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Taking Time: Part-Time Students and Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

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Abstract

For decades, higher education institutions have undertaken comprehensive and systematic efforts to explore, document, and improve the assessment of student learning outcomes, as well as improving learning itself. However, many of these assessment practices have been designed for full-time traditional students, even as the number of non-traditional students enrolled in higher education continues to grow. One group of these non-traditional students remains particularly invisible on their campuses, in their classrooms, and in assessment practices: part-time students.

Part-time students, defined by the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), are students who are not full-time (USDOE, n.d.). This definition inherently defines full-time students as the default assumption, and part-time students as the aberration – even though nationally speaking, part-time students currently (and historically) make up somewhere around 35-40% of all higher education enrollments (De Brey et al., 2021).

The purpose of this study was to focus on part-time students and the student learning outcomes assessment process; specifically, to explore whether assessment practitioners at different institutions were doing anything in particular to measure the learning of part-time students, and to explore with part-time students themselves how they thought about their own learning, how they compared themselves to full-time students, and how they understood assessment practices at their institution. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to fully explore the richness of the lived experiences of these assessment practitioners and part-time students. Four practitioners and three students participated in semi-structured interviews, which generated more than

11 hours of interview data. These data were coded and analyzed into broad qualitative themes that attempted to capture the full range and depth of these experiences with part-time student learning outcomes assessment. The results raise interesting questions about the nature of part-time learning and how we capture it in assessment practices. The discussion includes some brief recommendations for assessment practitioners.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Mikaela Williams works full-time for Kroger, stocking the dairy section and serving as assistant customer service manager; from week to week, her work schedule changes regularly, and it's a struggle to make ends meet. She has two children, both of whom are under the age of eight and in daycare when they're not in school, and she is finally getting the chance to realize a lifelong dream of earning a college education by enrolling in one class per semester at her local university. This spring, she is taking her last general education course, and she just received a notice from her university that she is required to attend an all-day testing session in February. She isn't even certain what the tests are for, only that she has to be there, even though they aren't for any of her classes. She doesn't know how she is going to arrange to take a day off at work, while still making sure that her children are cared for. If she doesn't attend the session, she is afraid she won't be able to enroll for the fall semester; and even if she waits to take the tests during a more convenient make-up session, any delay in registration may mean she ends up not getting her next class at the time slot she needs to be able to make all the moving parts of her life work. Mikaela may feel like she is alone in trying to figure this out, but there are millions of part-time students juggling family, work, and other obligations while enrolling in higher education institutions across the country, and the numbers of these students are growing.

Meanwhile, at Mikaela's university, administrators and assessment practitioners are meeting to plan the analysis of the data that will be gathered from this year's "Assessment Day," the all-day testing session that Mikaela just learned about. These administrators deeply value student learning, and want to be sure that the students who

graduate from their institution have the skills, knowledge and abilities to succeed in their

chosen careers, and to contribute meaningfully to society. They have collected this kind

of learning outcomes data for many years, and have used it to successfully improve and

adapt programs, curriculum, and services for students. But they realized this year that

while most of their students are enrolled full time, there are more students than ever who

are attending on a part-time basis. This is partly because of enrollment and demographic

changes in their student population, and partly because of ongoing impacts from the

COVID-19 pandemic. These administrators ask each other, "Do we know what these

part-time students are learning? Are they able to participate fully or even partially in our

assessment activities? Do we ever separate the data we gather on full-time students from

part-time students, and consider what any differences might mean? Are there places in

our assessment practice where we have not thought enough about part-time students?"

This fictitious scenario outlines the realities of higher education for both part-time

students, who face a set of challenges in participating in and completing their education

that full-time students don't usually face, and for higher education assessment

practitioners, who may have robust assessment systems established but who may not

realize that those systems don't fully recognize the student learning of part-time students.

There are more part-time students than ever on campuses across the United States (De

Brey et al., 2021), but in many ways, they represent an invisible segment of higher

education that presents challenges of its own.

Background of the Study

So-called traditional students, who graduate from high school at 18 and attend a

residential experience on a four-year campus, are no longer the majority of students in

higher education, yet they are the quintessential student in the minds of policymakers

who make decisions about resources, financial aid, outcomes, and accountability for

institutions of higher education and the students they serve (Complete College America,

2012; De Brey et al., 2021). Yet, there are millions of students enrolled in postsecondary

education who do not fit this stereotype. One such subgroup of students are those who

attend school on a part-time basis, whether because of work, family, or other obligations.

Part-time students are not just full-time students enrolled in fewer credits (although that is

one functional definition) – they are rather qualitatively and quantitatively different from

full-time students. Presumably because these students are earning the same college

credits as full-time students, they are included in many of the same institutional

requirements and processes as other full-time students. This includes registration

processes, honor code requirements, student fee calculations, and completion and

progression requirements. For many institutions this should also include processes

designed to assess student learning. But do our processes for assessing the learning of

full-time students work for part-time students and what can we really say about what

part-time students are learning in higher education?

Nontraditional students make up the majority of higher education enrollments

today. There are many kinds of nontraditional students who are struggling to find access,

to find pathways, and to reach success. Adult learners, transfer students, working parents,

part-time, homeless and food insecure students – the list goes on and on. And many

students don't just fit into one of these categories, but meet multiple definitions in ways

that intersect and overlap (ACE, 2013), ways that we in higher education just are not

considering. Research exists on some of these populations but there's not a lot of

existing literature on part-time students (Complete College America, 2012; Kember,

1999; Kember et al., 2001). This dissertation focuses on part-time students as one aspect

of the multitude of non-traditional students, while recognizing that all these categories

overlap, and more importantly, intersect in ways that we need to continue to examine and

care for.

Statement of the problem

A significant and growing number of students enrolled in higher education are

invisible in our policies, practices, and on our campuses: part-time students (Bombardieri,

2017; Complete College America, 2012; Corney et al., 2008). Presumably, because these

students are earning the same college credits, and hopefully ultimately the same degrees,

as full-time students, they are included in institutions' mechanisms for student learning

outcomes assessment. But is that assumption true? Are we as higher education

assessment specialists really measuring what part-time students have learned? Are they

being included in our student learning outcomes assessment activities? Have we made it

possible for them to be included, and have we thought about what might be different

about their experiences in higher education? What can we say about what part-time

students are learning in higher education, and about how we measure their learning? This

population of students reminds us that although institutions of higher education have

decades of experience measuring student learning and sharing learning outcomes

information with stakeholders for accountability, improvement of learning, and other

purposes, there may still be large groups of students for whom we cannot draw

significant and valid conclusions about their learning, and therefore the meaning of their

degrees. The proportion of research devoted to part-time study is much less than the

proportion of students studying part-time. Higher education and assessment research are

often, implicitly if not explicitly, restricted to the 'traditional' ways of study (Bennion et

al., 2011; Corney, et al., 2008; Yum et al., 2005). And it is this implicit focus on full-time

traditional students that renders part-time students, and any other type of non-traditional

student, largely invisible in higher education policymaking and practice.

Theoretical framework

   This dissertation is founded on assessment practice, which is itself founded in

program theory, as described by Bickman (1987). Program theory is "the construction of

a plausible and sensible model of how a program is supposed to work" (p. 5). A program

includes a particular set of beliefs, values, and goals that define its structure, processes

and outcomes (Bickman, 1987), and assessment practice aims to measure those program

outcomes. A program in the context of higher education is usually a credential, and in

this dissertation a program refers primarily to a bachelor's degree program. As Gallagher

(2016) described:

>   Producing degrees is one of the principal products of colleges and universities,
>
>   and the foundation of the business model for most higher education institutions.
>
>   University-issued credentials such as degrees possess a strong and unique market
>
>   power, backed by the quality assurance of accreditation. (p. 3)

This dissertation also focuses on part-time students and their participation in higher

education processes, specifically, institutional assessment practices. An additional useful

theoretical framework for considering the role of part-time students in higher education

can be borrowed from an economic theory called partial inclusion theory (Katz & Kahn,

1978). Partial inclusion theory describes the involvement of part-time employees in their

employer or organization, and describes the way that involvement might be different for part-time employees compared to full-time employees. The connections between program theory, assessment practice, degree completion, and partial inclusion theory will be explored in greater detail in the chapters to follow.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore: 1) how assessment practices take into account the lived experiences of part-time students at institutions with significant numbers of part-time students, and 2) the lived experiences of part-time students studying primarily at the undergraduate level, including their experience of student learning outcomes assessment.

Target audience of the study

The target audience for this study includes higher education assessment practitioners and other senior leaders who recognize that part-time students are a growing percentage of the U.S. population in higher education, and who wish to understand whether and how their assessment practices are capturing the learning outcomes of part-time students.

Organization of this dissertation

This dissertation includes four chapters, including the current chapter, an introduction to the problem. The literature review outlines and organizes the current research on the state and future of higher education, what we do and do not know about the learning and experiences of part-time students, and research questions for this study. The methods chapter explains the philosophy and features of phenomenological research and describes the interview and analysis methods for two groups of participants (higher

education assessment practitioners and part-time students) for this study. The results

chapter and discussion chapter describes and categorizes the primary themes and

statements of meaning from both groups of participants, discusses the research findings

in relation to the overall framework and existing literature on part-time students, and

makes some initial recommendations for future directions of research and higher

education institutional policy on part-time students' learning outcomes assessment. These

recommendations will hopefully give assessment practitioners some tools and questions

to help ensure that part-time students' learning is captured, measured, included, and

interpreted at their institutions while taking the experiences of those part-time students

into account.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

> *Sadly, the U.S. higher education system is failing far too many part-time students.*
> *Only about one quarter of exclusively part-time students earn a degree within*
> *eight years of starting college. Even those who attend part-time for only a portion*
> *of their college career fare poorly; just more than half of these students*
> *eventually earn a degree. That is compared to about 80 percent of exclusively*
> *full-time students who attain a degree. Moreover, too many part-time students*
> *never come close to finishing college and earning a degree. Four in 10 students*
> *who attend college exclusively part-time in their first year are not enrolled in*
> *classes the next year. (Bombardieri, 2017, p. 3)*

Part-time students make up a significant number of the students enrolled in higher

education today (De Brey et al., 2021), and yet they are largely invisible in our policies,

programs, support services, and assessment methods. Our system of higher education was

designed for full-time students who live on campus, have no or few external

responsibilities, and are financially supported by their families (Fain, 2017a). However,

this system ignores a vast number of students who are enrolled in higher education today.

In a Center for American Progress report on part-time students in higher education,

Bombardieri (2017) wrote:

> Even though they are a large proportion of the college population, part-time
>
> students have often been relegated to the shadows from a data, research, and
>
> policy standpoint. As a result, it is difficult to even identify the bright spots where
>
> part-time students are more likely to graduate, let alone figure out what those
>
> communities or institutions are doing differently. (p. 17)

These "bright spots" are difficult to find and highlight, whether they are institutions or

communities where part-time students are demonstrably thriving in higher education and

graduating with the degree or credential they seek, or whether they are individual part-

time students who have found a way to succeed despite the systems in which they find

themselves. These kinds of success stories are largely invisible in our conversations about

higher education, its purposes, and who it is meant to serve. Part-time students are a

subcategory of students among those considered "non-traditional," which is in itself a

large and growing percentage of higher education enrollments. Estimates on the exact

number of part-time students enrolled today and in the near future differ, largely because

we measure higher education enrollments in full-time equivalencies (FTE), and because

enrollment status as part-time isn't always stable, since these students often change their

enrollment status from part-time to full-time for periods of time (Bombardieri, 2017;

Crosta, 2014), both of which will be explored later in this literature review.

This literature review will explore current trends in higher education, including

the need for greater accountability in terms of student learning outcomes and public

skepticism of the value of higher education versus its cost; examine definitions of part-

time students and their role in higher education; define the concept of part-time students

and explore past, current, and future enrollment trends; explore existing higher education

policy trends related to part-time students; consider the value of part-time higher

education and the strengths and experience that part-time students bring; and argue that

higher education needs to consider part-time students, what we know and don't know

about what they're learning in college, and why we need to know it.

A national crisis in higher education

Higher education continues to face increasing scrutiny from accreditation

agencies, the U.S Department of Education, policymakers, state regulators, employers

and families. Questions arise regularly regarding whether students graduate with the

skills actually needed in the workplace (Fain, 2017b; Lederman, 2019). Only a quarter of

Americans feel that higher education is functioning well as it is, according to a New

America survey on higher education (Fishman et al., 2017). Students and families who

have taken on increasing amounts of debt are uncertain whether a college degree adds

value to their lives and careers, whether tuition dollars and other funds are being used

appropriately and efficiently, and whether institutions are providing appropriate and

complete support services for students (Jaschik, 2017; Mangan, 2019; Smith, 2017).

Tuition costs continue to rise at many institutions, often to cover reductions in state

funding costs, increases in needed student support services, and the ever-increasing cost

of healthcare for university and college employees; these tuition increases have risen

faster than national average wages and consumer inflation costs (Maldonado, 2018).

These cost increases make it harder for families and individuals to afford higher

education, which leads them to question whether it is something they should pursue full-

time, part-time or at all.

At the same time, higher education is facing a crisis of confidence, with many

Americans doubting the value of a college degree. A number of surveys and polls have

shown an increasing amount of skepticism; one poll commissioned by a Democratic

political action committee found that "83 percent of white working-class voters said a

college degree was 'no longer any guarantee of success in America'" (Smith, 2018, p. 1).

The cost of college continues to rise far more quickly than inflation or wages

(Maldonado, 2018). And in 2013, the Federal Reserve Bank released a report showing

that student loan debt had reached $1 trillion in 2012, and for the first time, that student

loan debt exceeded the amount of credit card debt (McGee, 2015). Perhaps never before

have we seen "such a need for postsecondary education credentials but such skepticism

about whether a college education is worth the cost" (Mangan, 2019). Finally, a personal

finance expert writing for Forbes offers this advice:

> For someone yet to begin their college education, I would caution them against
>
> going to a private university to study liberal arts, unless they have a very clear
>
> idea what they are going to do with that degree, or unless they will be receiving
>
> meaningful financial support from a parent or another source. Thirty-five years
>
> ago, it made sense to make that investment to grow and learn about oneself at
>
> college, but at the current cost of a university degree, that no longer makes sense.
>
> If you plan to attend graduate school, that's all the more reason you need to get
>
> your undergraduate studies at a reasonable cost. Whether that means spending the
>
> first few years at a community college before transferring to a university to
>
> complete the degree, or applying for scholarships and grants to cover the cost.
>
> (Maldonado, 2018)

Higher education needs to do a better job of making the case for its value in order

to counteract this skepticism. A bachelor's degree still offers valuable benefits to those

who complete one, including greater lifetime income potential, greater civic participation,

stronger critical thinking and writing skills, and greater personal satisfaction (Smith,

2018). A recent survey from the New America think tank suggested that Americans still

see the value in getting a college degree, but they're not happy with our nation's higher

education system and the cost of getting one (Fain, 2017b). They're also aware that we

are facing a "completion crisis" – with only 46 percent of students who start a degree

finishing it, yet carrying staggering amounts of student loan debt with little to nothing to

show for it (Attewell & Reisel, 2011; Fain, 2017b; Moore & Shulock, 2009).

Policymakers have shown growing concern with increasing time-to-degree, with dozens

of states implementing legislation, initiatives, and studies to address college completion

time (Darolia, 2014). And finally, polls show frustration with college outcomes and an

increasing demand that institutions be able to demonstrate the skills and knowledge

earned by graduates (Jaschik, 2017).

Paradigms for student learning outcomes assessment

Student learning outcomes assessment remains one of the central issues of public

policy in higher education, both in response to these growing calls for accountability and

because university administrators and faculty want to see increases in student learning.

