 2013). Students may not have a choice to attend a traditional graduate program if they hope to take advantage of this assistance, so more and more students are considering enrolling in part-time programs or pursuing non-traditional graduate options. Their situation can get even more complicated if employers are unwilling to grant tuition assistance or allow flexible work hours to incorporate on-campus classes (Ritt, 2008).

Difficulty in financing education is a common theme for all student groups; however, dealing with competing financial priorities can add difficulty for adults in higher education (Kasworm, 2012). Graduate students are more likely to finance their own education rather than relying on family assistance (Bednar & Gicheva, 2013; Elliot & Friedline, 2013). Graduate tuition can be prohibitively expensive, and there are fewer loans and grants available to graduate students. Graduate loans themselves can increase the cost of graduate school with higher interest and accrual rates than those offered at the undergraduate level (Miley, 2012; Ritt, 2008). Loan interest rates can have an adverse effect on enrollment (Logue, 2012), and students may take a longer time to obtain a degree if they receive less funding (Cassuto, 2011; Kim & Otts, 2010). Additionally, external debt (for example credit card debt) can affect the health and abilities of students (Nelson, Lust, Story, & Ehlinger, 2008). Gururaj, Heilig, & Somers found that any form of financial aid is significant in promoting graduate student persistence (2010).

While my current study does not specifically focus on student demographics, like racial diversity, gender, or class, it is important to note that not all graduate students

experience exactly the same barriers in the same way. Levin, Jaeger, and Haley (2013) explored how racially underrepresented groups may experience additional barriers in their social identity and relationships with faculty. Socio-economic class is also a factor that can affect success in graduate school. Warnock and Appel (2012) explored how working-class graduate students may feel less academically prepared for graduate school than middle or upper class students. Additional studies could focus on the intersectionality of diversity and full- or part-time status in graduate education.

Although the literature does not directly focus on part-time graduate students, many of these barriers can affect all students. Part-time students face additional difficulty while they work to complete their degrees because while they still experience many of the same barriers, they do not have some of the same benefits full-time students enjoy. This could be considered a double disadvantage for this population. In the next section I will outline how this literature informed the survey development.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Instrument Development

In order to explore the research questions posed in the introduction, I wanted to first understand what students moving through a graduate program actually feel are their biggest barriers to degree completion. While departments and institutional surveys already collect data on tuition rates, graduation rates, and financial aid, there is little information available about other areas that are often cited in the literature as burdens to students. Information on social barriers (family and work lives) or institutional barriers (students' relationship to on-campus services, courses logistics, campus community) is rarely collected from part-time graduate students. Additionally, there does not seem to be any data from the point of view of the student-- nothing to indicate what students find to be their largest barriers to degree completion.

I decided to create and distribute a survey to graduate students. I felt a survey would allow me to both collect some of the information missing from the institutional data and also begin to understand student barriers from the point of view of the students. I chose a survey over other research methods, like interviewing individual graduate students, because a survey would allow me to gather information from more than a just a few students. If I had used interviews with students, I would have a much smaller pool of individual stories instead of responses from many more students that would help me start to paint a picture of how this group of students feels. It is necessary to have data that reflects how several students in the group feel, not how individual students feel, in order to provide recommendations for change.

Graduate students are incredibly busy, so I wanted to make sure that taking a survey was not a large additional burden. I developed the survey instrument using the 'social

exchange' recommendations set forth by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian in order to maximize the survey response rate, and make the process worthwhile for the students taking the survey (2014). The sociological theory of social exchange functions as a "framework used to explain how people realize their self-interests as well as achieve effective interaction with others in social groups" or simply put, "people are more likely to comply with a request from someone else if they believe and trust that the rewards for complying with that request will eventually exceed the costs of complying" (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014, p.24). Applied to survey development, the theory ensures that participants taking a survey will feel that it was worth their time. It was important to me that students believed they were able to share their viewpoints and make their issues known. When drafting the survey questions, it was vital for me to keep in mind the following: the time the survey would take to complete, the ease of taking it, and a rationale of the survey for students (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). It also helped that I administered the survey as a fellow graduate student from the same institution, so students felt I was a peer and not an administrator.

Literature and Survey Questions

Using the literature on adult and graduate student barriers, I created a survey to allow part-time graduate students to report which barriers affected their persistence. I decided to send the survey to both full- and part- time students to see if there was a difference in how the different student populations answered the questions. I tested the questions using informal, cognitive interviews with both full- and part- graduate students. Finally, I relied on my own experience as a part-time graduate student to inform some of the question development and analysis.

The survey questions are divided into a few key areas based on the review of the literature. Below I've provided examples of questions from my survey and justifications that show the relationship between the questions and literature on barriers. See Appendix 1 for the full version of the survey.

General Program and Cohort Questions

Part-time students are often unable to take advantage of the relationships formed as part of a group or cohort due to the limited time they spend on campus with classmates and instructors (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012). Some of the initial questions from my survey address this barrier. I first asked, "Do you consider yourself a part-time or a full-time graduate student?" and "Why? (credit load, program designation, personal feeling)" to see how a student's perception of the experience lines up with the university's designated full- and part- time status structures. It is important note that student load status may change from term to term, depending on students' programs and how they progress through it.

Additional survey questions related to on-campus relationships included "Do you feel like you are part of a cohort?" and provided the following definition for cohort in case students were not familiar with the term, "A group of students who start a program at the same time and complete most program courses together." If the student answered yes, the survey asked, "Do you feel being part of a cohort has made it easier to succeed in your program?" and if the student answered no, the survey asked "Do you feel you would be more likely to succeed if you were part of a cohort?" The survey then asked a more generic question about how much the student agrees with the statement "I feel I am part of the campus community." The goal of this section was to understand the student's perception of how helpful a cohort or on-campus relationship is to persistence.

On-Campus Service and Course Logistics Questions

As noted previously, institutional factors like full-time fee structures even if attending part-time, campus locations, and daytime-only course offerings can be barriers for students (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Questions from the survey that address this barrier include asking the students to “Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements: I feel I can take advantage of campus services (i.e. career center, professional development workshops for graduate students)” and “I can easily access the student services or program staff in my department for clarification, if I don’t understand a process or policy.” The survey also addressed questions like “How often do you feel getting to class at the scheduled time is difficult?” and “How often do you feel getting to campus is a difficult?” in order to determine how possible time and location barriers affected the students.

Work-Life Balance Questions

Several studies have explored the effects home responsibilities such as child activity schedules, childcare, and family time have on students (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Fairchild, 2003; Kasworm, 2012; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012). Graduate tuition can be prohibitively expensive, and there are fewer loans and grants available to graduate students (Miley, 2012; Ritt, 2008). Questions from the survey that address these barriers ask students to list how many hours per week do they do each of the following: hours spent working a job, hours spent as a primary caretaker of children / others, and hours spent in class and on homework. The survey also asked how students pay for tuition. Answer options included loans, personal/family income, employer tuition assistance,

program funding, RA/TA, and other. The goal of this section was to see the difference in answers between full and part-time students and if any of these factors impacted the student groups differently.

Largest Barrier Questions

This section of the survey allowed students to indicate which barriers presented the greatest struggle for them. Each part of the question, “Please rank the following factors from greatest to least as you feel they are barriers to degree completion, 1 being the greatest barrier, 8 being the least barrier,” relates to a barrier cited in the literature. The response options (and citations from the literature) are listed below:

- Cost of tuition (Cassuto, 2011; Kim & Otts, 2010).
- Working full-time while going to school (Bates & Goff, 2012; Moro-Egido & Panades, 2010; Ritt, 2008; O’Conner & Cordova, 2010)
- Family commitments while going to school (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Fairchild, 2003; Kasworm, 2012; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012)
- Getting to campus (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012; Kasworm, 2012).
- Time of course offerings (Shepherd & Nelson, 2012)
- Support from your program (Kasworm, 2012).
- Access to faculty (Gardner & Gopaul, 2012).