Whether the university has a long-standing culture of assessment or is simply conducting

assessment for purposes of accreditation, the underlying notion is to systematically and

empirically study what students gain from their university experience (Erwin, 1991;

Ewell, 1991). These two paradigms for student learning outcomes assessment

(assessment for accountability versus assessment for program and learning improvement)

represent two different approaches to the assessment of student learning (Suskie, 2004),

and the differences between them have generated a range of conflict and conversation

over the last thirty years between university administrators and faculty, and between

universities and policymakers. As Ewell (2008) described these two paradigms, the

differences between them are often exaggerated, and it is rare for an approach to

assessment to fully align to either one; much more commonly, assessment approaches at

universities include aspects of both. There are:

> Conceptual incongruities between the accountability and improvement
>
> assessment paradigms. Adopting either of these two perspectives affects

institutional choices about what and how to assess, how to organize

assessment tasks and strategies, and how to communicate assessment

results. As with all ideal types, the differences between these two

contrasting opposing paradigms of assessment are exaggerated, and rarely

does an existing assessment approach fully conform to either one. (Ewell,

2008).

A more recent example of several case studies from institutions who are successfully

using assessment results also highlights the balance and integration of assessment

approaches for both external accountability and internal learning improvement (Baker et

al., 2012).

Ewell (2008) argued that the predominant ethos for assessment for accountability

purposes is compliance with externally imposed regulations, from accrediting agencies,

state boards of higher education, governor's offices, or other external bodies with

authority to compel an institution to provide information. Assessment for accountability

uses the institution, or possibly even all of higher education, as the unit of analysis;

stakeholders are interested in whether the institution is effectively and efficiently using

public funds in the education of students, for example, and not in whether individual

programs are succeeding in educating students. This approach is usually targeted to an

external audience, rather than an internal one (Ewell, 2008). Assessment for

accountability is what we think of when legislatures, governing bodies, and accreditation

agencies demand greater transparency and achievement related to student learning

outcomes.

On the other hand, Ewell (2008) argued that assessment for program improvement has a primary ethos focused on internal engagement and improvement of educational offerings, rather than compliance. The unit of analysis is the program, which can be defined as a major, general education curriculum, certificate program, degree program, or student affairs intervention. The goal of assessment for program improvement, or as Banta and Blaich (2010) described it, among many others, "closing the loop," is to discover where programs are not meeting their own objectives, and to improve those programs so that they come closer to those objectives. Fulcher et al. (2014) used the metaphor of "weigh pig, feed pig, weigh pig" to explain this goal of program improvement; first we must measure the pig (or learning), then make some kind of intervention to change (or "feed") the pig (program improvement to increase learning), and then measure the pig again (examine the results of that intervention). Finally, as Ewell (2008) argued, assessment for program improvement is usually pitched to an internal audience of faculty and administrators, in order to help them make decisions about the best ways to use scarce resources to improve existing programs (and possibly to guide the development of new programs, if needed). As Banta and Blaich (2010) argued, "Much of the national conversation about assessment focuses on measurement issues, encouraging the use of assessment data to guide change is much more about collaborating with colleagues to decide what to improve than it is about measurement" (p. 23). This conversation about guiding changes in student learning requires an institutional culture change to embrace the concept of improving learning first, and using assessment methods as a central strategy for accurately measuring that learning improvement, rather than viewing assessment as an external mandate for accountability – and institutional culture

change is notoriously difficult (Hersh & Keeling, 2013). That kind of culture change is

particularly difficult because we need to shift our mindset to consider the student

experience as a cumulative and coherent whole (which, it could be argued, is closer to

how the students experience it), rather than focusing on individual courses or majors

(Hersh & Keeling, 2013). Higher education generally tends to do a poor job of

communicating the results of assessment for program improvement with external

stakeholders, which is partially why calls for accountability and standardization have

risen in volume over the years (Ewell, 2008). Higher education also needs to continue to

develop this larger mindset of learning improvement and institutional culture change to

better position assessment practices and results within the context of a holistic college

education (Fulcher et al., 2014; Hersh & Keeling, 2013).

Legislatures and other stakeholders remain unconvinced that college graduates are

being trained to contribute to society and thus are demanding more specific and

conclusive evidence of the value that higher education adds to those who attend. Arum &

Roksa's (2011) book, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses,*

explored how and why institutions of higher education were failing students, and

proposed using the Collegiate Learning Assessment to standardize and report on student

achievement across all institutions. They described legislatures, families, business leaders

and employers, and families as being disillusioned with the skills of college graduates,

and suggested that students are not learning during their time in college (Arum & Roksa,

2011). They argued that if all colleges and universities used the same standardized

assessment, we could compare and measure learning across and between institutions

(assuming that the Collegiate Learning Assessment would be the right instrument to

accomplish that comparison). While the Collegiate Learning Assessment has been widely

criticized by many assessment practitioners (e.g. Possin, 2013), the point remains that

Academically Adrift (Arum & Roksa, 2011) aimed to show that higher education is

failing to produce graduates with the skills and abilities that institutions claim. Arum &

Roska's (2011) book offered just one example (of many) of a proposed solution to reform

higher education, but it clearly aligned with the assessment as accountability paradigm

described above. In other words, are students learning, what are they learning, how do

they use what they have learned, and how do we know? Lederman (2019) argued:

> As Americans express growing doubts about the value of a postsecondary degree,
>
> colleges and universities have been under increasing pressure to show that
>
> students emerge with the knowledge and/or skills the institutions say they're
>
> trying to develop. Not everyone applauds the push to measure student learning,
>
> but the pressure to be more intentional about the outcomes a college or program
>
> aims to develop isn't likely to abate soon. (p. 3)

This national skepticism around the costs and value of higher education suggests that

either some individuals and families may choose to forego higher education completely,

or find other ways to earn a bachelor's degree that allow them to accomplish other goals

at the same time, such as employment and raising families. Part-time enrollment will

likely be a significant part of those decisions as we move forward.

Who are part-time students?

So how do we define part-time students? The answer is incredibly simple on the

surface, and yet remarkably complicated as we dig deeper. Part-time students, according

to the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

(IPEDS), are students who are not full-time; specifically, IPEDS describes them as "If a student does not meet the IPEDS definition of full-time (e.g., enrolled in 12 or more credits per semester) and is not considered full-time for federal student aid purposes, the student should be reported as part-time" (USDOE, n.d.). A part-time student is any student who is not a full-time student; therefore part-time enrollment is implied to be just like full-time enrollment, except with fewer credits. However, this creates an interesting linguistic and philosophical dialogue about defining something by describing it as what it is not, rather than what it is. Nonprofit organizations and noncredit programs share a similar language problem, being defined by what they are not (Lohmann, 1989). Of course, this study does not attempt to change the definition or the language used to describe part-time students; but the point about defining them by being "not full-time students" raises some interesting questions about how they are treated, described, and valued in higher education. This definition of part-time students as "not full-time students" assumes that full-time is the default, standard assumption of what a student is, and that part-time students are a rare aberration from that norm (which is an assumption that, as we will see, is not borne out by national higher education enrollment statistics).

Another similar parallel for how we define part-time students as being "anyone who is not a full-time student" lies with economic theories about part-time employees, who are also defined as "anyone that is not a full-time employee." Katz and Kahn (1978) developed partial inclusion theory to explain the differences in motivation, job attitudes, and work behaviors among part-time and full-time staff members. Partial inclusion theory views the employment organization as the main social system for full-time employees, whereas part-time employees are more strongly included in or identified with other social

systems (e.g., home, family, school, another job). This theory suggests that, depending

upon the individual's level of inclusion (full or partial), the perceived importance

attached to each role varies across social systems; the organization itself may also value

part-time staff members as less engaged and therefore less valuable to the goals of the

organization (Katz & Kahn, 1978). When partial inclusion theory is applied to part-time

students, it is possible to conclude that they may feel less connected to the college

because they spend less time on campus and have less college involvement than full-time

students.

Accepting that part-time students are defined by the number of credit hours they

enroll in, how many of them are there? The National Center for Education Statistics

describes enrollment patterns by attendance status from 1959 (the first year that data is

available for part-time students) through 2018, with projections for 2019-2029 (De Brey

et al., 2021). In 1959, the total enrollment in higher education was 3,639,847, with

1,218,831 of those being part-time, or 33.5%. The percentage of part-time enrollment

compared to total enrollment has remained relatively stable over the years at

approximately 35-40%, but as the total number of students enrolled in higher education

has grown, the total number of part-time students has also grown. In 2018, the total

enrollment in higher education was 19,645,918, with 7,654,197 of those being part-time,

or 39%. And by 2029, part-time enrollment is projected to increase to 7,971,000 students

out of a total higher education enrollment of 20,115,000, or 39.6% (De Brey et al., 2021).

While this NCES report was released in 2021, the enrollment data represented here are

from 2019 (before the COVID-19 pandemic); it's safe to assume that the pandemic will

have an impact on future trends in part-time enrollment. Nearly 8 million (or more)

students enrolled on a part-time basis cannot be ignored or left behind. As Hall (2015) noted:

> Programs and initiatives to boost persistence and completion have been primarily focused on first-time full-time students. Approaches to raise persistence for part-time students, the majority in higher education, have been neglected or … not adapted to the unique circumstances part-time students bring to the college. (p. 15)

While Hall (2015) described a community college environment, where part-time enrollment is indeed the majority, the point about programs and initiatives that focus on full-time students remains.

For a more local example, my own institution had a total enrollment in fall of 2020 of 21,954 students; 2,080 of those are part-time enrollments, or 9.4%, as described the university's Fact Book (James Madison University, 2020a). Given the nature and characteristics of my institution, the fact that part-time enrollment here made up a smaller percentage of overall enrollment than the national average is not surprising; many part-time students are enrolled at community colleges, for-profit institutions, or four-year institutions with higher percentages of commuter students (Grawe, 2018; Kember et al., 2001; Bombardieri, 2017). Demographic changes in recent years, and more significantly in coming years, present a substantial challenge for higher education, and part-time students will be part of this challenge. This shift in the demographics of higher education has been occurring for several years as a natural result of the children of those born in the Baby Boom generation (Grawe, 2018). The number of students graduating from high school was 4.17 million in 2017; there is expected to be an 8% increase between 2022-

2025 to 4.5 million high school graduates, but then after 2025 through 2030, we are about

to face a "demographic cliff," where the number of students graduating from high school

will drop to 3.86 million per year, or a 14% decrease (Grawe, 2018). Part of the reason

for this sharp decline in high school students is the number of young families during and

after the Great Recession of 2008 who decided not to have children (or have fewer

children) because of economic conditions (Education Advisory Board, 2019). So the

population of traditional-age college students, who are the most likely to attend full-time,

will drop sharply, while at the same time there are 1,000 more institutions of higher

education than there were in 1996 (McGee, 2015). Yet while the demand for the

resources and degrees offered by institutions of higher education will decline among

traditional students, that demand will also continue to grow among other populations.

This includes adults with some college but no degree, speakers of English as a second

language, and other underserved populations of higher education – many of whom are

likely to attend part-time because of other obligations such as work and family (Bowl &

Bathmaker, 2016; Schuller et al., 1999). As mentioned above, James Madison University

(like similar universities where full-time students make up the majority of students)

currently has only 9% of students enrolled on a part time basis. That number will likely

increase in the future, and we need to be ready to serve the needs (and measure the

learning) of those part-time students.

There is significant enough overlap between part-time students, "mature"

students, and adult learners that the existing literature on each category can yield useful

insights about the learning outcomes of part-time students, so this literature review

explores each of them interchangeably (Bourner, et al., 1991; Kember, 1999; Richardson

& King, 1998). Few adult learners attend school full-time, and few part-time students are

18 years old and recently graduated from high school; or put another way, part-time

students are generally adults with established lives and other obligations besides higher

education, rather than adolescents transitioning into adulthood (Bombardieri, 2017;

Schuller et al., 1999; Yum et al., 2005).

Being a part-time student is also a highly fluid status, changing regularly along

with changes in students' lives, work schedules, and other obligations (Jamieson et al.,

2009). Many part-time students enroll full-time at some point during their college career,

and some full-time students enroll part-time for at least one semester. Students do not

always make an initial decision that they are going to be a part-time student; rather, they

are making the best possible decisions they can for themselves in each semester, which

can lead to an enrollment status that is continuously in flux. In a study of community

college enrollment intensity patterns, Crosta (2014) analyzed student-level data from five

community colleges to examine enrollment intensity and attachment, and he found

literally thousands of patterns of enrollment among community college students. Crosta

(2014) identified the most common of these enrollment patterns, as summarized in Table

1:

Table 1

Enrollment Intensity and Attachment Patterns (Crosta, 2014)

Enrollment pattern	Definition	Percentage in sample
full-time persisters	those who enroll primarily full-time and persist to degree completion	20
early leavers	students who enroll for usually only one semester and do not persist	35

early persistent switchers	those who change frequently between part-time and full-time status	14
mostly part-timers	those who attend part-time and do not change enrollment intensity	16
early attachers	students who start out full-time and make significant progress, and then drop to part-time status later in their college career	5
later attachers	those who start part-time and continue for several semesters, eventually switching to full-time status to complete their degree	10

These dizzying variations in enrollment patterns at the community college level have not yet been documented in detail at the four-year level, but it is likely that similar patterns of enrollment for part-time students (with perhaps differing category percentages) could apply. Bombardieri (2017) also found similar fluidity in enrollment patterns for part-time students, saying "four in five students start their college career full-time, but the majority will eventually attend part-time for at least a semester. And many of those who start part-time end up spending some portion of their college career full-time" (p. 7). Finally, the fluidity of part-time enrollment has an impact on degree completion, with a 29 percent decline in degree completion rates when students switch from full-time to part-time (Smith, 2018; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). With students changing between part-time and full-time enrollment, it can be difficult to measure their progress toward degree completion, determine what kinds of interventions will serve them best, and clarify what student learning outcomes they have or have not met, as well as whether they have participated in assessment activities to measure that learning.

Sometimes they appear in institutional records just like full-time students, but with a different history and pattern of learning; institutions need to consider all part-time students, regardless of their enrollment patterns, when considering curriculum design, program assessment, and support and intervention services.

15 to Finish

Part-time students have garnered a small amount of attention from policy advocates who have recognized their prevalence in higher education and offered solutions to help them increase degree completion in recent years. However, these initiatives have focused more attention on encouraging part-time students to enroll in full-time course loads than on recognizing and accommodating the needs and experiences of part-time students. Statistically speaking, students who enroll full-time are more likely to complete their education. Initiatives like "15 to Finish" (Complete College America, 2018; Jones, 2015; Klempin, 2014) encourage students to enroll in at least fifteen credits per semester. These initiatives have been explored in states from West Virginia to Hawaii, with encouragement from national higher education policy organizations such as Complete College America and the U.S. Department of Education (Fain, 2016). Because full-time course loads at most institutions are defined as 12 credit hours per semester (for financial aid reasons, primarily), students rightfully assume that maintaining a full-time course load will allow them to graduate in two or four years (depending on whether they're seeking an associate's degree at a community college, or a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution). However, if a student only enrolls in 12 credits each semester, they will only have earned 96 credits by the end of four years, which is not enough for a bachelor's degree. The argument behind "15 to Finish" initiatives also draws on

academic momentum theory, which "refers to the speed of progress towards a degree

resulting from the rate of credit accumulation" (Attewell & Monaghan, 2016, p. 684).

Academic momentum was first coined by Adelman (1999), and has been widely used to

support research and policy designed to increase degree completion rates (Doyle, 2011;

Goldrick-Raab, 2007).

     While this argument to encourage students to enroll in 15 or more credits each

semester is mathematically sound, and while an increase in enrollment from 12 credits to

15 seems doable for many students, this entire policy focus and approach ignores the

reality of the lives of part-time students. Students with families, careers, and other

commitments are less likely to succeed in completing 15 credits in a single semester.

Many of these students are only able to handle perhaps six credits in a single semester,

and asking them to consider taking on an additional nine credits, along with all their other

obligations, is just not feasible. So, while these efforts to push students who are already

enrolled full time at 12 credits to move towards 15 credits in order to reach national and

state goals of increased degree completion are admirable, and could make a significant

difference in college completion rates for a certain population of students, they do not

recognize the daily lived realities of a large portion of our students. As Bombardieri

(2017) argued:

     To the extent that policies address part-time students at all, it is often to offer

     incentives to encourage students to attend full-time instead. While reaching full-

     time status is a worthwhile goal for some students who are taking fewer courses

     than they reasonably could, viable solutions are still needed for students...who

     cannot realistically take on a full course load. (p. 4)

Experiences of part-time students

While the numbers of part-time students have been increasing in recent years (De Brey et al., 2021), part-time students are not a new phenomenon. Despite their relatively large numbers, much less is known about them than about full-time students. On the one hand, a significant amount of research has been conducted about the *experiences* of part-time and non-traditional students in higher education. Factors such as their persistence, perceptions, experience, coping mechanisms, and motivations are well documented and explored (Butcher, 1997; Cramp et al., 2012; Hall, 2015; Jamieson et al., 2009; Swain & Hammond, 2011; Testa-Buzzee, 2014; Yum et al., 2005), and these studies contribute valuable depth and richness to the available literature on part-time students; however, these studies are in themselves not enough, as this study explores.

Based on a hypothesis that non-traditional and part-time students would feel more involved and persist to degree completion if they felt that they mattered to their institution, Butcher (1997) administered a scale of student mattering to 289 students, and found a connection between student persistence and the idea of mattering or belonging at their institution. Similarly, Hall (2015) found that persistence for part-time students in a community college environment was influenced by academic preparation or under preparation, motivation, age, other life involvement (including work, family, and caretaking responsibilities), and academic goals. Finally, in a study that explored academic persistence for part-time students who are single mothers, Testa-Buzzee (2014) found that especially among community college enrollments (where a significant majority of enrollments are women), single mothers who were most likely to persist were

those who used their economic motivation to provide for their families as a driver for

their performance and participation in higher education.

Beyond persistence, other studies have explored the motivations and coping

mechanisms of part-time students. In a qualitative study of 18 part-time students, Swain

& Hammond (2011) found that the motivations of these students were as diverse as the

students themselves, and often linked directly with their sense of identity and their

reasons for seeking higher education. The students reported a mix of intrinsic and

extrinsic motivation for their studies, with one student saying, for example, that she was

committed to complete her studies because she had not done this when she was younger,

implying that she had something to prove to herself, her family and her community. Part-

time students also demonstrated a range of coping mechanisms and strategies to find time

for their studies amongst the other commitments in their lives; Yum et al., (2005)

developed a model of these strategies that included sacrifice of other commitments and

relationships, support from family, friends, and community, and negotiation of

arrangements of time and space. These strategies for carving out time for study indicate

that students enrolled in higher education on a part-time basis struggle to balance the

factors of their complex lives, including family, work, self, and social life, with their

education; and yet those who persisted used these coping mechanisms to achieve their

goals (Yum et al., 2005).

Finally, a handful of studies have explored the benefits that part-time students

gain from higher education. In a longitudinal study conducted over three years, Jamieson

et al., (2009) found that students perceived benefits from completing their education on a

part-time basis that included both increases in competency and improvements in life

circumstances (personal, family, or economic). One student described his experience as "personally and professionally enriching," saying that he "would not have been able to develop his entrepreneurial and management skills in a shorter time frame, if [he] had been a full-time student" (p. 260). Another study explored the emotional experiences of part-time students in response to the evaluations received by their instructors (Cramp et al., 2012). The authors found that the majority of these part-time students were initially reluctant to read their instructors' evaluations of their work, but quickly learned to enjoy and value that experience because their instructors clearly respected the students' work and life experience as part-time students.

These studies share a common theme of exploring how part-time and other non-traditional students intersect with higher education. However, even studies that have focused on outcomes, such as Jamieson et al. (2009), only drew on the perceptions and experiences of the students themselves. While these experiences are certainly valuable, they do not tell us about what the students have actually learned in terms of student learning outcomes.

Part-time students: Integrating employment and higher education

Many part-time students have considerable obligations outside of their commitment to higher education, namely employment and family obligations. Rather than seeing their commitment to their work as a hindrance to their learning, their employment offers a usually invisible benefit for their own education as well as those around them. Part-time study is more appropriate than full-time study for those who are employed (Tight, 1991), and it allows students to continue their employment and seek higher education at the same time. While this may seem like an obvious point, it is also

well documented that students who are working can relate their learning to their

employment and vice versa; this enhances their own learning experience as well as their

fellow students (Schuller et al., 1999). Since part-time study is more compatible with

other commitments than full-time study, it is more likely to happen later in life when

students may have a stronger motivation for learning and a clearer purpose than the

average full-time learner (Schuller et al., 1999). It also brings future professional benefits

for part-time students, as they continue to gain work experience and career skills while

simultaneously balancing work, family, and studying (Darolia, 2014; Green, 2014). In a

study of both full-time and part-time students who worked either part-time or full-time

while enrolled in higher education, Darolia (2014) found that working during school:

> Has benefits that could lead to improved academic performance for some
>
> students. Occupational activities can complement academic lessons by providing
>
> structure to students' schedules. Working can also aid in the development of soft
>
> skills that have value in both academic and vocational settings, such as
>
> communication, problem-solving, adaptability, responsibility, organization, and
>
> working under pressure. (p. 39-40)

There are even a small number of colleges in the U.S. that are described as "work

colleges," where all residential students (and some commuter students) work on campus,

doing everything from cleaning to assisting with classes to administrative work, with the

mission of developing exactly those soft skills described above. In an article about the

value of these "work colleges," Lloyd (2019) described similar benefits for students who

learn to integrate work and study, including time management, the value of work, and

professional skills. Far from being a disadvantage, the ability of part-time students to

balance both work and higher education offers a wide range of benefits to the individual

student, their families, and the students around them. As Davies (1999) described, we

should "celebrate the flexibility in the system which offers the possibility of combining

formal learning with non-formal learning, learning related to work and career

development with abstract knowledge, and personal with social development" (p. 153).

Others have made similar arguments, that more flexible forms and pathways to

degree completion are needed to meet the economic demands of a growing workforce

(Smith & Saunders, 1991). Part-time education, with its diverse population of students

and connections to the workforce, offers benefits to the institution as well, including

strengthening external links, maintaining or improving connections with employers,

keeping in touch with current workforce developments, gaining access to existing

expertise, encouraging future business, promoting employment for both part-time and

full-time students, and improving community and public relations (Schuller et al.,1999).

Encouraging and sustaining part-time students allows us to show viable pathways to

encourage regular and periodic involvement in lifelong learning, with a higher education

system that can accommodate students through all kinds of life changes and other

obligations.

Value of part-time enrollment

Because part-time students are different from what we think of as "normal"

college students, they are often marginalized, even on campuses where they make up the

majority of enrollments. Part-time students are not influential actors; their "leverage is

frequently too marginal to matter in most institutions" (Wooden et al., 1994, p. 205).

Some literature even describes non-traditional students, including adult learners and part-

time students, as being "pathologized" against and as being deficient in terms of

academic preparation, priorities, and abilities (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Webb,

1997). But perhaps counterintuitively given these tendencies, mature students *en masse*

do as well, or better than, younger, middle-class peers in higher education, providing they

survive the higher attrition rates (McGivney, 1996; Waller, 2006). In other words, if adult

students manage to persist, they perform better academically than younger students.

>As Swain & Hammond (2011) succinctly wrote:

>Because part-time students are substantial in number, we argue that it is important
>
>to understand their motivations for study and how they benefit from participation,
>
>and that research needs to include students' own accounts so that policy may be
>
>better informed by the realities of people's lives. (p. 592)

We must ensure that our future students have the opportunity to learn and develop

through higher education, even if that population of students looks and behaves

differently than the students around which our institutions were designed. The rise in

part-time students, though, has not been accompanied by a similar growth in research

studies that address the issues and problems of part-time study (Bennion et al., 2011;

Kember et al., 2001; Yum et al., 2005). None of this is to discourage full-time higher

education, but to put it in its full context.

In his sweeping history and overview of part-time education in the U.K., Tight (1991)

argued that:

>Full-time attitudes and misconceptions have dominated and diverted thinking and
>
>practice in British higher education for too long. Part-time higher education offers
>
>a way forward. Full-time higher education will remain important for certain

subjects, students, and needs. But it cannot offer a general model for a

significantly expanded system of higher education: the sort of system that we

need. Only part-time higher education can do that. Only part-time higher

education gives a genuinely real-life perspective to higher education, effectively

linking it with the society of which it is an integral and crucially important part.

(p. 144)

As Tight (1991) stated, part-time education has "seldom received the attention

paid to full-time provision, and it has never enjoyed the latter's level of resourcing. But

it…remains of considerable value to those who have experienced it and who could not

engage in full-time study" (p. 21). Part-time higher education is not just a poor shadow of

full-time education, but has value and merit in its own right. Seeking a degree part-time is

a choice made by students whose lives include other obligations, rather than a detriment

or failing of these students, as Davies (1999) also argued saying: "But is it possible to

extend this more widely, to present part-time higher education more positively, in a way

which constructs the students as actors rather than victims, as making positive choices

and contributions?" (p. 145). Students who choose to study in higher education on a part-

time basis face many barriers to degree completion, but they are not inherently flawed or

lesser than full-time students, and they bring a value and richness of their own to the

institution and their own learning.

 Diversity of part-time students

Higher education institutions across the country have faced, along with most other

societal institutions, a reckoning in recent years related to diversity, equity, inclusion, and

justice (Jaschik, 2021; Khalid & Snyder, 2021; McKenzie, 2021). Our institutions are

trying to quickly adapt to welcome and serve the needs of underrepresented populations; even my own institution, James Madison University (which has had diversity initiatives in place as part of its strategic plan for more than a decade), has issued strong statements of action and accountability with respect to an agenda of anti-discrimination and anti-racism (James Madison University, 2020b). Increasing the enrollment of part-time students can increase the diversity of a campus, given that part-time students are more likely than full-time students to be of lower socioeconomic status, first-generation college students, from underrepresented minorities, and older students (Bennion et al., 2011; Bombardieri, 2017; De Brey et al., 2021; Kelderman, 2020; Richardson & King, 1998). These part-time students are also likely to have other priorities besides higher education because of their family and work commitments; this means that they are firmly considered "non-standard" students, with emotional and mental baggage that makes them "messy" (Davies, 1999; Jamieson et al., 2009; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; MacDonald & Stratta, 2001). Of course, enrolling more part-time students alone will not resolve higher education's problems with inclusion, access, equity, and justice, but enrolling more part-time students can be part of the solutions we need to welcome and embrace diversity, which can get us closer to achieving inclusion, access, equity, and justice.

Lifelong learning: the epitome of part-time study

Part-time students who are seeking a bachelor's degree, and who are the primary focus of this dissertation, represent one critical segment of higher education. However, there are other ways to conceptualize part-time students, including those who will continue learning and seeking new credentials throughout their lifetime. Institutions that

are ready to innovate and adapt their systems and processes to welcome part-time students along a lifelong learning journey will be crucial to our success. Many educators and professionals have recognized that lifelong learning is a critical component of their careers. Dubin (1974) outlined a theory of obsolescence in various professions, arguing that over time, professionals in every field from medicine to psychology to engineering to management lose competence as the state of the field changes from when they graduated with their degree, saying "The factor that figures most prominently in hastening professional obsolescence today is the exponential rate of change of factual information and the rate of addition of new data and knowledge" (p.17). He argued that professionals must engage in a sustained and intentional plan of lifelong learning in order to keep up with new developments and research; this loss of knowledge over time, and the changes in a profession over time, has only accelerated since the mid-1970s with new technologies advancing faster than education can keep up. A college degree earned in four years at the beginning of a professional career may no longer be the best approach to learning that would support professional growth, especially as our careers grow longer just as our lifespans grow longer.

Because of the growth in technology and increased lifespan, our students must be prepared not for 30 years of work and then retirement, but possibly 60 years of work, and the demands of that work will change over time. A return throughout life to higher education in some form is valuable, and will become even more so as we prepare students for careers that do not even exist yet (Dede & Richards, 2020). This kind of education, where work, life, and study are intertwined, lends itself best to part-time enrollment. Our

current post-secondary education system, with its emphasis and structural design around

full-time residential students, is ill-suited for:

> Facilitating seamless, flexible, and cost-effective learning pathways for people to
>
> keep up with the emerging demands of the economy. If students don't follow the
>
> typical two- or four-year college experience, our systems do not make it easy for
>
> them to return and retrain in the future. Learners are left to force-fit nonlinear
>
> realities into a rigidly linear system. (Weise, 2020)

Recognizing, evaluating, and validating part-time enrollment in higher education in

general, whether for the purposes of earning a degree or returning to retrain for new kinds

of work, would facilitate these kinds of transitions and conversations, and therefore

assessment practice must ensure that the experiences and learning of part-time students

have not been forgotten.

Part-time students and the assessment cycle

Since we have established that part-time students represent a significant portion of

higher education enrollments, part-time education adds value to students' lives and their

future employment, and part-time students also add value to their institutions, courses,

and programs, higher education must ensure that we understand what these students are

learning in their programs. Student learning outcomes assessment, as described above, is

the key to unlocking that understanding.

Many institutions have developed clear assessment processes that include

establishing student learning outcomes for a program, developing ways of measuring

those outcomes, analyzing and sharing the data from those measurements, considering

program and learning improvements, and repeating the cycle again (Suskie, 2004; Banta

& Palomba, 2014; Erwin, 1991). At James Madison University, this is called the

assessment cycle (as illustrated in Figure 1), and it specifically includes the following

steps: state learning outcomes, map them to courses, select methods of measurement,

analyze and interpret results, report to stakeholders, and use the results for program

improvement.

Figure 1

Assessment Cycle
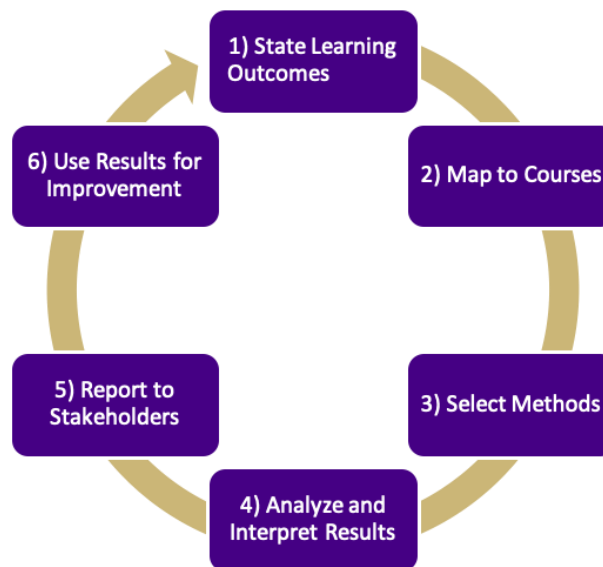
Note. Assessment cycle diagram, n.d., James Madison University Center for Assessment
and Research Studies
(https://www.jmu.edu/assessment/AcademicProgram/AssessmentReporting.shtml).

Implementation fidelity and the college curriculum

For an example of how part-time students should be considered in the assessment

cycle, but may not currently be, let us consider the process of examining implementation

fidelity. To return to our hypothetical part-time student, Mikaela, we can consider

whether and how her experiences as a part-time student are captured using the assessment

cycle. Since it will take Mikaela significantly longer than the traditional four years to complete her bachelor's degree, how do we know whether she has experienced her program of study as it was designed to be experienced? And can we therefore draw any meaningful inferences about her learning, based on data gathered throughout the assessment cycle?

The general definition of implementation fidelity provided by O'Donnell (2008) is "the determination of how well an intervention is implemented in comparison with the original program design during an efficacy and/or effectiveness study" (p. 33). The intervention, curriculum, program, or other unit of evaluation has been designed by experts to accomplish certain goals and lead to specific student learning outcomes; in some senses, that intervention is the "gold standard" that we are seeking to meet, but we need to be able to measure how far the actual program as it was delivered has deviated from that gold standard (Hulleman & Cordray, 2009). Deviations from the planned program may involve excluding critical program components or curriculum, shortening or lengthening program sessions or classes, changing the mode of program delivery, or adding extraneous information or activities. Ewell (1991) also encouraged an analysis of the designed curriculum vs. the delivered curriculum. If a program does not appear to meet the intended learning outcomes, three conclusions are possible: the outcome measures are not measuring the intended outcomes, the program does not work, or the program was not implemented correctly (Gerstner & Finney, 2013).