The goal of this question was to see how part-time students answered the question. The answers will inform the kinds of suggestions I make for further student support of this student group.

Survey Distribution:

I surveyed a sample of 1000 students at one large urban Midwest research university enrolled in a degree-seeking graduate program during spring 2015. Both full- and part-time students were included in the survey, 500 from each student population. I excluded students who had total suppression privacy setting on their student account, students in health professional programs, and students not actively enrolled in courses. I elected to use this institution's full and part-time qualifiers, so students taking 6 or more credits were sampled as full-time students and students taking 5 or fewer credits were sampled as part-time students.

I submitted the survey, cover letter, e-mail, and follow-up e-mail for Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval. The IRB determined that the study was exempt from review and I was allowed to distribute the survey to the indicated population of students (see Appendix 2).

Students were e-mailed the survey using university e-mail addresses. The cover letter indicated that any student who filled out the survey would be entered into a drawing for a \$50 Target gift card. This incentive was used to increase response numbers. I sent reminder e-mails after 2 weeks, and then closed the survey 2 weeks after that.

General Survey Results:

Of the 1000 survey requests sent, I received 295 survey responses: 144 from full-time students and 151 from part-time students. In general, all students, full- and part-time, reported feeling many barriers to degree completion. Three areas emerged as "barriers" for part-time students: cohort or group support, funding and paying for school, and working while going to school.

Results and Discussion

Before diving into the analysis, I must point out that this survey does not represent the views of all full-time and part-time students of this university. However, by looking at the survey responses, I am able to illuminate some of the common struggles that students are experiencing, and these are worth looking into more in depth. It is also essential that I point out that the survey was designed with part-time students in mind. As a part-time student myself, I have responded to university-wide surveys asking questions relevant only to full-time students, though they are distributed to get feedback from all graduate students. That experience left me feeling voiceless and frustrated at the institution and was part of the inspiration this project. While I did not want to make any full-time students feel that way with my survey, I chose to send the survey to both full- and part-time students to see which barriers were unique to part-time students, and which were relevant to all students.

As I looked through the survey responses, two results stood out immediately. The first is that both full- and part-time student populations struggle with graduate school, but barriers cited by each group are different. The full-time student survey responses indicated several barriers like lack of transparency in the dissertation process, inadequate funding for assistantships, and limited access to faculty. Part-time students indicated the barriers of having no cohort and feeling isolated, difficulty paying for tuition, and working full-time while going to school.

The second result that stood out to me in the survey responses was that the part-time student responses illustrated that this student population does not fit the mold of a "traditional graduate student" at a large research university like this one. One full-time graduate student responded to the survey stating, "The barriers discussed in this survey

seem very inconsequential for a full-time student with full research assistantship/financial support.” While I feel sorry that this student did not feel the survey was a helpful avenue to voicing concerns, the sentiment underscores my point and illustrated why this project was so important to me. Part-time students at this institution do not reflect the population of students the institution is set up for. The part-time students attempt to navigate a system that is not set up for them; they are non-traditional students.

To explore the notion that part-time graduate students at this large research institution are non-traditional students, I will use a theory from higher education developed by Linda Serra Hagedorn. In her article “Adult Students and Their ‘Fit’ in Postsecondary Institutions”, Hagedorn outlines “four corners of friction” areas where adult students struggle in an institution set up for traditionally aged students moving through traditional programs: access, success, retention, and institutional accommodation (2005). The theory demonstrates how adult students are “square pegs” trying to fit into the round hole of traditional university structure (2005). As adult students are generally non-traditional students at the undergraduate level, I argue that part-time students are also often non-traditional students in graduate programs. Hagedorn’s theory will help me illustrate parallels between non-traditional undergraduates and the non-traditional graduate students in my survey responses.

As noted above, there were three areas that emerged from the survey responses that I will focus on in more detail below. These sections take a deeper look into the part-time student responses to the survey, then explore how part-time students are non-traditional students using Hagedorn’s “square peg” theory sections of success, retention and institutional accommodation. These sections of the theory provide a helpful lens for my survey results. The “access” section I cannot use because my survey was administered

to students that are already enrolled, and did not question how students gained access to their programs. Finally I will make recommendations for how to assist part-time students in the future.

Chapter 3: Finding a cohort and campus community

The Barrier

Even though part-time graduate programs exist at this university, part-time students can still have a hard time taking advantage of graduate student resources. There are several on-campus resources that can be difficult for part-time graduate students to utilize even after they work through the logistics of getting to a campus location, or trying to work around courses that are only offered during the day.

An example of an on-campus resource that part-time graduate students cannot take advantage of is the ability to socially integrate with fellow graduate students on campus or network with faculty. Part-time students are not on campus and able to socialize as often, due to the limited time they spend physically on campus (Shepard, 2012). Support systems benefit student persistence.

Since many part-time students move through their programs in non-traditional ways, I wanted to see if part-time students felt that they were part of a cohort. Not belonging to a cohort or cohort-like support system was the first area from the survey that emerged as a barrier for part-time students. In the survey questions of this section, I used clarifying language in case students were not familiar with the concept of a cohort or were not part of a cohort-modeled program.

Survey Responses

The first question in this section of the survey asked students to respond to the following question “Do you feel like you are part of a cohort? (A group of students who start a program at the same time and complete most program courses together)” I asked the question this way because while some programs are set up in a cohort model, not all

students in that program may not experience it that way. On the other hand, students may feel like they are part of a cohort even if their program is not officially set up as one. For this question, I relied on the individual student’s perception of whether or not they felt like they were part of a cohort rather than an official program designation. *Figure 1* below illustrates the responses of both full- and part-time students to this question. Seventy percent of part-time student respondents indicated that they do not feel like they were part of a cohort, while 67% of full-time students do feel they belong to a cohort.

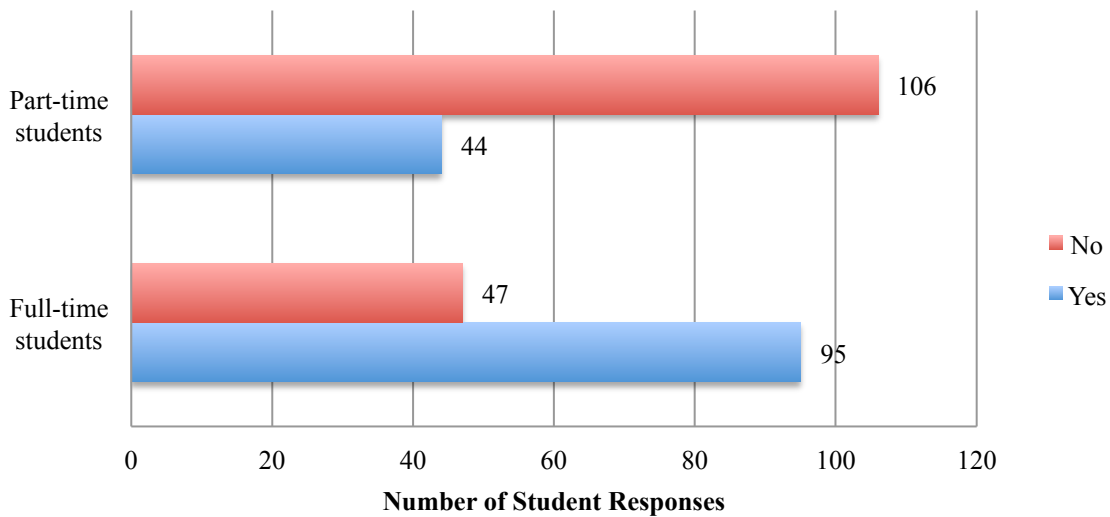


Figure 1. Responses to the survey question, “Do you feel like you are part of a cohort? (A group of students who start a program at the same time and complete most program courses together)”