Implementation fidelity can be reasonably assessed for short-term programs, such as a one-day transfer student orientation; one approach is an implementation checklist (Swain et al., 2013). However, for longer and more complex programs, such as a

bachelor's degree or a K-12 education system, implementation fidelity becomes

significantly more complex (Hagermoser Sanetti & Kratochwill, 2009). One aspect of

implementation fidelity that is most relevant for part-time students is a specific kind of

deviation from the planned program: length of curriculum. If a bachelor's degree is

designed to be completed in four years, and if it takes a part-time student (like Mikaela)

significantly longer than that to complete it, have they experienced the program as it was

designed to be experienced? For example, what happens to the inferences we can draw

regarding learning outcomes if a course that was in the plan of study when Mikaela

started the program is replaced with another course before she is assessed? If she took the

course originally required by the program, but the assessment she takes, years later, is

designed to assess the updated curriculum, then our inferences are about her learning in

relation to the new curriculum, not the curriculum she actually completed!

On the other hand, institutions and programs cannot afford to keep curriculum

exactly the same over many years. Changes in available knowledge, or employment

trends in a particular field, or learning improvements resulting from assessment efforts,

could all reasonably change the design of a particular major (or other educational

program). These changes could (and should) also change the way the student learning

outcomes for that major are measured. Striking a balance between the needs of individual

students who may be taking longer than planned to complete a program, and the needs of

the program or institution as a whole to offer timely, relevant, and responsive educational

programs, is not an easy task. But the questions are worth asking. While full answers to

questions of implementation fidelity, or any other detailed aspect of the assessment cycle

as it relates to part-time students, lie outside the scope of this dissertation, this is an

important area of future research. Exploring in detail the places where part-time students may be left out of, or not accurately assessed by, program assessment procedures will be important to ensuring students' success.

Literature review summary

With growing skepticism about the value of higher education from both families and policy makers, and with demographic changes in our student populations that are both swiftly coming and already arrived, our institutions must act to demonstrate that value before it is too late. Being able to share the evidence of student learning through student learning outcomes assessment is a significant piece of those actions, but we must ensure that all types of student groups are represented in that evidence. A recent review of national trends in student learning outcomes assessment from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment highlights this need to ensure equity in student learning outcomes, arguing that "equity is an important consideration in assessment work, but underemphasized in data use…however, using assessment data to support the achievement of equity goals was uncommon" (Jankowski et al., 2018). Even this national review of assessment practices, while comprehensive, fails to even mention that part-time students exist on our campuses. Institutions that have adopted goals of equity, diversity, and inclusion are seeking strategies to welcome and serve diverse groups of students, and our assessment practices must reflect that reality. Part-time students are only one aspect of that diversity, but an important aspect that is likely to continue to grow as more students attempt to access the benefits of higher education in ways that match the realities of their lives and other commitments.

Our institutions of higher education must acknowledge, explore, understand, and accommodate the needs of part-time students. Some institutions that already enroll significant numbers of part-time students may have already accomplished this work, but more remains to be done as the number of part-time students grows (especially in a post-COVID-19 pandemic world). In order to adjust our assessment practices, we must first understand the experiences and learning of part-time students, as well as learn from other institutions who have begun to address these questions.

Research questions

Missing from all of the above literature are studies exploring what part-time students actually learn in college. We have partial information on what their experiences are like, the variables that contribute to persistence and retention for part-time students, and part-time students' satisfaction with their learning experience, but we know little about what this group of students achieve in relation to student learning outcomes, and whether and how they participate in institution's program-level assessment activities. Therefore, the research questions for this study include:

1) How do institutions with significant numbers of part-time students measure student learning outcomes? Do they do anything differently to assess part-time student learning outcomes?

2) What lessons can we learn about assessment of student learning outcomes of part-time students from institutions that are already enrolling significant numbers of part-time students?

3) Are part-time students able to fully participate in the institutions' planned assessment experiences? What challenges do they face in assessment experiences,

and what facilitates their participation? How do part-time students experience the

program assessment activities their institutions have designed?

Chapter 3: Methods

To address these questions about how part-time students experience student learning outcomes assessment and how institutions approach student learning outcomes with part-time students, I conducted a two-phase qualitative research study, using phenomenology as the qualitative approach and semi-structured interviews as the data collection method. A qualitative method was appropriate for this study because qualitative researchers "listen to participants and build an understanding based on their ideas" (Creswell, 2013, p. 30); because the participants in this study included both part-time students and academic administrators who work with part-time students and the assessment of their learning, building an understanding based on their ideas is a critical step towards future assessment practice. Before we can take any steps to adapt assessment practice to ensure it accounts for part-time students and their experience, we must first understand their experience, which makes qualitative research methods appropriate for this study. This methods chapter will first explore the key concepts of phenomenology as a research approach on a more theoretical or conceptual level, then explore my own role as researcher in this study, and finally describe the methodological steps that were undertaken in this dissertation to explore my research questions.

History and philosophy of phenomenology

Since I am exploring the phenomenon of how student learning outcomes are assessed with part-time students, as well as how part-time students perceive their learning, a phenomenological approach is the most appropriate for this study (van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology as an approach has its deepest roots in existential and transcendental philosophy, specifically that of Kant

(1781) and Husserl (1970). Existentialism, as a philosophy, "seeks to understand the human condition as it manifests itself in our concrete, lived situations" (Valle & King, 1978, p. 6). Disenchanted with natural, empirical science as a method of understanding human experience and consciousness, these philosophers and later phenomenological researchers were more concerned with "the lived experiences of individuals, because these are largely immeasurable and difficult to appreciate through sensory observation" (LeVasseur, 2003, p. 408). Measurement of physical phenomena, or observable behavior, is not enough to truly understand the lived experience of human beings. The foundational researchers in phenomenological methods recognized "the inability of positivistic, natural scientific thinking in the social sciences to adequately deal with these" (p. 13) types of lived human experiences, or existential questions (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Instead, a phenomenological study "describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon…describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76).

Phenomenology seeks to understand and describe the meaning of an experience or phenomenon, rather than to explain or discover causal connections (Dukes, 1984). First a researcher determines if the problem is suited for phenomenological research, i.e. one in which it is "important to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences" (Creswell, 2013, p. 81) in order to develop a deeper understanding about the phenomenon's features, or to develop practices or policies that take into account the lived experiences of the participants those polices would affect. As Moustakas (1994) described the texture and meaning of phenomenology:

> Phenomenology is committed to descriptions of experiences, not explanations or
>
> analyses. Descriptions retain, as close as possible, the original texture of things,
>
> their phenomenal qualities and material properties. Descriptions keep a
>
> phenomenon alive, illuminate its presence, accentuate its underlying meanings,
>
> enable the phenomenon to linger, retain its spirit, as near to its actual nature as
>
> possible. (p. 59)

The subject of a phenomenological study is some aspect of lived human experience; as

Henriques (2014) phrased it, "The object of study with which I am concerned is

sociological; it refers to what the collective experience and meaning of individuals is in a

common context, the one in which their agency occurs" (p. 452). In this case, the

concept, lived experience, or phenomenon being studied is that of part-time students and

what they learn through participation in higher education, from both the perspective of

the part-time students themselves and the assessment practitioners who evaluate their

student learning outcomes.

Features of phenomenology

Phenomenology has several key features, although researchers continue to

disagree on the relative importance and emphasis of each. Many prominent researchers

(Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2009) have contended, as

long as the key aspects of phenomenological methodology are followed, researchers can

follow their intuitions as they design, conduct and analyze their respective studies

(because those intuitions are part of the researcher's lived experience, which is

unavoidably part of the study). These key aspects include bracketing of the researchers

own biases and experiences relative to the topic of study, or *epoché*; specific approaches

to sampling participants; the process of gathering information through open ended

questions that focus on the "what" of the experience and the "how" it made participants

feel and think; and a form of evaluation that includes analysis of interview transcripts to

find common "meaning units" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83) and then gathering those into a

shared, rich description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009;

Moustakas, 1994).

Taking each of those features of phenomenological research in turn, bracketing

or *epoché,* which comes from a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, refers to

an attempt to recognize, acknowledge, and then set aside (as best we can) a researcher's

own lived experience related to the phenomenon of study, and their presuppositions and

assumptions about the lived experience of their participants (Moustakas, 1994;

LeVasseur, 2003). This is not a simple thing to do, as human beings, but the attempt itself

has value in the execution of a research study; by acknowledging that we are not coming

to this subject as a blank slate, which is always true in any research study, we at least

make an attempt to see, hear, and understand the subject from a new, fresh perspective. If

we can attempt to resist our initial assumptions and their implied structures and beliefs

about an experience, then we come closer to the thing itself, which is a philosophical way

to approach the exploration of some kind of truth. Moustakas (1994) described it as a

"new way of looking at things, a way that requires that we learn *to see* what stands before

our eyes" (p. 33), and Merleau-Ponty (1962) has described bracketing as a kind of

astonishment before the world that disrupts habitual patterns of thinking (emphasis mine).

This sense of astonishment, of new eyes, brings a refreshing and almost childlike sense of

openness to the process of qualitative research, making it appropriate for this study

because of the number, nature, and invisibility of part-time students and their learning experiences.

As is often true in qualitative research, sampling methodologies in phenomenological studies can be less defined or pre-specified than in quantitative research. The number of participants required to answer a phenomenological question can vary, and depends on when saturation, or redundancy, is reached (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Henriques, 2014). Saturation refers to a strong sense that the researcher has now heard or seen the same information multiple times, and no new information is available under the current circumstances (Creswell, 2013). As Henriques (2014) writes, "I find, from experience, that it [sample size] should be defined initially in an open way which allows increase or decrease" (p. 462); sometimes the researcher discovers new important categories of information that require increasing the number of participants, and sometimes finds no new information and saturation is reached after interviews are conducted with the pre-planned number of participants (or possibly fewer). Participants should be chosen based on their ability to describe a particular perspective on the experience the study is focusing on, or their ability to "represent" a perspective (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, phenomenological researchers should remain open to adapting their sampling methodology as circumstances change through the course of the research.

When designing a phenomenological study, the researcher needs to consider two broad categories of questions to ask the participants during interviews. They generally fall into "what" and "how" categories: what have you experienced related to this phenomenon? And how did that make you feel or think? (Moustakas, 1994). Some researchers advocate adding a third type of question: what context or situations have most

often impacted how you have experienced this phenomenon? (Creswell, 2013). This should be an informal, interactive process designed to engage the participant in trusting the researcher, utilizing open-ended questions, and encouraging the participant to share the full story of their experience of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Semi-structured interview questions create a framework within which to explore the participant's lived experience but also allow for variation or alteration when a participant delves more deeply into a particular facet of their story (Smith et al., 2009).

Analysis in phenomenological inquiry is characterized as a set of iterative and non-linear common procedures, moving from the specific to the shared, and from the descriptive to the interpretive. The analysis of the interview transcripts begins when the researcher studies them in detail, first reading through them completely to familiarize themselves. Merriam (2016) argues that any kind of qualitative data analysis, including from a phenomenological framework, should consider the collection and analysis of data to be a simultaneous, iterative process, where early interviews help inform further data collection efforts, and analytic coding schemes can be developed early and further refined as the study continues and deeper analysis is conducted. Moustakas (1994) described this as "horizonalizing" the data, giving equal value to each statement as having meaning related to the phenomenon under study – this "horizon" concept suggests that each statement represents a possible horizon or outer visible limit of this particular set of data. From there, "meaning units" are listed (Smith et al., 2009), and then the next transcript is analyzed. These "units" of data should be heuristic, or reveal something about the larger context and meaning of the data and the study, and also the "unit" should be the smallest possible piece of information that can be understood by itself within the broader concept

of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Once all transcripts have been broken into their

meaning units, these are clustered into common themes (being sure to remove

overlapping and repetitive statements; Smith et al., 2009). These are then developed into

the textural descriptions of the experience, or a structure or frame that illuminates the

relationships between themes. These steps lead to a final integration and reflection into

the meaning and essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). As

Merriam (2016) describes, "data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data,"

or the process of making meaning.

My own role as a researcher

As a key feature in phenomenological research, the role of the researcher is

critical, and not objective. The researcher is a key part of the research itself, from the

initial question to the initial contact with participants to the last interview to the complete

analysis (Henriques, 2014; LeVasseur, 2003). This is why bracketing is a fundamental

feature in phenomenology. My own role as a researcher in this study is nuanced and

complex. I work as an administrator at the university where I conducted this study, and

thus am deeply enmeshed in the daily routines, policies, and activities of the institution,

and yet I have little direct contact with students, full-time or part-time. The nature of my

work is oriented towards strategy and policy development, as well as internal university

relationships. These strategies, policies, and relationships allow my university to better

serve a subset of adult learners, many of whom are part-time students, but the faculty

who teach in these programs have more contact with students than I do, and more

influence on the assessment of student learning in these programs. This means I won't

already know the students in this study, and will hopefully be able to hear their

experiences with fresh "ears," as it were.

In addition, I am also a part-time doctoral student at the same university. The

experiences of part-time graduate students may not have much in common with the

experiences of part-time undergraduate students, but that question remains for another

study. I do recognize that my experience as a part-time doctoral student, surrounded in

my program primarily by full-time doctoral students, may influence and color my own

perceptions of the part-time undergraduate students in this study, and I will attempt to set

that perception aside. My own undergraduate career was spent at a very traditional, small

liberal arts college in the Midwest, where there were very few part-time students, so my

memories of my time there should not have much impact on what I learn from part-time

undergraduate students at this much larger institution, twenty years later.

Furthermore, my administrative role at this institution does not directly align with

our institutional process of assessing student learning outcomes – I am not part of the

conversations about student learning outcomes assessment as part of my work. While I

am aware of the ways my current institution approaches these activities, by nature of my

doctoral training, I am rarely directly part of them by the nature of my administrative

(rather than academic) position. So, when I interview assessment practitioners at other

institutions, I hope to have a fresh understanding of their experiences with assessing the

student learning outcomes of part-time students as well, and bring that sense of

"astonishment before the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 13).

This attempt to set aside my own lived experience, in order to better understand

and perceive the experiences of the administrators and students in my study, will

hopefully not only improve my understanding of this phenomenon, but also allow me to establish trust with my participants so that they feel safe in sharing their lived experience. As Henriques (2014) writes:

> The researcher has his or her own *habitus*. If the researcher has difficulty in suspending his or her preconceptions and judgements, or in being compassionate, or in accepting the others' meanings as valid – even if different – ways of experiencing the world and the organisation, then the researcher will not engender the necessary trust from the participants (p. 460).

Trust is a critical facet of phenomenological research, and must be established in order to develop and maintain an open communication between researcher and participant in order to fully uncover and illuminate the deep, rich meanings of the participant's lived experience.

Having described the key features and philosophical foundations of phenomenology, I will now describe the detailed steps of the methodology for this dissertation. Table 2 provides a summary of the research design employed in the current study.

Research Design

Table 2

Research Design Map

Design Phase	Dissertation Component
Phase I: Qualitative Data Collection, Assessment Administrators	Remote semi-structured interviews with assessment practitioners and administrators from institutions with large percentages of part-time student enrollment to understand how they assess part-time learning.

Phase II: Qualitative Data Collection, Part-Time Students	Remote semi-structured interviews with part-time students at James Madison University to understand their learning experiences as part-time students and their experience with student learning outcomes assessment
Data Analysis	Transcripts from both sets of interviews were analyzed and coded using a phenomenological data analysis approach (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). This analysis yielded a rich, descriptive understanding of the experiences of both part-time students and assessment administrators.