There are many variables that could affect this answer other than full- and part-time student status including program structure and individual student awareness perception. However, since such a large number of part-time respondents felt they were not part of a cohort, I wanted to look a little further into the question. Depending on the answer to the question in *Figure 1* above, the survey asked a follow- up question. To the respondents

that answered yes, that they do feel like they are part of a cohort, the survey asked, “Do you feel being part of a cohort has made it easier to succeed in your program?” Eighty-four percent of respondents answered yes. To the respondents that answered no to the question in *Figure 1*, that they do not feel like they are part of a cohort, the survey asked, “Do you feel you would be more likely to succeed if you were part of a cohort?” Fifty-five percent of respondents answered yes.

This shows that the majority of respondents that are part of a cohort find it easier to succeed in their graduate program because of this student support system. A little over half of the respondents who do not feel they are part of a cohort feel they would be more successful if they were part of one. Even students not involved in a student support system like a cohort recognize its potential value to their degree persistence.

In the final survey question, respondents were given the chance to provide a qualitative answer to the question, “Do you have any recommendations for changes the University could make to remove barriers to your degree completion?” Multiple students specifically mentioned that a cohort or increased support system would help in their degree persistence. Listed below are some examples of student written- in responses to the question.

Survey responses:

“Bigger push for programs to support cohorts.”

“More flexible class schedule and cohorts for part-time students.”

“Maybe the grad school could highlight grad student groups in its email-- that would help grad students without a cohort connect better to other grad students.”

“Creation of cohort-like groups that connect students with common interests, easier access to potential committee faculty.”

“A cohort program would have been valuable. If not a cohort program, at least a way to connect with other students who are in similar circumstances (working full-time while in the program, or parents of young children) or who were in the same part of the degree process (done with coursework but not yet doing research, etc.). It wouldn't just have to be people from my particular program. I feel very disconnected from other students and from faculty, and that makes it hard to sustain motivation.”

“I was very connected for the first two years, as a part-time student with classes on campus. This third year, with no classes on campus or on-line, and only a culminating project left, has me feeling very isolated from other students and faculty.”

While a cohort may not work for everyone, these responses indicate that this is a potential area for improvement. Many part-time students are either not in programs set up in an official cohort model or are unable to take advantage of a program's cohort structure due to their non-traditional status.

In her article, Hagedorn argues that institutions need change to meet needs of non-traditional undergraduate students (2005). While those needs can be different at the undergraduate level than at the graduate level, they are important for both non-traditional student populations. She states, “Understanding the distinctive needs of adult students and designing programs that more appropriately attract and support them have become increasingly important” (Hagedorn, 2005, p.28). For part-time graduate students, an institutional accommodation like designing programs so that they have a cohort component (either an official cohort, or a cohort-like structure) could help with student success and the institution's retention of part-time students.

Additionally, student development theories suggest that peer groups can assist students in retention and personal support, and offer networking/social environment. In their survey of *College Student Development*, Evans et al., cite several studies on the role of peer support, including the research of sociologists Newcomb and Wilson on student

peer groups (2009). The influence of social networks and peer groups can provide assistance in degree persistence. One area that many part-time students miss out on that can provide additional peer assistance is participation in student groups.

Student groups are a strong example of an on-campus resource that can assist graduate students, and they are a key resource for graduate students while they complete their degrees. As articulated in Sample's *Open Letter to Part-time Graduate Students*, "Part-time grad students often lack the benefit of being part of a cohort, and a graduate student organization can provide a substitute means of connecting with fellow students" (2010). Student groups provide support, information, and communication for graduate students on campus, as well as advocating for graduate student issues to higher administration. Membership in these student groups allows students' voices to be heard and can provide a sense of community while working towards a degree.

As a part-time student, I will add that without a cohort there have been times I have been confused about specific details for degree completion, felt isolated while moving through classes and research, and struggled to persist. Any interaction with other students in my program or even other graduate students on campus has felt supportive and has motivated me to keep working. If I had that support every time I came to campus, my program would have felt much different.

Recommendation for institutions and programs

When planning graduate programs, create or simulate a cohort model as much as possible. The survey data suggests that even non-official cohorts can help students succeed. In programs where a cohort model will not work, encourage students to develop support ties with other part-time students. I recommend that departments facilitate this

process if possible. Engaged students are already very busy and may not find time to connect, while disengaged students may not know how to connect with students in a similar situation. Graduate student groups could also help in this area by specifically reaching out to part-time students and encouraging participation.

Chapter 4: Funding and paying for school

The Barrier

One major barrier to graduate education is the cost of tuition. Financing either a full-time and or part-time graduate program can be more difficult than undergraduate programs. However, public attention is typically focused on undergraduate tuition rates, resulting in more assistance for undergraduate students. Undergraduate assistance can come in the form of a tuition freeze or in the form of grants and lower interest rates on undergraduate federal student loans. Less attention has been devoted to graduate financial aid options, and graduate students pay for it. Before looking at the responses to my survey, I needed to understand how graduate aid functions at this university.

Loans are one of the main funding sources for graduate students. Federal student loan options at the graduate level come with higher interest rates, and that interest begins accruing immediately when the loan is disbursed (Lochner & Monge-Naranjo, 2015). There are no interest-free grace periods. Interest rates are currently 4.29% for most undergraduate federal student loans, but they are 5.84% and above for graduate student loans (studentaid.gov). Additionally, if students are unable to pay their graduate loan interest during their program, this interest will capitalize (be added to the principal and accrue interest as well), making the total loan cost even larger (studentaid.gov). Capitalization of interest is a big problem, because tuition is already higher for graduate students. The added loan interest can make graduate education even more expensive.

Figure 2 shows both the tuition rates and average loan debts for full-time graduate and undergraduate students at this institution. These data indicate that both graduate tuition and graduate loan debt is higher than undergraduate tuition and loan debt. This information was not surprising to me, but what did seem shocking is that the higher

interest rates for graduate school loans and the possibility for graduate loans to capitalize interest are not reflected in this graph. This means that the average graduate loan debt numbers could increase significantly and at a greater proportion than the undergraduate loan debt. It is evident that tuition and loan options for graduate students are more prohibitive than tuition and loan options for undergraduate students. High tuition and increased interest rates could discourage graduate students, both full and part-time, from pursuing degrees, and institutions may see a decline in enrollment (Logue, 2012).