Phase I of study

The first phase included interviews with academic administrators at various institutions to explore their student learning outcomes assessment process. I selected a preliminary list of institutions who serve a higher proportion of part-time students than my own institution, in order to learn whether and how they alter their assessment practices specifically for part-time students. These institutions were selected using purposeful sampling based on a thorough literature review of part-time students in higher education. This list initially included the University of North Texas, Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, Trident Technical College, Blue Ridge Community College (Virginia), Odessa College, and Bunker Hill Community College. This list changed during the course of the research, as the assessment practitioners I spoke to had recommendations of other institutions with assessment practices specifically for part-time students that I should speak with, and as some of the assessment practitioners at these preliminary institutions did not respond; this practice of expanding the list of participants based on recommendations from current participants is called "snowball sampling"

(Creswell, 2013). These interviews were conducted using a semi-structured qualitative interview protocol (see Appendix A), and were audio recorded. All interviews were conducted exclusively through video interviews using Zoom, because of current pandemic safety concerns. Video was not recorded. All participants agreed to be recorded. After contacting a total of 15 institutions, I was able to conduct 4 interviews with assessment practitioners at a range of different types and sizes of institutions. I transcribed all interviews, which gave me a chance to deeply engage with the material during the initial interview, the transcription, and the data coding and analysis. Once transcribed, interviews were analyzed using the phenomenological procedures described below using NVivo qualitative analysis software (2018).

Phase II of study

The second phase of the study included part-time students at JMU (i.e. enrolled less than 12 credit hours). These students were identified with the help of the Office of the Registrar, who sent an email to that population of students notifying them of this study and inviting their participation. While there were difficulties with this process, which I will discuss in detail in the final chapter, this was the prescribed procedure for contacting students as potential research subjects at my institution. Students who wished to participate responded, and I worked with them to set up an interview time that was convenient for them. All interviews were conducted exclusively through video using Zoom, because of current pandemic safety concerns. Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B), and were audio recorded with subject consent (i.e., all subjects consented to recording). Video was not recorded. After the email from the Office of the Registrar was sent in the first round to approximately

5600 students, and in the second round to approximately 1000 students, I was able to

schedule interviews with six of them; two did not attend their scheduled interviews, and

one withdrew during the interview, leaving three part-time student participants. I

transcribed all interviews, which gave me a chance to deeply engage with the material

during the initial interview, the transcription, and the data coding and analysis. Once

transcribed, interviews were analyzed using the phenomenological procedures described

below using NVivo qualitative analysis software (2018).

For both phases of this study, interview audio files were stored on a secure,

password protected computer accessible only to the primary investigator. Transcription

files were maintained on a secure, password protected computer accessible only to the

primary investigator; this computer did not access any cloud services during the duration

of this project. Once research is complete, these transcription files will be destroyed as

well. No photography was used; video communication was used to conduct the

interviews, but video data were not analyzed or stored, only the audio files and

transcribed interviews.

Data analysis

All interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed according to

phenomenological research procedures, beginning with a general reading, a close, line-

by-line reading of the experiential claims and understandings of the participants, initial

coding of themes and concepts, and then grouping these into "meaning units" (Smith et

al., 2009). Analysis continued with each transcript in an iterative process, and then the

meaning units were gathered into larger themes that describe the phenomenon of part-

time learning and assessment (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009), seeking to find the

shared meaning and essential features of the experience of these part-time students and assessment administrators. The development of these themes emphasized both convergent and divergent aspects of the lived experience of participants, as well as commonality and nuance between them; finally, these themes were developed into a larger framework or narrative that sought to connect these lived experiences of part-time study and student learning outcomes assessment into a detailed and rich exploration of these phenomena (Smith et al., 2009).

Hopefully, these two phases of this study have generated useful understandings of the assessment of the student learning outcomes for part-time students, the experiences of the students themselves, and recommendations for practices to ensure the incorporation of this population of students into an institution's overall assessment plan while honoring their unique individual life and learning experiences.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

Overview and summary

This chapter includes a description of my research participants and a summary of the qualitative themes and supporting evidence from my interviews. I begin with assessment practitioners' reflections on their institutions' experiences with assessing student learning outcomes for part-time students, and then move to part-time students themselves. This chapter also includes reflections on the process of collecting these data and what that process reveals about part-time students. Finally, the chapter concludes with further reflections on the themes identified here and how they connect to existing literature and higher education practice, limitations of the current study, directions for future research, recommendations for assessment practitioners, and conclusions.

Summary of participants and data

In the course of my study, I interviewed four assessment practitioners at different types and sizes of institutions.

Table 3

Description of assessment practitioner participants

Pseudonym	Type of institution	State	Estimated enrollment	Part-time enrollment (percentage of total)
Maria Cisco	Two-year community college	Virginia	3,800	2,607 (65%)
Bryan Gallagher	Four-year institution	Texas	9,700	6,233 (64%)
Geoffrey Haskins	Four-year institution	Maryland	40,700	2,852 (7%)
Robin North	Two-year community college	Massachusetts	11,360	7,265 (64%)

Note. All enrollments based on Fall 2019 NCES College Navigator data:

https://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/

These interviews generated 1,008 lines of coded data. Those data were analyzed into 13

larger codes, which were then summarized and refined into the following five themes:

1) Assessment practices for part-time students vs. full-time students

2) Course-embedded assessment

3) Finding and/or identifying part-time students and recognizing their

experiences

4) Student progress, persistence, and completion

5) Role of faculty

These themes, and the data that inform them, will be discussed in greater detail below.

I also interviewed three part-time students as part of my data collection process;

however, as the discussion below will show, this became significantly problematic, both

because of ongoing pandemic restrictions and because of the nature and difficulty of

locating, identifying, and contacting part-time students. A summary description of these

student participants is below:

Table 4

Description of part-time student participants

Pseudonym	Major	Time at JMU and status	Estimated number of credits completed
Sierra Bantam	Psychology	One semester (transfer from community college)	66
Morgan Greene	Political Science	Four semesters (transfer from community college)	54

| Katie Whitby | Nursing (RN-BSN) | Two semesters (transfer from community college) | 72 |

These interviews generated 754 lines of coded data. Those data were analyzed into 11

larger codes, which were then summarized and refined into the following three themes:

1) Reasons for part-time study/part-time students' other life obligations

2) Influence of the nature of time itself on part-time learning

3) Comparison to full-time student learning, from the part-time student

perspective

Qualitative themes: Assessment practitioners

The data gathered from assessment practitioners addressed the first two of my

research questions:

1) How do institutions with significant numbers of part-time students measure

student learning outcomes? Do they do anything differently to assess part-time

student learning outcomes?

2) What lessons can we learn about assessment of student learning outcomes of part-

time students from institutions that are already enrolling significant numbers of

part-time students?

Below, each qualitative theme is described and supported with examples from

interview participants, each of whom is an assessment practitioner at varying types of

institutions.

Assessment for part-time vs. full-time students

When asked if their institutions did anything differently in the assessment process

for part-time students vs. full-time students, whether in gathering data, analyzing or

interpreting it, reporting it, or anything else, the answer for all assessment practitioner

participants was essentially "no." For example:

> Haskins: *Not that I've ever seen spelled out in any of the reports, or in any of the conversations I've had with faculty and the program heads.*

> North: *There's not a lot of very specific, yes, we're doing this, and this is how we're measuring it, but it's part of our conversations, it's part of our thinking, and it's becoming more so, I would say.*

> Cisco: *I would be interested if any other colleges say that they treat them differently – because I can't imagine.*

Even for some of the participants I interviewed at institutions with significant or

majority part-time students, they felt that they didn't have enough part-time students in

any particular category, program, or curricular pathway to draw conclusions about part-

time students; or they don't have enough full-time students in those pathways to be able

to make meaningful comparisons to part-time students.

> Cisco: *We have so few numbers generally, by the time you get down to the people who are in administration of justice who are full-time vs. part-time, I don't know if you have many full-time people in that because most of them are employed already, um, it would be such, it would take you so long to get any numbers that would possibly show you anything, and then you couldn't say that it accrues to them being part-time, because it could just, if it's eight years later, who knows what's changed. I think that would be difficult to do.*

> Haskins: *Our part-time population is extremely small, which might be why there isn't as much of a focus with it. Um, especially, like if you want to start diving into the data of a particular program, and part-time students, then it gets to be handfuls…You know, this, our institution doesn't have a large population, so I don't think the question comes up as much as it would at another institution.*

Some of them even mentioned that they weren't sure what they would gain by

exploring the differences in student learning between part-time and full-time students;

either it wouldn't show any difference, and so what would the point be, or it would show

a difference, and then what kinds of changes in learning would that lead to? A participant

who thought it wouldn't make any difference shared that:

> Cisco: *I don't think we have [looked at part-time students differently] – and if we did, I'm not sure it would be all that meaningful for us. Since the majority of them are part-time, what would it show if we did break out that data by part-time or full-time status?*

And another participant who wasn't sure what they would do with that

information if it did show a difference noted that:

> Gallagher: *I could see that being different at a different institution. But here, at a community college, I think the most we would be able to say is something like "It doesn't matter whether you take your time, or pack it in, you're learning the same thing either way." And I suppose there's some value in that, whether it's saying that to the students themselves, or prospective students, or employers, or the faculty. But would that be worth the effort? I don't know.*

One of the research questions driving this dissertation is exactly this question: are part-

time students learning the same thing as full-time students? This response highlights the

need for the question and further research; do part-time students know the same things as

full-time students (or more, or less) – all while part-time students make up almost 40% of

higher education enrollments (De Brey et al., 2021).

However, there were three areas in which participants mentioned possible

differences in assessment practices or analysis for part-time students, even if they were

still in preliminary stages. These include revamping curriculum maps for part-time

students, analyzing assessment data for groups of students by age and credit thresholds,

and exploring momentum metrics. One community college participant mentioned that her

institution was in the midst of

> North: …r*evamping these curriculum maps. And they're all done for full-time students, they're designed to show a student, you know, which courses they need to take in which term to finish at such and such, after such and such a time. I know we're talking about developing those curriculum maps for part-time*

students, so I don't know when the plan is to do that, but that is in the works.

Even at a community college, knowing that the curriculum maps for students

were designed for full-time students suggests how invisible part-time students are, at an

institution where they make up the majority of the student population. And those

curriculum maps determine staffing, assessment process planning, course availability and

scheduling, and many other factors that would impact the lives of part-time students. The

assessment practitioner at the same institution mentioned that she had started to look at

student data broken down by age group, and that our conversation had prompted her to

consider doing the same for part-time students:

> North: *I've been doing that with age, and um, completed credits…I've been*
> *considering the same way, how we can get more, that was actually quite shocking*
> *to people when I did that, they had ideas about how many people were in those*
> *higher credit range groups, and I think it could be interesting with part-time as*
> *well to just break that group down a little bit more. I think it's a big difference for*
> *someone to take you know one course vs. three courses.*

Another community college had done some initial (unpublished) research on part-

time student participation in a learning community. Learning communities are widely

recognized as a high-impact practice, and this community college was the first to

incorporate part-time students in a learning community; information available on this

practice and its results is scarce, but

> North: *We were just looking at if a part-time student was part of this high impact*
> *practice, did it increase their likelihood of being retained the next fall, and the*
> *answer was yes. That was again a snapshot analysis, you don't want to draw too*
> *many conclusions, but it'll be interesting now, they're revamping that intro*
> *Learning Communities course.*

Finally, as part of a Title IV grant for Hispanic Serving Institutions focused on

guided pathways, one participant mentioned that comparing learning outcomes for part-

time vs. full-time students would be included, along with other metrics related to

retention, persistence, and momentum.

> North: *I'm always trying to look for those new ways we can assess, and one thing I've been coming to again and again is kind of these early momentum metrics, and I think that that's something that could be helpful for any student, but it could be extra important I think for part-time students. I think full-time students might be meeting those anyway, but for part-time students it would be interesting to look at like who's meeting some of those, or do we extend the time frame for people to meet those, I don't know, just kind of considering other ways of looking at people's momentum and success and trying to figure out what's helping people be successful, so that we can support them in that.*

Course-embedded Assessment

Each of the assessment practitioners I spoke with for this dissertation were at

institutions whose primary mechanisms for assessment were course-embedded. They

described multiple methods of gathering assessment data, but all of them were conducted

during a single course or series of courses to evaluate the student learning captured in a

single existing assignment or series of existing assignments, so all students enrolled in

that particular course or courses were captured in the assessment data. For example, at a

community college, one participant described the following:

> Cisco: *Within each class, the faculty who teach the class determine what assignment is going to be used to measure that objective that year. And then they proceed through the year, getting together and making sure that everybody knows how to use the rubric the same, and those kinds of things.*

And another participant at a large four-year institution shared a similar process:

> Gallagher: *We have those assessments built right into our Blackboard stuff, so the faculty teaching the courses that those are part of, um, you know, don't really have to do anything special to set it up, it's just built in there, they're mostly rubrics for analyzing specific student assignments, so more authentic embedded assessment, rather than just multiple choice tests. And then we have the program level outcomes, which of course are different for each program, but generally approached in a really similar way. The program coordinators have defined them, we have assessments built for them and loaded into Blackboard for the particular courses they've identified where they want to measure that, and then it*

just goes from there.

Finally, another participant, also at a large four-year institution, had similar

comments:

> Haskins: *I kind of view it [general education assessment] as more course-level assessment instead of program-level. So each faculty is supposed to do assessment, and they basically are already in our learning management system, we have those rubrics that I mentioned on the back end, and they can attach entire rubrics or rows of the rubrics to assignments, and then they can use those rubrics to rate those assignments, ungraded, and that's kind of how they do assessment in their courses.*

Because the assessment practices these participants were talking about were

embedded in existing courses using existing assignments, the assessment mechanisms

were applied to part-time students in exactly the same way as full-time students. The

students' enrollment status didn't matter, just their enrollment in a single particular

course. Often, these interview participants actually found the question about "Do you do

anything different to assess the learning of part-time students?" to be an odd question,

because when the assessment happens in the classes where part-time students and full-

time students are enrolled together, it would be strange (and difficult) to do anything

differently in terms of assessment for part-time students.

> Haskins: *With the general education stuff, because it is pretty much course embedded, it wouldn't matter [whether they were part-time or full-time] – really, many of the characteristics of the students themselves wouldn't matter, as long as they're all enrolled in the same course with each other, they're experiencing the same assessment process.*

> Gallagher: *I don't think so – because they're [the assessments] all tucked into the classes they're [the students] taking, they're learning the material and then being assessed on it in the same semester, and it's whenever they get to that particular class in their pathway. We don't have a really tightly managed curriculum sequence for the most part – students generally take these courses, especially the general education ones, whenever they can get a seat in a class that fits their schedule in a particular semester. So they're just…I don't know, they're just <u>there</u>, you know? It is, sort of, <u>is</u>. I don't know if that makes sense.*

> Cisco: *I don't think that many faculty members think about whether the student overall is full-time or part-time. Certainly not when we choose assignments [to include in the assessment process], it's, if you do the assignment, your response gets included in the assessment.*

So each of these examples of course-embedded assessment processes included part-time students in exactly the same way as full-time students, and for these assessment practitioners to consider how they might treat the two populations of students differently was outside their frame of reference. A strength, therefore, of course-embedded assessment from the perspective of including part-time students is that it's just generally inherent – if the student is enrolled in the class, their data is collected in the assessment, regardless of their overall enrollment status, time to completion, or any other factor. However, course-embedded assessment models only capture the learning that happens in courses, and do not necessarily draw connections and conclusions about the larger student experience of higher education (which can be very different for part-time students).

This aligns with the general literature on the differences and advantages between a course-embedded model of assessment vs. a focused institution-wide assessment collection process. Institution-wide assessment processes allow for more longitudinal assessment designs and broader conclusions about student learning that aren't just attributable to normal growth and development but that are instead directly tied to coursework completed and changes in student learning. As Pastor et al. (2019) describe, an "assessment day" approach (which includes the approach at JMU) "addresses major weaknesses associated with common assessment approaches, specifically those using a posttest-only design, cross-sectional data, or convenience samples" (Pastor et al., 2019,

p.1-2). The pretest-posttest design of an Assessment Day model allows faculty to draw

conclusions about gains attributable to particular coursework; if students know more after

having completed a set of general education classes, we can conclude that student

knowledge is increasing as a result of that coursework (Hathcoat et al., 2015; Mathers et

al., 2018; Pastor et al., 2019).

Other considerations included in an assessment day model include whether

student participation in assessments should be required or encouraged; in order to gather

complete data. Broad (if not universal) student participation allows for greater evidence-

driven decision making, whereas finding ways to encourage student participation can

reduce student resentment and allow for greater flexibility, but at the cost of universal

participation. At JMU:

> Students who failed to attend (either for legitimate reasons or out of
>
> delinquency) have a hold placed on their record and are contacted via
>
> email about make-up sessions. There are typically two to six make-up
>
> sessions, each accommodating about 100 students, scheduling in the
>
> evenings several weeks after Assessment Day. (Pastor et al., 2019, p. 9)

While this approach means that JMU has 99-100% participation, it can also be difficult

for part-time students to participate, even in the make-up sessions, and then face the

consequence of having a hold on their student registration (which can then make it hard

to enroll in classes that meet their scheduling requirements for the following semester).

At another institution, student participation is voluntary and rewarded (with early

registration for the next term, messages about the importance to the institution/campus

pride, etc). Students are not punished for non-participation; students with scheduling

conflicts could choose to reschedule for a makeup time (Swing, 2001). Regardless of these scheduling and attendance considerations, higher education students in general are also used to a culture of assessment testing from their K-12 experiences, which can impact their willingness and motivation (Zilberberg, 2013).

A course-embedded model of assessment, on the other hand, has the advantages of being systematic, nonintrusive, and possibly mitigating "faculty resistance to program-level assessment initiatives which they may lack necessary knowledge of, and perceive as demanding significant time commitment" (Kumar et al., 2018). As Gerretson & Golson (2005) argue, "Course-embedded assessment practices aligned to program-level objectives allow for flexibility in course content and delivery while ensuring consistency in evaluating student learning across the program's curriculum." Additionally, a course-embedded model of assessment can lead to more meaningful discussion among faculty about expectations for student learning, standards of performance, and best practices for enhancing student learning (Gerretson & Golson, 2004; Kumar et al., 2018).

Institutions across the country have adopted either of these models, or hybrid approaches, and the intent here is not to argue for one over the other. Good assessment practice can take many forms; as the assessment practitioner participants in this study suggested, course-embedded assessment was the common practice at their institutions, which may have had an impact on how they measured student learning, and how they thought about measuring student learning, for part-time students. However, the key component above all is institutional buy-in and commitment to assessment practice, and to using the results to improve student learning. As Swing (2001) argues:

Institutional improvement is unlikely to result from assessment data obtained

from unwilling participants and delivered to skeptical faculty and administrators.

Dedicated assessment days based on voluntary, rewarded participation can

provide an intrinsically motivating assessment structure. Ultimately, assessment

in higher education is dependent on the goodwill of students to supply valid

answers to our assessment questions. Goodwill must be earned through our

communication with students and the assessment structures we design. (p. 15)

This statement is true regardless of the assessment model chosen; student

participation is critical, and part-time students must have equal and reasonable ways to

participate. The assessment practitioners in my study might also argue that quality

assessment and the inferences we draw from it about what students are learning depends

not just on the goodwill of students, but also their ability and opportunity to participate in

assessment structures. Ultimately, this is not intended to be a full review of the

considerations and decisions required to choose an assessment model, but rather a brief

exploration of some of the issues involved, and how they might impact part-time

students, as a way to contextualize a theme that was consistent among the participants in

this study: course-embedded assessment allowed part-time students to participate in

assessment in exactly the same way as full-time students, specifically because it was

embedded directly in the courses they were enrolled in.

Identifying part-time students

Several assessment practitioners mentioned the difficulty of identifying who the

part-time students at their institution are. For many of the participants in this study, where

most assessment data is generated in course-embedded models, that meant they were

thinking largely about whether faculty members in the classroom would be able to

identify which students in their class were part-time, and the answer to that was no, as

several mentioned:

> Cisco: *A faculty member doesn't know when they have a class who's part-time or who's full-time.*
>
> Gallagher: *When they're actually in the classroom, I don't know of anybody who knows or cares or maybe not even is curious about whether the student is full-time or part-time, they're in their class and that's their responsibility.*
>
> Haskins: *I don't know if that piece of information, for example, is available in the class roster.*

This perspective makes sense in a course-embedded model; the faculty generally

wouldn't know from the roster, or from looking at the students, which ones are part-time;

that aspect of their status, or that characteristic of their student experience, is invisible.

But even beyond the classroom, some of the participants mentioned that there are aspects

of their institutional systems or national data systems that would make it difficult to

identify part-time students in general.

> Haskins: *Our transactional systems, which go back to the 80s, I think, for our student system, doesn't make some of that [identifying which students are part-time] easy.*

In addition, one participant was describing the process of receiving special pandemic-

related support funding, and said:

> Gallagher: *It was all based on FTE. Full-time equivalencies, you know? And when you take a bunch of part-time students and add them up based on credit hours and see how many full-time students that would be – well, when you have so many part-time students, that formula ends up messing with institutions like us. We ended up getting far less aid, because of that formula. I said before that to us, they're all just <u>students</u>, you know? Well, not for that kind of thing. For that kind of thing, a big chunk of our students count as less than individual students, you know? They apparently, in the eyes of people making those decisions, don't have the same needs, they don't really count. They don't count. That was frustrating.*

This common assumption in higher education policy about full-time equivalencies underlies many decisions about student needs and support, and as Gallagher points out, it does a real disservice to part-time students who literally count as less than a person.

Part-time student progress, persistence, and completion

Even though my interview questions focused on student learning outcomes assessment, several participants mentioned efforts around evaluating time to completion, persistence, and progression for part-time students. These metrics are important at an institutional level, and part of the ongoing reporting and data collection needs, especially for assessment offices that are part of institutional research and effectiveness offices, even if they don't directly measure student learning. For example:

> North: *I'm always thinking about kind of the big metrics, right, so things like retention, things like graduation.*

> Cisco: *When they graduate, when they get an associates, we have an exit survey that asks how long did it take you to get out of here, that kind of thing, and that can be, I mean, it's anywhere from eighteen months to ten years.*

Specifically in the area of retention and persistence for part-time students, one participant described efforts at their institution to evaluate how long part-time students take to complete a degree:

> North: *It's not uncommon for somebody to take courses part-time for <u>years and years</u>. And then there's the ones who, they don't come back, and that's, unfortunately the majority, but what's different about these, what, I don't know what it is, what is it that's driving and what supports has that person had that have allowed her to continue to be successful and continue to persist?*

These comments align directly with the research on part-time student motivation related to persistence, and questions about what drives part-time students to keep coming back and moving forward (Swain & Hammond, 2011). Along the same lines, the same

participant described how difficult it is to actually measure persistence with part-time

students, given the fluid nature of their enrollment patterns (Crosta, 2014):

> North: *Another thing about our part-time students is – students could, students, it's very difficult to, you know, get a sense of like a pathway, or even like multiple pathways. Every person's pathway seems different, so um, there may be students who are consistently persisting from term to term, and just taking one or two classes a term. But then there's others who maybe they were full-time before, or maybe they were part-time before and then they've taken some time off, they've come back, we have lots of people who we term "stopouts," I'm sure you've heard this, so some of them don't return but some of them do. So in terms of part-time students, I would just say it's kind of across the board, there's not one way to really make sense of who they are in a specific kind of way.*

So while persistence, retention, and completion are important markers of progress

at both the student and institutional level, they are difficult to measure for part-time

students; yet these metrics came up in multiple interviews because they are easier to

measure than student learning outcomes. Given the complex and fluid enrollment patterns

of part-time students (Crosta, 2014; see also Table 1), persistence, retention and

completion are not easy to calculate for part-time students, but measuring what those

students have learned is even more difficult. As North described, "there's not one way to

really make sense of who they are in a specific kind of way;" the diversity of this

population of students makes measuring anything about their experience more

challenging.

Role of faculty in assessing student learning outcomes of part-time students

While I didn't specifically ask about the role of faculty in the student learning

outcomes assessment process, several participants mentioned this topic, while indicating

varying levels of faculty involvement. Because all of my participants used a course-

embedded model of assessment, it seemed relatively consistent that faculty had a high

degree of involvement in the assessment process, and in the use of the results of those

assessment data; in some cases this was really positive involvement as part of an overall

culture of assessment, and in some cases that level of assessment led to some

inconsistencies across academic units or programs.

> Gallagher: *So then as we collect that data each year for a particular set of outcomes, I do some basic analysis and data cleanup here, and then share that with the faculty cluster who teach in that area in a series of meetings. They really lead that conversation about what that information tells them about what students are learning, you know, and that's one of the coolest parts of my job – this goes back to what I was saying earlier, that it's all really built in here, that it's just, uh, part of the environment, you know?*

> Cisco: *We have an assessment coordinator, who works with all the faculty to help them determine all this, we sit in on their weekly meetings as they, um, pick what they're going to do, determine what assignments and what classes – classes and assignments to use, and look at, analyze things and data – but don't make the decisions, the faculty, the people who are doing the teaching actually make those decisions, and implement those assessments.*

> North: *Part of, the one thing that I would say is maybe a negative is that there are kind of various levels of assessment going on in different departments and different courses, so um, on the one hand, I think it's really great that it's faculty-driven, but then on the other hand, it might be a little harder to have consistency in how things are implemented.*

None of these comments or this theme were specific to part-time students and

their learning, but they are included here to illustrate the varying levels of faculty

involvement in the student learning outcomes assessment process; since interview

participants had indicated earlier that most of the time, the faculty wouldn't know who in

their class was a part-time student vs. a full-time student, this level of faculty

involvement in assessment suggests that the faculty who are making decisions based on

the results of the assessment data would not be thinking about part-time students.

Qualitative themes: Part-time students

The data gathered from part-time students addressed my final research question:

Are part-time students able to fully participate in the institutions' planned assessment

experiences? What challenges do they face in assessment experiences, and what

facilitates their participation? How do part-time students experience the program

assessment activities their institutions have designed?

The themes that emerged from these interview data with part-time students

include:

1) Reasons for part-time study/part-time students' other life obligations

2) Influence of the nature of time itself on part-time learning

3) Comparison to full-time student learning, from the part-time student
   perspective

Reasons for part-time study

The students in my study all expressed different reasons for pursuing part-time

study at JMU. All of them happened to be students who transferred to JMU after

completing either an associate's degree at a Virginia community college, or completing

approximately 20 credit hours at a Virginia community college. Their reasons for

enrolling at JMU part-time ranged from their current life circumstances to their

perception of their intelligence and capacity as college students:

> Bantam: *I don't know what kind of expectations I had coming here, but I think I didn't think I was probably smart enough to like go full-time… I have reasons for always feeling like I was the dumbest kid in the class, just from middle school, it was this whole weird thing, I was kept at home, so I was a little socially awkward as well.*

> Greene: *So I started that fall with a full-time load, but realized a few weeks into the semester that I wasn't going to be able to do everything all at the same time. I – it's been like one lesson after another, right? I can do this, or I can do that, I like things about both, I want to do both, I can't do it all, so which things do I let go of? What do I give up? I knew I didn't want to quit school all together, I finally had a clear picture in my head of where I wanted to end up. And I figured, hey,*

what the hell, I'm already behind where I'm supposed to be, might as well try and do this, even if it takes me longer.

Both of these students had already invested considerable time in their learning; for Greene, he had begun at a community college because he didn't know what he wanted to do, and transferred to JMU as a full-time student once he figured out what he wanted his major to be. He later became a part-time student because he realized he would have to work, and knew he couldn't juggle a work schedule and full-time school schedule. For Bantam, it had taken her nine years to finish her associate's degree, largely because of other life circumstances:

> Bantam: *I've got custody of my younger siblings, so I've kind of done the single mom route… I had three girls at nineteen, my sisters, I had custody of them, so I did work full-time and go to school. Going to school it was difficult, I did have to work my schedule around the girls, which also limited me in classes. Because maybe they would offer a seven o'clock class, but I had a six and a ten year old at home, so I was not able to, you know, participate in that, so, um, I'm not unhappy that it's taken me nine years, but I am very happy we've all gotten what we needed. Not trying to brag on the girls, but two of them graduated with honors, one graduated early, they're both in college right now, the youngest is fifteen, so I'm really, I feel good about where I'm at.*

Finally, for Whitby, she had always known she would be a part-time student. She had always known she wanted to be a nurse, but that she would need to start as a nursing aide, then earn an associate's degree and become an RN (registered nurse), and then continue on for her BSN (bachelor of science in nursing). As a part-time RN-BSN student at JMU, she felt very comfortable with that choice and her path as a student:

> Whitby: *This program really supports part-time students well, which I appreciate. There was a really clear pathway laid out for me – if you take these classes in your RN, and make sure you've done this, this, and this, then you'll be all set to transfer to JMU and take this, this, and this, and here's exactly what you need to do, step by step, you know? That always made sense to me – actually, it made more sense to me than quitting my job, which I love, and going to school full-time. Why would I give that up, when this path lies right in front of me?*

Whitby and Greene's experiences in particular aligned with the literature on the value

that working while studying part-time can bring to their education; work informs their

learning, and learning informs their work, in an iterative cycle (Darolia, 2014; Schuller et

al., 1999). While each of these students had different reasons for being a part-time

student, they all had agency in making that choice for themselves, rather than feeling it

was forced on them by circumstances. And each of them, as I explore below, found

advantages in being a part-time student that they believe they wouldn't have found as a

full-time student.

Influence of the nature of time itself on part-time learning

All of the students I interviewed spoke of various aspects of the nature of time

and its impact on their learning and experiences of higher education. They saw their

learning as something that they were responsible for, and something they valued deeply:

> Whitby: *There's something really neat about being able to do one thing at a time, or really two things at a time, while still doing all of my work at the hospital. Like anyone else, I suppose, it's really up to me whether I – what I get out of the classes I take, right? That's up to me. And so many times – seriously, I can't believe how often this happens – I'll learn something in class, and then see it at work, or vice versa, I'll see something at work, and then we'll talk about it the next week in class. And if I wasn't taking my time doing this, if I was trying to – if I wasn't working, I wouldn't be taking this long, right? But if I wasn't working, I also wouldn't see that kind of connection between my work and my classes, right? So having the time to really dig deeply, to focus on just a few things rather than everything, has really helped me.*

> Bantam: *I'm actually in two classes, I'm taking organic and 210, so stats with psychology, and I feel like that's probably enough for me to do very well in the classes and make sure I'm not just memorizing stuff, I'm actually like understanding it. Um, so that was another reason that I decided to just go ahead and stick with part-time. I'm super confident, I know I'm going to get where I want to go, I have the drive, and being able to focus on school part-time while also taking care of the other things in my life I had to take care of meant that I was able to not only do all of those things at the same time, but also learn my courses and that material on an even deeper level. I feel like I have the tools now, and I will say that I can attribute that to going part-time.*

> Greene: *If I'm the only part-time student in a class, and everyone else is a full-time student, I would think we're all getting the same thing out of a class. Well, at least as much as we're putting into it, right? Maybe the full-time students can focus on it more, because they are mostly just doing school, and can dedicate themselves, um, to that kind of thing. Or maybe, now that I think about it, I can focus on it more, because I'm only taking two or three classes at a time? I don't know, I hadn't really thought about it before.*

While these students largely saw the benefits of taking their time and being able to delve deeply into their learning, they also mentioned a few drawbacks to part-time study that they felt impacted their learning:

> Greene: *At the same time – your question made me think of this – I'm taking a class this semester where we're using some of the stats skilled we learned in another class, and now that you say this, I'm remembering that most of the students took that other class just the semester before, whereas I took it two years ago. I couldn't take them back to back (which is what my advisor suggested) because of when it was scheduled, so I'm having to work really hard now, going back to, um, my old notes, and sort of re-learn, re-teach myself, if that's a thing, um, the stuff I learned then so I can use it again now.*

> Bantam: *Probably realizing that it's going to take me for-ev-er, but at the age I was, I didn't realize the importance of taking your time and stuff. I think initially, it was like, oh gosh, I'm just going to be here forever, I'm only taking a few classes, so I think there was a lot of self-doubt, about my accomplishments, and where I would get in the timeframe that I wanted. Again, I think a lot of young people are like, oh, if I haven't done this by twenty-four, I'm a failure! So just the fact that I could put 100% of my time into those classes, really set me up to understand stuff and the wonderful thing is, I'm so happy to say this, because I was deprived of an education, to see how beautiful education can be when it all comes together, I just, part-time has just really given me a chance to appreciate things, but it also makes me think about how long this has really taken me, and how much I'll really remember at the end.*

Even as they explored the idea that their learning might be deeper in each course as a part-time student, because they had fewer courses to focus on at a time, they also recognized that what they've learned might decay over time, since a longer time frame to complete their undergraduate degree was the primary distinction that separated them from their full-time classmates.