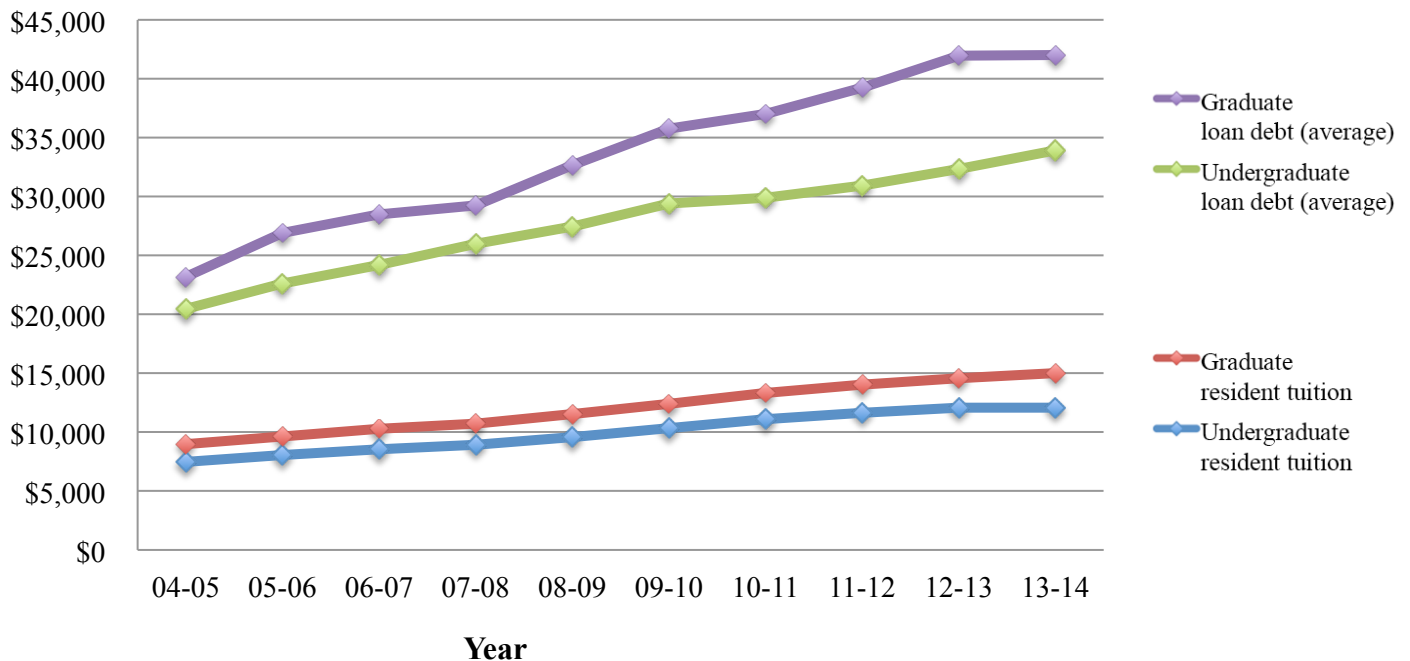


Figure 2. Tuition rates for undergraduate and graduate students from 2001-2014 and average loan debt for undergraduate and graduate students from 2004-2014.

Graduate students do have some options to help alleviate this possible loan debt. The first way that graduate students offset the cost of their degrees is funding from their department or program. Full-time students can take advantage of research assistantships, fellowships, and teaching assistantships offered through their departments and on

campus. Another resource that can be helpful for full-time student populations is the institution's tuition band, if available. Banded tuition is where the institution charges a single or flat rate for tuition within a certain credit range (Lumina Foundation, 2016). While not all institutions offer a banded or flat rate tuition structure, the institution surveyed does at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Graduate students pay a flat tuition rate for all credits between 6-14. Tuition bands can considerably decrease tuition cost for full-time students at this institution as they have the option to register for up to 8 additional credits per semester at no extra cost. Part-time students will pay for each credit of their programs because they are not able to take advantage of this cost-saving benefit. Over the course of an entire graduate program this savings can greatly alleviate some of the financial pressure associated with graduate school and loan debt after graduate school.

Employer tuition assistance is a benefit that part-time graduate students are able to take advantage of. Employer tuition assistance is tuition assistance given by an employer to help finance graduate education, a benefit usually available to full-time employees of a company (Bednar & Gicheva, 2013). Depending on how much assistance the employer offers, this benefit can be helpful for graduate students to offset the cost of tuition. One drawback is that depending on the employer, students may be limited in what they study.

Another drawback of employer tuition assistance is that this benefit is reported on the student's W2 and subject to income tax, meaning students have to pay taxes on the assistance they receive. In some years, states have offered exemptions and subsidies so students do not have to pay all of this income tax, which helps the students dramatically. (Bednar & Gicheva, 2013) But while these exemptions and subsidies can be very helpful, Bendar and Gicheva point out that they are reviewed yearly and subject to change (2013). If the laws change each year or every few years, part-time graduate students may have a

hard time determining the real cost as they plan for a program that may last several years.

Survey Responses

As noted above, graduate tuition is expensive. Students at this university are well aware of the cost. When asked what the university could do to help students succeed in their programs, survey respondents had the following feedback on the cost of tuition.

Survey responses:

“Control the cost of tuition somehow. My graduate degree, although hopefully worth it someday, will cost me in excess of \$70k, which is absurd.”

“Tuition is just beyond ridiculous. Someone should be able to work fulltime in the summer, about 20 hours a week in the school year and be able to cover the bulk of tuition.”

“The cost of tuition is an immense burden. I would not be able to complete this degree without the financial, logistical, and moral support of my husband. I am sometimes overwhelmed with guilt over the amount of our savings we have poured into my education. Our debt weighs on me heavily.”

The cost of in-state tuition at this university was \$1,320 per credit the semester students were surveyed, so if students are using only student loans to pay for their education, there is a potential for a lot of student loan debt (onestop.umn.edu). I thought it would be important to first explore how graduate students paid for graduate school. Are they getting assistance? What kind of assistance? I then wanted to see if there was a trend towards a particular kind of funding depending on if students were attending graduate school full-time or part-time. The first question I asked for this section was, “How do you pay for tuition?” I offered several options for students to choose from in addition to providing a space for students to write-in options that were not listed. *Figure 3* below shows the responses from both full- and part-time students.

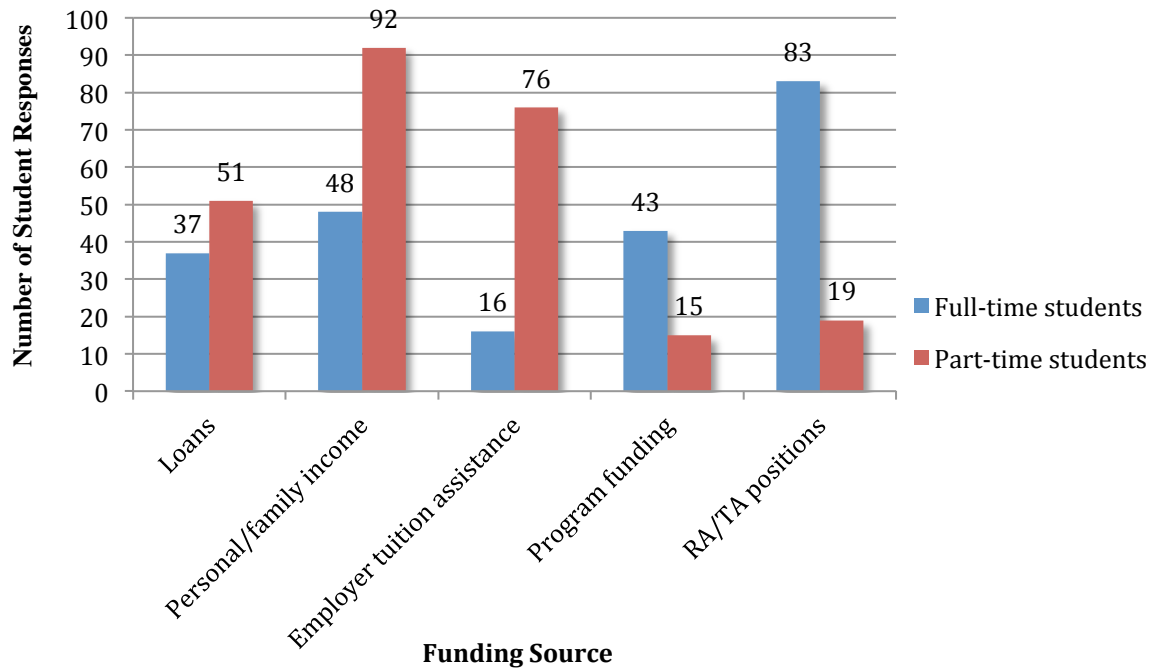


Figure 3. Responses to the survey question “How do you pay for tuition?”