Comparison to full-time student learning

Finally, each of the students I spoke with mentioned a variety of perspectives as they compared themselves to full-time students around them. Two of them in particular mentioned that they really didn't know any other part-time students, and that they felt different from the other students around them:

> Bantam: *I haven't been here very long, but as far as I know, I'm the only part-time student that's been in my classes so far. I have not, I tend to sit in the front of all my classes, and if somebody is sitting next to me, we talk, and if not, I really don't turn around, so I think that's probably just because I'm kind of a hermit. But also, I've got stuff to do, I'm out of class and I'm going to go study, or I've got to go home to do, the kids or whatever, so I think maybe you'll get a different answer with someone else, but I just don't have the time, unfortunately, until I have a class with somebody. So I've not met anybody, but I'm sure they exist. There's a student in my stats class right now, she's probably 18 years old, she's never had to put in the effort that she is having to now, because you don't have to in high school, and so she's just completely overwhelmed because she doesn't have the, you know, coping skills to know how to manage time, deal with stress, um, so I can see where the mental health aspect for young people would be better if they didn't take – I mean, I've never taken five or six classes, I've been going to school almost ten years, I don't know if I ever could. I find a lot more full-time students here at a young age just trying to get done and through, and I just don't know how that's going to fare later in life, when you need all this stuff, and you need to see the connections, I do feel that it's going to be slightly inhibiting to them, if they don't [see those connections].*

> Greene: *[Do I know] someone else who's doing the crazy stuff I am? <chuckles> No, not really. I think there was one other student in my English class last fall who was part-time, but that's definitely one of the things about taking your classes online – you don't really get to know the other students as well. There's no ten minutes before class to just sit around and shoot the – you know. No, um, I don't think I know anyone else who's doing this on the same kind of crazy pathway I am. I think that's pretty much just me.*

While they didn't know any other students studying part-time at JMU, they did observe that other students around them seemed to be less focused on their classes and more focused on other things:

> Greene: *They were more interested in who had the best parties, and the girls, and that kind of thing. I realized pretty quickly that year that that's exactly who I*

> *would have been if I had come here right after high school, you know? I would have been partying, not focusing on my work, hanging out, playing games, that kind of thing.*

The part-time student in nursing, however, did have some direct comparisons between her experience as a part-time student and the other full-time students in her program. Because the RN-BSN program is explicitly designed with a part-time pathway and a full-time pathway, both with tightly specified curricular schedules, the two groups of students take classes together, just on a different pace. As Whitby described:

> Whitby: *Honestly, for us in this program, I don't think there's much of a difference. I think the full-time students, which there is more of them, you know? They're just taking more classes, but that's the only way they're different from those of us who are doing this part-time. They'll be done faster, but not that much faster – it's like three semesters vs. five semesters, full-time vs. part-time.*

For this student, because she was enrolled in a specific degree-completion program at JMU that is designed to move students through as quickly as possible, regardless of whether they're part-time or full-time, Whitby's experience was different than the other two students.

However, for all three of the students I interviewed, one final theme was common to them all: they didn't have any awareness of JMU's student learning outcomes process. They might remember taking various tests, but didn't really separate those tests from their other educational experiences as something different, and they didn't remember their faculty mentioning things like "Assessment Day" to them during classes. None of them had participated in Assessment Day, as far as they knew:

> Greene: *Honestly, I just know that's when they cancel classes for a day in the spring. Some of my friends have mentioned having to sit in a room and take extra tests, but I've never been told I have to do that. Wait, does that mean I'm missing something? Was I supposed to be there? I just thought I got a day off, and they didn't get as lucky.*

This finding raises interesting questions about how much a traditional, full-time JMU student knows about JMU's assessment model, and whether they could talk about it, especially outside of a direct frame of reference (such as during Assessment Day itself, for example). But for these part-time students, none of them could remember specifically participating in anything related to overall, program- or institution-level student learning outcomes assessment. That may or may not mean that they did participate, or that information about their learning is captured in that assessment data, but it does show that they're unaware of it.

Qualitative theme: COVID-19 pandemic-related issues and questions

While my research questions for this dissertation were not focused on how a global pandemic impacted assessment practice, I also felt it was important to recognize that this entire dissertation was written and all data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. This global health event has of course had a massive impact on all aspects of daily life, and higher education is no exception. Our practices, relationships, systems, and approaches have all had to adapt to the realities and public health concerns of an airborne virus, and of course there are significant mental health, financial, economic, and personal challenges as well. Both the part-time students and the assessment practitioners I spoke with mentioned various ways that COVID-19 had impacted their experiences in higher education and with student learning outcomes assessment. A common theme was, not surprisingly, that assessment processes (both in gathering assessment data and in reflecting on and analyzing that data) had moved online. Another common theme was that institutions allowed some additional "breathing room" for faculty to step back and consider assessment practice and meaning. And finally, the part-time students I spoke

with also mentioned that the shift to online learning had impacted their learning in both

positive and negative ways.

Because, as described above, the assessment practitioners in this study had

embedded most of their institutional student learning outcomes assessment in courses,

and those courses were continuing through the pandemic largely in an online format,

several practitioners mentioned that little had changed for them.

> Gallagher: *The student learning may have changed as we had to rush to offer almost everything completely online, and we have seen some changes there, but of course it's such a short time span in the total scope of things, you know? But the process itself? Hasn't changed. The meetings, the conversations, the analysis, the reflections, those we all did online rather than getting together, but honestly, that just meant that we had even greater participation than usual – no one had to travel to the meeting, you know?*

> Cisco: *No, we carried on. I mean, the classes were still going on, they had already set everything in motion and were pretty much finished, um, they had definitely determined all the assignments and collected most of the data.*

> North: *My director had come back from a meeting about overall planning in response to the pandemic, which of course just keeps going on and on, and she mentioned that someone from another office had talked about how much they had to change everything that they had planned to do that year because of this whole mess. And we looked at each other and said, honestly, we didn't really change anything.*

For a few assessment practitioners, the pandemic meant that they allowed faculty to

adjust their practices or their focus temporarily, to accommodate differences in data

collection or even just the mental bandwidth to process information, or to allow for

professional development activities.

> Haskins: *We've adjusted our process temporarily through COVID, um, so we provided different options than the standard assessment report for programs, like we allowed them breathing room to work on learning outcomes and curriculum maps…but as things are shifting back to normal, we're slowly moving back to our normal process.*

>   North: *Many faculty were thrown into suddenly having to deliver all their content online, so I know they've done a lot of professional development, but that's still a steep learning curve for some.*

At other institutions, the COVID-19 pandemic may have had a greater impact on assessment practice than it did for the assessment practitioners in this study. But these comments suggest that as long as student learning finds a way to continue, assessment practitioners find a way to continue measuring student learning outcomes.

When I asked the part-time students in this study about how the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted their learning, their focus was primarily on online courses. For some, their program had already been designed to be offered online; for others, the shift to online learning may have been unwelcome at first, but became an additional tool for flexibility that allowed them to continue moving forward.

>   Whitby: *Nothing really changed for me as far as school goes – this program was already an online program, so nothing about our classes changed. But as a nurse, seeing patients come in with this disease, getting sicker and sicker, and then more and more of them, it meant a lot of extra shifts and long hours, and that made it harder sometimes to focus on school. But I was also grateful for the support and community of my teachers and the other students – we were all going through this, I wasn't alone. And if I hadn't been taking classes online, there's no way I could have kept going.*

>   Greene: *At first, I hated online – maybe because it all happened so fast. But after that first rough semester when everything changed, I kept taking all my classes online, because it meant that it was easier than coming to campus, finding parking, all those things. It meant I could do my work for classes around my work shifts, rather than having to schedule work around when my classes would be offered. So yeah, um, I think that's been a big part of what I've seen, I don't know how it would have been different without this big COVID thing, but I do know that I'm glad I'm still going.*

A full exploration of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, assessment practice, students, and part-time students lies outside the scope of this

dissertation, but it also could not be ignored. In the years to come, more research in this area will hopefully give us better tools to be ready for the next global pandemic.

Reflections on process

In many ways, this dissertation is unusual. My initial research questions about what we know about the learning outcomes of part-time students are important questions, but the process of exploring those questions and conducting this study was also significant. There were challenges, both expected and unexpected, in identifying and recruiting part-time students, and in identifying and recruiting assessment practitioners who were willing and/or able to speak about part-time students and how they fit into assessment practices. The process of completing this dissertation also raises interesting questions about the nature of time and how it is incorporated into the nature and structure of higher education itself. In the section that follows, I offer some reflections on those challenges and processes.

Finding and recruiting part-time students

To recruit participants for the second phase of qualitative interviews, my university requires that researchers use a bulk email request form to initiate the process. Once Institutional Review Board approval has been granted, the researcher completes the bulk email request form (see Appendix C for a blank example of this form), and submits it along with a copy of the text of the email that would be sent out to the selected participants. The form allows you to request that a communication be sent out (as an "Informational Email," rather than an "Official Email," following university policy) to employees, a subset of employees, all students, a subset of students, or some combination of students and employees. The email itself must be sent by the Registrar's Office (or

Human Resources, in the case of university employees) in partnership with Information

Technology; no individual can send this communication directly. For student emails,

there are dozens of possible selection options, including year enrolled, number of credit

hours earned, level of degree (graduate or undergraduate), particular majors or groups of

majors, residence halls, etc. However, none of the options available included anything

about part-time vs. full-time undergraduate students. That just isn't an available selection

criterion.

This alone struck me as interesting; my institution does not have a large

percentage of part-time students, to be sure, but there are more part-time students

enrolled than there are students in a particular residence hall, to use one example. This

suggests that part-time students are not often selected/differentiated as part of a

communication strategy, even for enrollment or retention efforts. Since I couldn't select

this group of students using the form, I wrote in my request as "Please restrict by part-

time status – degree-seeking undergraduate students with less than 12 hours of enrollment

for Fall 2021."

The bulk email request form also asks how many participants you would expect to

be selected, based on the criteria you have specified. The university's Office of

Institutional Research enrollment summary for the prior fall term (James Madison

University, 2020a) had reported 801 part-time students at the undergraduate level; data

for the current fall term had not been released yet. I did not have any reason to suspect

that part-time enrollment for the current fall would be vastly different than part-time

enrollment for the previous fall, so I indicated that I expected my request would generate

approximately 700-900 student participants. I submitted the form and the text of the

email to be sent out, and quickly received a reply that indicated that this would generate

5,649 students. I was startled – I didn't expect my estimate would be correct, but I also

didn't expect my estimate to be off by a factor of ten. I also would be surprised if the

university's part-time enrollment had gone from approximately 800 one year before to

5,649, which would be more than 25% of the current undergraduate population – and

even more surprised if that had happened and no one had mentioned it in conversations

about enrollment figures, the university's budget situation, or COVID-19 enrollment

trends.

I spoke with some contacts in the Office of the Registrar and the Office of

Institutional Research, and they confirmed that this request to select all undergraduate

degree-seeking students with less than 12 hours of enrollment for the current term should

generate something closer to 900 students, not 5,649. (As an update, now that final fall

2021 enrollment numbers have been released, my institution had 1,048 part-time

undergraduate degree-seeking students.) They recommended I rephrase my selection

criteria (still written in, not selected from the available options, because part-time status

wasn't available as an option) as "Active UG degree-seeking students with less than 12

hours of enrollment for fall 2021." Perhaps the word "active" was what had been missing

from my previous request, and this language would clear it up.

I resubmitted the bulk email request form, and quickly received a response that

this revised request generated 5,512 student recipients. Without having any other options,

I agreed that we should send that out and see what happens. Not surprisingly, I quickly

received direct responses from eleven undergraduate students who were enrolled full-

time, and were either confused or worried that they had been somehow identified as part-

time students. I was able to get permission from the Institutional Review Board to request a slightly different approach, and asked the Office of Institutional Research to generate a list of part-time students, and then send those to the Office of the Registrar (so that I did not see the list and compromise confidentiality of student records). This was a more manageable and realistic 1,100 part-time students; this second attempt to recruit part-time student participants was more successful, although not dramatically so (four more students responded and indicated they would be interested in participating).

These struggles were both not surprising, and illuminating. The literature available on part-time students describes their enrollment status as fluid (Crosta, 2014), invisible (Bombardieri, 2017). Because part-time students are defined by IPEDS precisely by what they are not (U.S. Department of Education), their student records in our enrollment systems don't have a "part-time student" identifier or tag on them; we can only identify them at a single given moment based on their enrollment.

I still don't know for certain how or where the breakdown in communication happened between me, the Office of the Registrar, and Information Technology; I don't have an explanation for why the bulk email request form process generated 5,512 students when we would have expected to only have around 1,000. I am also very aware that my status as both a doctoral student researcher and a university employee impacts my perception of and understanding of this problem. If I had been trying to collect data on part-time students at another institution, where I didn't work, didn't understand their student information system and how student records are setup and coded, and didn't have direct contacts in key offices that could help me navigate this, I might have ended up with even more confusing results. If I had been trying to collect data as part of my role as an

administrator at this institution, rather than as a student researcher, I would have taken a

different pathway, and started with the Office of Institutional Research to help me define

the population as they report it to IPEDS, and then worked with Information Technology

to develop or adapt an existing query to gather this information. But even as someone

who is relatively well connected at my institution, and relatively well aware of how our

data systems work, I cannot explain that discrepancy, and neither can my colleagues in

those offices. It remains a mystery.

Finding and recruiting assessment practitioners

I faced some similar challenges in recruiting assessment practitioners. After

collecting an initial list of institutions with significant numbers of part-time students, I

began reaching out to the person I could best identify from institutional websites as

someone who could help. Usually, that person worked in an institutional research or

institutional effectiveness office. Many of them did not respond at all; a few responded

and said that they couldn't help; and a few others responded and suggested someone else

at their institution. Even drawing on JMU's extensive network of assessment practitioner

colleagues and alumni of the Assessment & Measurement doctoral program was only

mildly helpful – this strategy generated an additional seven individuals to reach out to,

but some had retired, some were new in their positions and couldn't speak to their

institutions' practices, and others didn't respond. While participant selection and

recruitment is always inherent in a qualitative dissertation process, it seemed particularly

difficult in this case, which actually aligns well with the research findings about the

assessment of student learning outcomes for part-time students. It seemed difficult to find

individuals and institutions who were exploring these questions about the learning of

part-time students – perhaps this is because as a field, we are not yet exploring these questions.

JMU's own Assessment Day process

After conducting interviews with assessment practitioners at other institutions, all of whom happened to have assessment models that were embedded in courses, it was important to me for my own frame of reference to be able to connect this information back to assessment practice at JMU. JMU's Assessment Day model is long-standing, deeply researched and validated, and widely known as a gold standard in the field of assessment practice. As a quick summary, this model includes two primary data collection points: during first-year student orientation (fall Assessment Day) and after a student has completed 45-70 credit hours (spring Assessment Day). The second data collection point is designed to take place after students have completed (or mostly completed) their general education requirements, which gives this assessment model a pre-test/post-test design centered around general education learning outcomes. Spring Assessment Day historically includes canceling classes on a day in February, assigning students who have reached this enrollment milestone to various classrooms on campus, and having them complete the same assessment instruments they had been given during their first-year orientation.

After my data collection phase was complete, I spoke with Dr. Dena Pastor, Associate Director of Assessment Operations within the Center for Assessment and Research Studies at JMU. While Dr. Pastor is not officially a subject of my dissertation research, her comments and thoughtful perspective were instrumental in helping me think through and understand what I learned from other institutions as part of this process.

Dr. Pastor's position involves coordinating the logistics and operations of JMU's

Assessment Day, including the scheduling of rooms, who gets tested, how they are

notified, which tests they take, and the cleaning of the data that is generated on that day.