The survey responses indicate that few part-time students in the survey were able to take advantage of program funding or TA/RA positions. Of the 160 responses in the two categories for ‘program funding’ and ‘TA/RA positions’, only 20% of part-time students paid for tuition this way versus 80% of full-time students. This experience aligns with my experience working at this university and speaking with other graduate students. Many departments reserve funding options for students admitted as full-time students in their graduate programs.

Another area where the full-time and part-time student responses differ is using employer tuition assistance. Few full-time students responded that they are able to use employer assistance to pay for tuition. However, 83% of the respondents in this category were part-time graduate students using employer tuition assistance. This makes sense, as

many employer tuition assistance programs are only available to students working full-time, and also many full-time graduate students receive other kinds of assistance like research and teaching assistantships.

While some students are able to take advantage of funding options, they are not always enough to pay for the cost of tuition. Some students receiving employer tuition assistance for only part of their tuition may still find it difficult to pay the remaining amount. I reviewed multiple write-in suggestions from part-time students who were also university employees. The institution's employee benefit used to offer a 100% reduction in tuition for full-time university staff, but it now only offers a 75% reduction. The following survey respondents indicated that while the employer tuition assistance program offered through the university was helpful, it was not enough to alleviate the burden of paying for school.

Survey responses:

"Bring back (employee benefit) covering 100% of tuition, or at least more than 70%. \$1000+ dollars out of pocket per class - when you earn the kind of salary that (institution) pays and work the kind of hours (institution) expects - is tough to swallow."

"More financial support. As a staff member, I get 75% off tuition with (employee benefit), yet as a single-parent, the cost is prohibitive."

"They bleed us for money with some of the highest tuition per credit of a state university, then don't even have affordable ways for students and staff to be on campus beyond that. My tuition needs to go down. Employer assistance should offer 100% tuition benefits for Master's degrees and beyond, not 75%. It makes no sense that a grad assistant can work 20 hours for 100% benefits and a staff person has to work 30 or more for 75%. It's completely inequitable."

"Bring back the full (employee benefit) for University employees that are advancing their degrees in the field that they work in. I already work for the University in my field. We are the future of this institution. My master's program is directly related to what I do, and it will help the University to retain qualified staff."

"Restore the (employee benefit) for graduate degrees to 100%. Even with 75% of tuition

covered by the (employee benefit), graduate tuition is still prohibitively expensive for employees at the U.”

Another response category in *Figure 3* worth exploring is that even though so many students reported receiving employer tuition assistance or program funding, 88 students still responded that they pay for tuition with student loans. This means that for some students, either the current funding options are not enough, or not all students have access to the funding sources. Additional write-in responses from students indicated other kinds of funding like the GI Bill and Veterans’ Benefits and fellowships or external scholarships, but this type of funding was only indicated by a small number of respondents.

At this university, tuition costs are high, and departmental funding generally does not exist for students at the part-time level. Most part-time students indicated they paid for tuition with loans, personal/family income, and employer tuition assistance. The responses in *Figure 3* are just a sample of some of the ways graduate students pay for tuition, but they give an idea of some of the trends associated with how different populations of students pay for tuition at a traditional research university. Due to high tuition costs and less appealing financial aid options, graduate education is harder to finance than undergraduate education. Part-time graduate students are affected by this barrier and are unable to take advantage of tuition bands, which can significantly lower the cost of graduate education, and they do not often qualify for funding through their programs and departments. The few benefits part-time students can take advantage of are linked to tax law, which can change dramatically from year to year. Financial barriers make working on and completing a graduate degree at the part-time, non-traditional level very difficult.

Recommendation for institutions and programs

Hagedorn's article demonstrates that non-traditional adult students must, "determine how to fit education within the boundaries of existing lifestyle" (2005, p. 25). In the case of part-time graduate students, funding education may not be possible within their normal boundaries. Even at the part-time level, tuition cost can be prohibitively expensive. While not all the non-traditional undergraduate students Hagedorn reviewed felt that paying for college is a more of a barrier than for traditional undergraduate students, she still argues that affordable education and increased financial aid are ways to improve adult student success (2005). Other literature also suggests that increased funding can relieve stress and increase success for students (Cassuto, 2011, Kim & Otts, 2010). I agree that an increase in financial support would go a long way in assisting all graduate students, and it would especially aid struggling part-time graduate students.

One recommendation for the institution would be to consider a tuition rate for part-time students that helps match the benefit full-time students get by taking advantage of the institution's tuition band. Another recommendation would be to increase funding opportunities for students. Asking departments to increase funding is a difficult recommendation because not all departments have the same funding to offer. However, any additional funding departments devote to assisting part-time graduate students would be a good start to assisting these students in their degree persistence. One final recommendation would be to offer support/coaching in financial aid planning (Marcus, 2013) for students that need to use loans to pay for tuition.

Chapter 5. Working while going to school

The Barrier

Working a job while also working to complete a degree can be a struggle for all students at both the undergraduate and graduate level. However, graduate students and non-traditional adults attending school at the undergraduate level often struggle to create a balance of work, life, and school. Students who enroll in programs at a part-time level often have multiple responsibilities outside of school. As I previously mentioned in chapter one, working while attending school was cited in the literature as one of the biggest barriers students face (Bates & Goff, 2012; Moro-Egido & Panades, 2010; Ritt, 2008; O’Conner & Cordova, 2010).

Additionally, one driving factor for the increase in students attending graduate school at the part-time level is employer tuition assistance. As explored in chapter 4, this is where an employer agrees to pay for all or part of a student’s tuition while the student is employed with the company (Bednar & Gicheva, 2013). Part-time students may not have a choice to attend a traditional graduate program if they hope to take advantage of this assistance, so more and more students are considering enrolling in part-time programs or pursuing non-traditional graduate options. Their situation can get even more complicated if employers are unwilling to grant tuition assistance or allow flexible work hours to incorporate on-campus classes (Ritt, 2008).

Survey Responses

Struggling to find a balance of work, life, and school is a well-documented barrier in the literature. I wanted to see how this barrier affected part-time graduate students, because as noted above, many of them work while finishing their degrees for financial

reasons. In the first question of the survey I asked students, “Do you consider yourself a part-time or a full-time graduate student?” and “Why?” The survey included the reasons, “credit load, program designation, personal feeling.” I did not provide “working a job” as a reason, but 49 of the 131 part-time student responses still said they felt that they were part-time students because they worked a full-time job. In a follow-up question, the survey asked students, “What is your main reason for going to school part-time?” Eighty-seven of the 150 responses indicated that respondents attended graduate school part-time because of their jobs.

In addition to finding out how many students responded that they were working in addition to attending graduate school, I also wanted to know how many hours per week students were working. The survey asked students, “Since beginning your program, how many hours per week do you do each of the following?” *Figure 4* below shows the answers for full- and part-time students in two of the different areas.

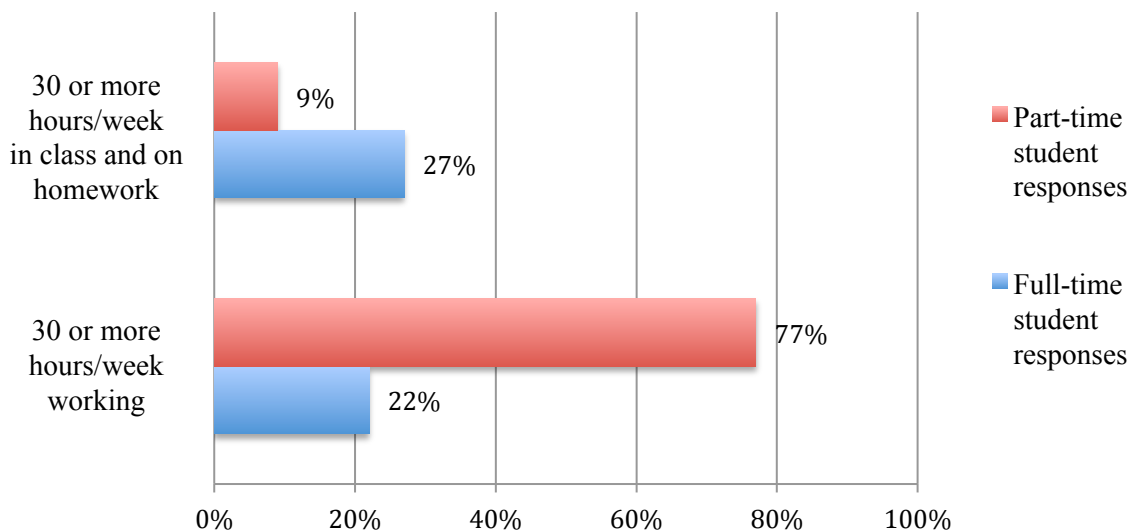


Figure 4. Percent of students claiming to work 30 or more hours per week on either work or study.

Part-time students are working much more than full-time students. While this response was not a surprise, what was interesting is that full-time students did not indicate they were spending a comparable amount of time in class and on homework. Only 27% of full-time student respondents responded that they were spending 30+ hours in class and on homework versus the 77% of part-time students who indicated that they are working 30+ hours while going to school. I had expected the number of full-time students spending 30+ hours on schoolwork per week to be higher. There could be several reasons for this response, including a misunderstanding of what the question was asking.

Many part-time students are working a significant amount while attending graduate school. I wanted to know if part-time students felt this was a barrier to degree completion or not. *Figure 5* below shows the number of student responses that indicated ‘a lot’ and ‘some’ to the survey question, “How much do you feel each of the following is a barrier to degree completion for you?”

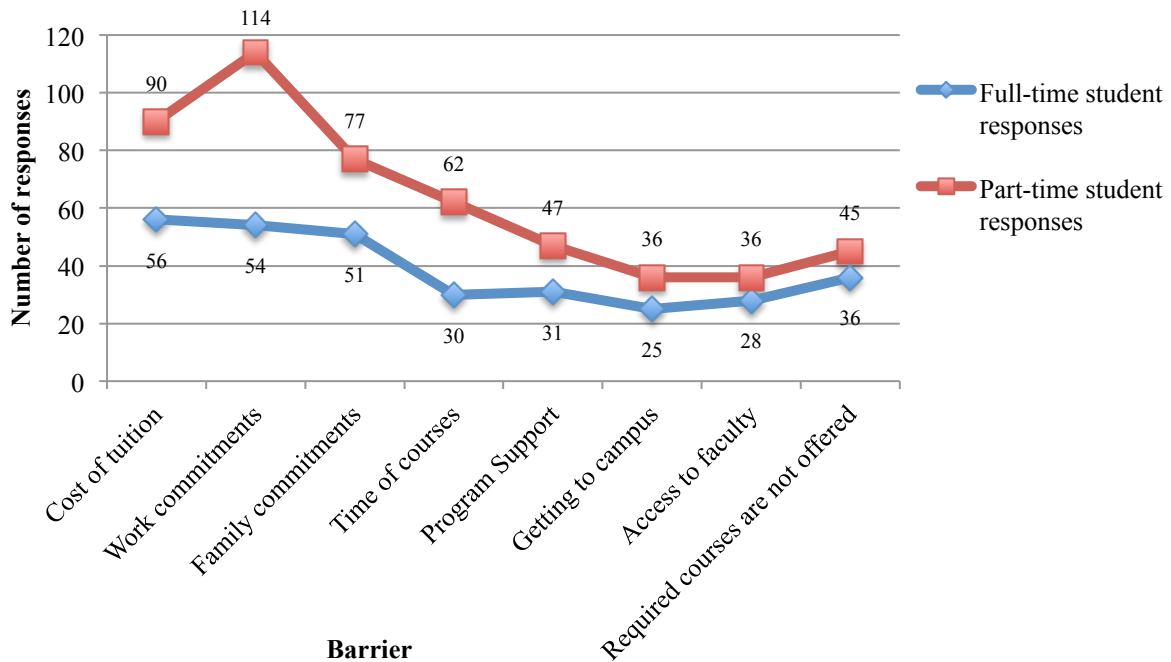


Figure 5. Responses to the survey question “How much do feel each of the following is a barrier to degree completion for you?”

More part-time student respondents indicated that each of these factors was a barrier to degree completion than full-time student respondents. The barrier category that received the most responses overall was work commitments, with 114 of those responses coming from part-time students. One final survey question asked students to rank factors that could be barriers. Working full-time while going to school had the highest ranking, 98 part-time students ranked this either their top 1 or 2 greatest barrier. Working while going to school is a large burden for the part-time student population.

Recommendation for institutions and programs

Students that enroll in programs at a part-time level often have multiple responsibilities outside of school. As noted earlier, “Understanding the distinctive needs of adult students and designing programs that more appropriately attract and support them have become increasingly important” (Hagedorn, 2005, p. 28). I argue that this applies to part-time non-traditional graduate students at a traditional research university as well. Programs need to find a way to help part-time students with competing priorities.

Support in graduate school can be helpful for students who are trying to balance work, life, and school (O’Conner), but the ratio of these items are different for non-traditional graduate students, so different kinds of support are necessary. I’ve listed some recommendations from part-time student survey respondents below.

Survey Responses:

“More online course offerings. It would also be nice if classroom-based courses were recorded so that if I cannot attend due to work commitments I could review the class online later.”

“My current online MA program has no consistency. The evenings I have to have blocked out change for every class, the time changes for every class. ... I need an online graduate program that is consistent on the day/time of class throughout the program duration.”

"More online/distance learning courses; more options for part time classes than brutal 3 hour blocks."

"Offer more classes on the weekends, online, and Monday/Friday nights."

"More weekend offerings instead of evening courses. Evening ones work most of the time, but usually at least 1-2 times/class I have a work commitment in the evening on a weeknight (travel, city council meetings, etc.) that I cannot miss and therefore need to miss the class."

"If there was a way to offer online class versions of all classes, such as record the lectures and post them so that students only need to take work off for the tests, not for each class period multiple times per week."

"Put effort into accommodating part time students. My program doesn't bar you from going part time, and when I applied they seemed like they would support it, but they refuse to do even the simplest things to accommodate it."

"Be more honest to prospective students about program requirements and unwritten policies/regulations."

While there is no way to alleviate the workload of part-time graduate students, departments can provide assistance by making a few changes to their current program structures. Individual departments that allow students to complete a degree at the part time level should offer more evening, weekend, and online courses. Since part-time students are often packing a lot into their day, these students would also benefit if departments clarified program requirements and provided accurate and timely syllabi. Instructors can play a role in assisting students in their balance of work, school, and life through assignments and research opportunities that are relevant for part-time students and their jobs. These examples show how just a few small changes can ease some of the burden of graduate school for busy part-time students.

Chapter 6: Additional Survey Results

The previous chapters discussed the three main areas that emerged from the survey results as barriers for part-time students: lack of cohort, funding and tuition, and working while going to school. However, during my informal conversations with graduate students and my exploration of the literature, some other areas emerged as possible barriers for part-time graduate students. I developed these into sections in the survey (see appendix 1) assuming I would find areas of difficulty for part-time students, but the results were different than I expected.

Campus Services

In the campus services section of the survey, I asked students if they agree or disagree with the following statements, “I feel I can take advantage of campus services (i.e. career center, professional development workshops for graduate students, etc.).” I expected part-time students to feel that they did not have the same support because they are rarely on campus and with their classmates. The responses from full-time students and part-time students were almost identical: 79% of the full-time respondents answered that they either strongly or somewhat agreed and 78% of part-time students answered the same way. A large portion of both groups of students feel they can take advantage of campus services.

I also asked the question, “Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: I can easily access the student services or program staff in my department for clarification, if I don’t understand a process or policy.” Again here, I expected to see that part-time students felt they didn’t have the same access to program

staff because many take online or evening courses when campus offices are closed. The responses were very similar: 91% of full-time student respondents either somewhat or strongly agreed and 92% of part-time respondents answered the same way.

I expected to see a large difference in the campus services section, but there was little difference between how full-time and part-time students and their perceived access to campus services like the career center, and professional development workshops for graduate students, and their access to program staff. In general all the graduate students surveyed feel that they can access staff and take advantage of services. One explanation for this response could be that part-time students were already aware of how this institution was set up before they decided to enroll in a graduate program. If students begin a program expecting their department's office to be closed when they arrive on campus, it may seem like less of a barrier for them, or one that they knew to anticipate.

Campus Logistics

Similar to the campus services section of the survey, I developed a "campus logistics" section of the survey to address issues raised in my conversations with students. In the campus logistics section, I first asked students "How often do you feel getting to class at the scheduled time is difficult?" Only 7% of full-time students and 11% of part-time students answered either 'All of the time' or 'usually.' I also asked, "How often do you feel getting to campus is difficult?" There was a slight bump in the part-time numbers 23% of part-time students answered 'all the time' or 'usually' while only 9% of full-time students answered the same way. Still the majority did not find getting to campus to be a barrier.

Again this section was surprising to me. The responses indicate that most students did not feel that they were struggling with getting to campus and getting to class on time,

but the conversations I had with students before developing this survey indicated that part-time students would have a lot of difficulty in this area. Even in the final question, “Do you have any recommendations for changes the University could make to remove barriers to your degree completion?” students responded with suggestions for better parking and more time offerings for courses. Some explanations for the unexpected answers could be that respondents misunderstood the questions as written, or as in the section above, students expected to face those issues at this institution. If they are expecting those difficulties, even if they struggle, they might not recognize them as barriers.

Final questions

At the end of the survey I asked two questions about students’ overall degree experience. The first question asked, “Knowing what you know now, how likely would you be to still choose your current degree program?” Again here both full- and part-time students had similar answers: 83% of full-time students responded ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ and 85% of part-time students answered the same way. I also asked students, “Do you feel your current degree program will help you achieve your future goals?” Most students felt it did: 92% of full-time and 96% of part-time students said yes to this question. This shows that despite barriers, most students still feel their program will help them achieve their goals, and they would choose their program again.

Conclusion

Summary

In this thesis, I was able to articulate how part-time students often follow a non-traditional path to degree completion, by exploring the responses to my survey using Hagedorn's theory as a framework. All graduate students may feel frustration and barriers, but there are different barriers to starting and completing a graduate program part-time while attending a traditional research university. It is important that institutions are aware of these differences instead of assuming part-time and full-time graduate students' barriers and issues are always the same; part-time students may need some additional assistance as they persist through their degree programs.

Part-time students may experience isolation and lack of a community because few part-time programs are set up using a cohort model. These students may also experience limited access to graduate student on-campus resources such as student organizations. Departments can assist students by working to create cohort or cohort-like groups, so students have a way to connect with others in their program. Also, outreach by graduate student organizations could allow part-time graduate student to participate and express their own issues along with fellow full-time graduate students.

Both part-time and full-time graduate students experience higher tuition costs and higher interest rates than students at the undergraduate level. However, the added barrier for part-time graduate students is that they cannot benefit from financial resources like tuition bands and certain program specific funding the same way full-time graduate students can. Due to their part-time status, this is a resource part-time graduate students will never be able to access. Departments can help by providing increased funding

opportunities for part-time students, and on a greater scale, institutions can consider part-time graduate student tuition rates that mirror the tuition band cost savings.

Part-time students often struggle to find a balance of work, life, and school, but they are unable to leave full-time employment. Working while going to school is the area in the survey results that students indicated affected them the most. Individual departments can offer more evening, weekend, and online courses. They can also clarify program requirements and provide accurate and timely information to help part-time students plan school into their busy lives.

Limitations and Future Projects

This research provides a small overview of barriers as explored through a sample of graduate students at one university. Policies and requirements may vary from institution to institution, so it is important to be aware of those differences and how they might affect student responses at a different university. A possible area for future study would be to explore how students from different universities experience moving through degree programs. It would be interesting to see how different policies may increase or decrease barriers for part-time students.

The sample size and survey response rate of this project are not statistically significant enough to be able to draw conclusions about how all students at this university feel. Using a survey was a helpful tool to generate general trends in how students feel, because this is not always possible with a one-on-one interview of only a few students. However, this survey cannot provide enough evidence to make larger claims about the population as a whole. A possible future research project would be a follow-up survey testing some of the general trends found in this thesis, sending the survey to all students, and generating a

larger response rate that would allow for a more precise view of how students feel.

Finally, this research does not explore the intersectionality of how race, class, gender, or ability affects a student's experience of institutional barriers. Diversity on campus is an incredibly important issue, and certainly not all students experience these barriers in the same way. A possible follow-up research project would be to interview or survey students about how identities shape the way they experience moving through degree programs.

Implications

Institutions need to assist part-time students. If "traditional" research institutions intend to attract working adults to part-time graduate programs, there will need to be an increase in awareness of the barriers these students face while pursuing graduate degrees. This awareness should lead to programmatic changes to better support these students. Understanding what current part-time graduate students feel are the largest barriers to their success will help everyone, including faculty and staff, better serve these students.

This research, while not necessarily new or groundbreaking, has allowed me to open a dialogue about the barriers faced by an often-invisible population trying to fit in. As work lives evolve, adult students will continue to pursue graduate degrees, and many of them will consider doing it in non-traditional ways. My hope is that this conversation continues, that part-time graduate students are a part of it, and that all students are able to finally fit in.

APPENDIX 1

Graduate Student Survey

Section 1 Introduction and General Program

Q1 What graduate degree are you pursuing?

- Ph.D. (1)
- Master's (2)
- Certificate (3)
- Non-Degree (4)
- Other (5) _____

Q2 Do you consider yourself a part-time or a full-time graduate student?

- Part-time (1)
- Full-time (2)

Q3 Why? (credit load, program designation, personal feeling, etc.)

Q4 What is your main reason for going to school part-time or full-time?

Q5 Do you feel like you are part of a cohort? (A group of students who start a program at the same time and complete most program courses together)

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

If No (2) to Q5 is selected, ask Q6

Q6 Do you feel you would be more likely to succeed if you were part of a cohort?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

If Yes (1) to Q5 is selected, ask Q7

Q7 Do you feel being part of a cohort has made it easier to succeed in your program?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q8 I feel I am part of the campus community.

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Somewhat Agree (2)
- Somewhat Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

Q9 Is your current program your first choice or was there another program you wanted to get a degree in?

- Current program was first choice (1)
- Another program was first choice (2)

Q10 If another program was your first choice, was the reason you are not doing it because they wouldn't accept part-time students?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- N/A (3)

Q11 When you started graduate school were you initially enrolled as a full-time/part-time student?

- Part-time (1)
- Full-time (2)

Section 2 Campus Services

Q12 I feel I can take advantage of campus services (i.e. career center, professional development workshops for graduate students, etc.)

- Strongly Agree (1)
- Somewhat Agree (2)
- Somewhat Disagree (3)
- Strongly Disagree (4)

Q13 In your current program, have you ever taken advantage of campus services (i.e. career center, professional development workshops for graduate students, etc.)?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

If No (2) to Q13 is selected, ask Q14

Q14 Why didn't you take advantage of campus services?

- Not on campus when they are offered (1)
- Was not informed about services (2)
- Have not needed services (3)
- Other (4) _____

If Yes (1) to Q13 is selected, ask Q15

Q15 What services did you utilize?

Q16 Thinking about the policies, procedures, and classes you have to navigate in graduate school, please rate how easy or difficult each of the following have been for you.

	Very Easy (1)	Somewhat Easy (2)	Somewhat Difficult (3)	Very Difficult (4)	Does not apply (5)
Degree Plan process (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Registration process (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Financial aid and billing (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Finding a Faculty adviser (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q17 Please rate how much you agree or disagree with the following statement: I can easily access the student services or program staff in my department for clarification, if I don't understand a process or policy.

- I have never talked with student services (1)
- Strongly Agree (2)
- Somewhat Agree (3)
- Somewhat Disagree (4)
- Strongly Disagree (5)

Q18 How often is your program office open when you are on campus?

- Always (1)
- Most of the Time (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Rarely (4)
- Never (5)

Q19 How important is it to you that your program office is open when you are campus?

- Very important (1)
- Somewhat important (2)
- Not at all important (3)

Q20 Do you think programs that admit part-time or working students should be required to have these services available during non-traditional work hours (e.g. evening, weekends)?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Section 3 Your Faculty Adviser (project adviser)

Q21 How much contact do you have with Faculty in your degree program outside of class?

- A lot (1)
- Some (2)
- Little (3)
- None (4)

Q22 How much assistance in securing a faculty adviser did you receive from your program?

- A lot (1)
- Some (2)
- Little (3)
- None (4)
- My program provides an adviser for me (5)

Q23 How often do you typically meet with your faculty adviser(s)?

- More than once a week (1)
- Once a week (2)
- 1-2 a month (3)
- 2-3 times per semester (4)
- Once a semester (5)
- Less than once a semester (6)
- I Never meet with my adviser(s) (7)

Q24 Thinking about the times you do meet with your faculty adviser please answer how much you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	Agree (1)	Somewhat Agree (2)	Somewhat Disagree (3)	Disagree (4)
My adviser makes it easy to schedule time to meet during the semester (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When we meet, I have my adviser's full attention (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
My adviser treats me like an individual, not just another student. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q25 Do you feel you need more contact time with your faculty adviser?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Section 4 Campus Logistics

Q26 When is the best time for you to take classes?

- Morning (1)
- Afternoon (2)
- Evening (3)
- Weekends (4)

Q27 How often do you feel getting to class at the scheduled time is difficult?

- All the time (1)
- Usually (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Rarely (4)
- Never (5)

Q28 How often do you feel getting to campus is a difficult?

- All the time (1)
- Usually (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Rarely (4)
- Never (5)

Q29 Please rate how much each of the following feels like a barrier to getting to class on time:

	A lot (1)	Some (2)	Little (3)	None (4)
Parking on or near campus (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Location of campus and classroom (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scheduled course time (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Section 5 External Factors

Q30 Since beginning your program, how many hours per week do you do each of the following?

	0-9 (1)	10-19 (2)	20-29 (3)	30-39 (4)	40+ (5)
Hours spent working a job (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hours spent as a primary caretaker of children / others (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Hours spent in class and on homework (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q31 How do you pay for tuition?

- Loans (1)
- Personal/Family income (2)
- Employer tuition assistance (3)
- Program funding (4)
- RA/TA
- Other (5) _____

Q32 How much student loan debt from your current program do you anticipate you will have when finished with your degree?

- \$0-\$10,000 (1)
- \$10,000-\$20,000 (2)
- \$20,000-\$30,000 (3)
- \$30,000-\$40,000 (4)
- \$40,000+ (5)

Q33 Have you received any of the following assistance

	Yes (1)	No (2)	Unsure (3)
Fellowship (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scholarship (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Research Assistantship (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Teaching Assistantship (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Employer Tuition Assistance (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q34 Do you currently use the University health insurance for students?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Section 6 Exploration of barriers

Q35 How much do feel each of the following is a barrier to degree completion for you?

	A lot (1)	Some (2)	Little (3)	None (4)
Cost of tuition (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Work commitments (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Family commitments (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Time of courses (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Program Support (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Getting to campus (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Access to faculty (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Required courses are not offered cancelled or closed to you (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q36 Please rank the follow factors from greatest to least as you feel they are barriers to degree completion. 1 being the greatest barrier, 8 being the least barrier.

- _____ Cost of tuition (1)
- _____ Working full-time while going to school (2)
- _____ Family commitments while going to school (3)
- _____ Getting to campus (4)
- _____ Time of course offerings (5)
- _____ Support from your program (6)
- _____ Access to faculty (7)
- _____ Other (8)

Section 7 Final Questions

Q37 Knowing what you know now, how likely would you be to still choose your current degree program?

- Very Likely (1)
- Somewhat Likely (2)
- Somewhat Unlikely (3)
- Very Unlikely (4)

Q38 Do you feel your current degree program will help you achieve your future goals?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q39 Do you have any recommendations for changes the University could make to remove barriers to your degree completion?

APPENDIX 2

IRB Research Approval

Date: Fri, May 29, 2015 at 9:45 AM

Subject: 1504E69542 - PI Mollen - IRB - Exempt Study Notification

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #2 SURVEYS/INTERVIEWS; STANDARDIZED EDUCATIONAL TESTS; OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR.

Study Number: 1504E69542

Principal Investigator: Christine Mollen

Title(s):

Survey of Graduate Student Barriers

This e-mail confirmation is your official notification of exemption from full committee review. You will not receive a hard copy or letter.

The study number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

Research that involves observation can be approved under this category without obtaining consent.

SURVEY OR INTERVIEW RESEARCH APPROVED AS EXEMPT UNDER THIS CATEGORY IS LIMITED TO ADULT SUBJECTS.

This exemption is valid for five years from the date of this correspondence and will be filed inactive at that time. You will receive a notification prior to inactivation. If this research will extend beyond five years, you must submit a new application to the IRB before the study's expiration date.

Upon receipt of this email, you may begin your research.

The IRB wishes you success with this research.

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