When I shared with Dr. Pastor the difficulties I had in working within JMU's student

information system, the Office of the Registrar, and Information Technology to generate

a list of part-time students, she agreed that 5600 part-time students at JMU did not seem

like the correct number, but also shared that:

> *As you started talking, I was thinking, I'm certain there's an indicator in
> PeopleSoft that would indicate to me whether or not a student is full-time or part-
> time. But I thought, I don't think we currently download that right now, so I'm
> like what would be the process that I would go through in order to ask for that
> information, and I think I would be contacting IT. You know, I would submit a
> request saying a need a query created to return, you know, for this, like you were
> just saying…I don't know if it would come back to me and say "tell me what you
> mean by part-time," or if they already have some formal definition of part-time
> that they work with, and that they already have coded into some variable. I'm
> thinking, if IR [Institutional Research] is reporting part-time, I'm guessing there
> is a variable that exists – right?*

The fact that Dr. Pastor recognized that the data that JMU collects on Assessment Day

doesn't already include part-time status, but that it must exist somewhere in our student

information system, aligned well with my own experience in attempting to identify and

contact part-time students. The information must be in our systems, but it is not simple or

automatic to extract it – which is only made more complicated by the fact that part-time

student status can be a fluid and changing status (Crosta, 2014).

Dr. Pastor also reflected on a problem that appeared frequently in my interviews

with assessment practitioners: if part-time students are a relatively small proportion of an

institution's population, then analyzing assessment data based on part-time status would

lead to increasingly small sample sizes, from which it would be difficult to draw any

meaningful conclusions about student learning.

> *If we were to disaggregate our Assessment Day data, for any one test, we're getting better about this, but for any one test, we might have a random sample of let's say at most a thousand students, right? Now you're taking ten percent of that, so you could have at most a hundred part-time students, and so it's kind of like the n's might get awfully small, you know, because you're working with such a small population? That doesn't mean we shouldn't look at it, but I would think that, you know, we might have to aggregate across different years of data collection in order to get like a sample size that makes us feel like the results are trustworthy.*

And aggregating data about part-time students across multiple years of data

collection, in order to get a large enough sample size to draw meaningful conclusions

about student learning, brings its own set of challenges. If you were to analyze data from

multiple groups of part-time students over multiple years, there could be enough other

confounding factors about the nature of those part-time students and their experiences

and student learning to make those conclusions difficult as well. Dr. Pastor and I

discussed at length the characteristics of part-time students and whether JMU's

Assessment Day model would be able to capture those students; would they appear in

first-year orientation data? Would they be measured during transfer orientation? Would

they participate in spring Assessment Day, when they've earned 45-70 credit hours? The

answers to all of those questions is "perhaps." Some part-time students come to JMU as

first-year students, and become part-time students later in their career; some come as

transfer students; and some might be transfer students who had just started at JMU right

before spring Assessment Day. So the diversity of their learning experiences as part-time

students complicates the analyses further.

One significant moment in our conversation about that spring Assessment Day

data collection suggests that the answer to all of those questions about whether part-time

students would be included in JMU's model lies in the nature of the longitudinal model

itself. I asked what JMU would do if we only have one data point for a given student, and

therefore cannot connect a pre-test and a post-test for that student:

> *Sometimes analyses are done using just post-test only data, you know. Even on a*
> *regular – your post-test sample size dwindles a lot, because a lot of the students*
> *we test in the spring didn't get tested on a fall assessment day prior, so it goes*
> *down to about half, it really does go down quite a bit...*

And then I asked what would happen if we had a student, and we had pre-test data for

them, but they had earned 45-70 credits over (for example) seven years instead of two or

three, meaning that the time between their pre-test and post-test was longer than the

model accounts for. Dr. Pastor said:

> *Ah! Well, they wouldn't. We only do pre-post comparisons, so let me just say if*
> *someone came in fall of 2020, they get tested again in spring 2022, so if someone*
> *came in fall 2019, we don't do the pre-post comparison with their spring 22 data.*
> *It's like only for a particular classical cohort, do we do the pre-post analyses.*
> *[SKM: So it's not just based on the number of credit hours they've completed, it's*
> *the number of credit hours plus sort of their cohort year, okay.] Exactly.*
> *Specifically for the pre-post stuff, because, some of the tests we don't even, we use*
> *that for the test we administer. Like the same set of tests I measured in fall 2020,*
> *I'm going to be administering in spring 2022. And that might, it kind of depends,*
> *even the set of tests can differ. It's not geared to the non-traditional student, that*
> *design.*

This understanding that JMU's longitudinal pre- and post-test model is not just based on

the number of credit hours earned, but *also* on the cohort the student entered with, was a

significant moment in my understanding. It makes abundant sense, of course, especially

given the logistics of an in-person assessment day model where students are assigned to

testing locations based on the tests they took in the pre-test, which therefore has to take

into account the cohort of students they entered with. This has enormous implications for

assessing student learning outcomes for part-time students, where the largest difference in

their experience as students is the amount of *time* they spend in college; and of course in

any longitudinal measurement design, time is a critical variable.

Finally, because I had asked all of my interview participants about how the

pandemic had impacted assessment practice, I asked Dr. Pastor the same question. Her

answer suggests a possible path forward for assessing part-time student learning (as well

as other possibilities for future flexibility in assessment):

> *Now that we've gone through this pandemic, we're not going in-person
> assessment days anymore, and I'm kind of hoping that will be the case moving
> forward, but that does open the door to being able to give students the post-test
> for whatever pre-tests they took the year they came in. It just opens the door so
> that logistically, it makes that kind of thing possible….some of the constraints
> with assessment day was that we could only handle testing four thousand students
> in the day, right? But now that it's remote, it doesn't really matter to us if we're
> testing four thousand or ten thousand, or everybody. So I keep thinking, do we
> have to stick with the time constraints, the 45-70 credit hour window, or can we
> kind of think about this differently? I think it's opened the door for who gets
> tested, when they get tested.*

While the COVID-19 pandemic has of course created significant challenges for higher

education in general and student learning outcomes in particular (not to mention

community health, mental health, and beyond, of course), this is one example of an

opportunity that has been opened. The pandemic has given us a chance to attempt to

achieve goals in new ways, using new methods and technologies, and we should not let

these opportunities pass us by just for the sake of "returning to normal" as the pandemic

begins to subside. In this case, conducting JMU's Assessment Day remotely allows for

students to participate during a particular time window, but on their own terms and

schedules, which could make it much easier for part-time students to participate. This

new remote model comes with challenges of its own, of course, including test security

and motivation, but those are challenges worth embracing.

Nature of time and student learning

Throughout the process of completing this dissertation, I constantly found myself

reflecting on the nature of time. Because we define part-time students as being a student

who isn't full-time, according to IPEDS (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), then

logically full-time students are the default assumption. But why is time the measure or

definition of a student, or the measure or definition of their learning? The credit hour as

the fundamental building block of higher education dates back to a 1903 Carnegie

Foundation definition that was designed primarily to measure faculty contributions and

workload, to better define retirement pensions (Laitenen, 2012). It was never designed to

be used as a measure of or proxy for student learning, and was unrelated to questions of

the quality of education. However, it was quickly adopted as an easily standardized and

comparable measure of learning across all institutions, and has been deeply and

irrevocably embedded in our systems of higher education ever since, for everything from

the size of a bachelor's degree to financial aid formulas to faculty workloads (Laitenen,

2012).

So the credit hour itself defines higher education, and therefore determines

whether a student is considered part-time or full-time. And because we assume that the

default student is a full-time student with no other commitments or responsibilities, able

to focus fully and completely on their studies, then a part-time student with commitments

other than their education is worth less to an institution. They pay less tuition, they take

longer, they may stop out, they are harder to predict and plan for, and they are less

committed to their education (at least in theory). But time does not equal learning, and full-time does not equal full-learning. Yet as the results of this dissertation make clear, we do not know enough – or really, anything – about what part-time students are learning, and whether our curricular options and support systems are helping them learn. We don't know if someone who takes ten years to earn a bachelor's degree knows the same things at the end of that process as someone who completed it in four years.

Limitations

This dissertation study has attempted to explore questions around the student learning outcomes assessment for part-time students in higher education. While it was not meant to be a comprehensive study of practices, or of student perceptions of their assessment and learning, it did touch on these themes and ideas. There remains much work to be done around these questions, and the current study faced some limitations that provide fertile ground for future researchers.

One limitation was small sample size, for both the assessment practitioners with whom I spoke, and the part-time students themselves. Even with the extensive professional networks of assessment practitioners connected to my institution and my doctoral program, it was difficult to schedule interviews with these practitioners. Part of this may have been due to collecting data over the summer, part of it may have been the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic making it more challenging to recruit research participants, and part of this may have been due to a lack of interest in the topic of part-time students. These students remain invisible, even to those of us who seek to ensure that our assessment work captures the experience and learning of all students.

In addition, because I was trying to capture a range of institution types including community colleges, smaller four-year institutions, larger four-year institutions, and so on, the pool of available assessment practitioners was less focused than it could have been. If I had focused on community colleges, for example, I probably would have found a higher number of assessment practitioners who have significant numbers of part-time students at their institutions; however, this also would have meant that those practitioners were more likely to see part-time students as fully integrated into their assessment processes by design, since they were such a large part of their student population.

In terms of finding part-time students to speak with, this was particularly difficult. On the one hand, it was difficult at my own institution for reasons that still remain unclear; our student information system, registrar, and information technology offices all had different answers about how many part-time students were enrolled in a given term. At the same time, part-time students are likely to have less of a sense of commitment to their institution, similar to how part-time employees feel less connected to their employers, and may therefore have been less interested in participating in dissertation interviews. Because of the nature of part-time students, who aren't likely to hang out around campus in particular student spaces, normal methods of student recruitment (such as hanging posters in the library, targeting particular student organizations, etc.) will not work with this population.

Another limitation includes the nature of the part-time students themselves that I was able to speak with. None of them were parents (although one had custody of her siblings). None were taking care of elderly family members. Two of them were working full-time while going to school. Only one was enrolled in one of the two degree

completion programs at JMU that were designed for adult learners (the RN-BSN is one of

these, and the Adult Degree Program/Bachelor of Individualized Study is the other). A

wider sample of students, at different institutions and at my own, would gather a wider

range of perspectives.

It would have been interesting to speak with part-time students at the institutions

where I was able to speak with assessment practitioners, rather than interviewing

assessment practitioners at a variety of institutions and part-time students at my own

institution. A longer-term study that had the resources and time to seek Institutional

Review Board approval at multiple institutions to speak with students would be able to

correct this deficit, although the problems mentioned above about participant recruitment

would probably still apply.

Finally, a longer-term study would also have allowed for an ideal situation of

having multiple coders review transcripts and assist with coding, which would have

increased qualitative trustworthiness of the analytic process and results.

Directions for future research

Given that we know so little about how part-time students learn in higher

education, and whether that learning is any different from full-time students, there

remains much work to be done in this area.

One of my interview subjects suggested an interesting direction for future

research: finding a way to measure part-time student motivation and persistence

compared to their intent. If a part-time student is forced to enroll part-time due to life

circumstances beyond their control, they may face different struggles and barriers than a

part-time student who has enrolled part-time by choice, because they wanted to take their time.

Investigating part-time students' sense of belonging at their institutions is another fruitful area of future research. Sense of belonging, or mattering, is a well-defined construct with numerous well-validated instruments available, including the Unified Measure of University Mattering scale (France, 2011). These instruments have not been widely used to explore the self-reported sense of belonging of sub-populations of higher education participants, including part-time students, transfer students, marginalized populations, and others, and this future work would contribute a rich sense of how part-time students identify (or don't) with their institutions. One assessment practitioner in my study mentioned ideas about part-time student motivation and intent that would be worth future exploration as well; if a part-time student entered higher education with the intent to graduate in five years instead of the traditional four, but was only taking one or two courses per semester, their enrollment and progress would not align with their intent. However, if a part-time student intended to eventually complete their degree but wasn't concerned about the amount of time it would take them, and they enrolled in one class each term, their progress would directly align with their own internal motivation and intent. Would those two groups of students have experienced different student learning along their pathways? These would be difficult questions to answer, especially because of the longitudinal nature of such work, but worthy questions nonetheless.

Another future study that would eliminate some of the limitations of this study would involve conducting similar qualitative interviews with assessment practitioners and part-time students at the same institution, so that deeper connections could be drawn

between assessment practices and student experiences and learning. Even more valuable would be to also analyze assessment data from those institutions.

Another future study that would explore some interesting questions about student awareness of institutional student learning outcomes assessment could compare the extent to which full-time students know about and can articulate how their institution measures student learning to the extent to which part-time students can do the same. Cross-institutional comparisons of this information would also be extremely useful. The more we know about what students understand about student learning outcome assessment, perhaps the more we can impact their learning in general, their motivation to participate in assessment, and the interpretations and conclusions drawn from the results.

Finally, it would be interesting to explore competency-based higher education programs, given that the nature of the credit hour as a measure of learning lies behind all of our definitions of what it means to be a part-time and full-time student. These competency-based programs, like those at Western Governors University, Purdue Global Campus, Southern New Hampshire University, or Arizona State University, have redefined higher education in terms of competencies rather than a total number of credit hours that students earn. When an institution has found ways to decouple student learning from measures of time altogether, is there such a thing as a part-time student? If so, what does that mean?

Recommendations for assessment practice

A qualitative study conducted using phenomenology is designed to create a rich, thick description of the lived experience of a particular phenomenon, in this case the assessment of student learning outcomes for part-time students in higher education. It is

not intended to build a grounded theory or model for future assessment work. However, it

seems appropriate to offer a few recommendations and thoughts for assessment

practitioners who wish to explore this idea further.

The first is to consider again the entire assessment process at an institution. At

JMU, that assessment process is described by the Assessment Cycle (see Figure 1, p. 35).

At each stage in the assessment process, are part-time students included? Would they be

able to participate in the way that assessment information is gathered and analyzed?

Implementation fidelity was one possible aspect to explore, or whether the program being

delivered is the same as the one that was designed, but there are many others. The process

of mapping outcomes to courses, and the mapping of curriculum itself, often assumes

full-time enrollment. If a particular learning outcome is covered significantly in a course

that students should take early in their program sequence, but a part-time student isn't

able to take that course until two or three years into their studies, how does that impact

that student's learning? In the process of using assessment results for improvement of

student learning, does a particular curriculum change or learning intervention impact all

students equally, no matter how quickly or slowly they progress through the curriculum?

These questions don't have simple answers, but they are questions worth considering.

A second recommendation is to consider the design of processes for gathering

assessment data. The assessment practitioners in this study used a course-embedded

model, which had the advantages of automatically including all students enrolled in a

class, but which also didn't take into account the larger institutional context or student

experience of a program of study. My conversation with Dr. Pastor highlighted the

strengths of a longitudinal pre- and post-test model of assessment data gathering, but also

emphasized that a fundamental aspect of any longitudinal study is a consistent length of time for participants between the pre- and post-test. Both of these models have strengths and weaknesses, as does any other model; but we can invest time in considering whether all students at an institution are served by a particular model, or whether we are comfortable if most of the students are served by a particular model. Any choice we make has tradeoffs.

A third recommendation, which is less directed as assessment practitioners and more at institutions of higher education, is to carefully consider questions of audience and student enrollment. If an institution has a handful of part-time students, but primarily serves full-time students, then it may be worth reflecting on whether part-time students have access to student support, advising, and other resources to meet their needs, but not to fundamentally change the nature of the institution. An institution may also choose to implement some programs that are specifically designed for part-time students (or other marginalized student populations) within the larger framework of the institution. JMU's example of the RN-BSN program is one such targeted program that meets the needs of part-time students well, without changing the overall institution. Or an institution may choose to focus exclusively on part-time students (or other non-traditional students as a whole), and build their entire infrastructure around this population. Each of these are valid and important choices, with advantages and disadvantages. I would encourage institutions to consider carefully the shifting demographics of higher education (Grawe, 2018; McGee, 2015; Weise, 2020) as they consider those choices.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on issues of diversity and equity in assessment practice. In their 2018 survey of assessment practice across higher education, Jankowski et al. found that:

> Survey respondents indicated that addressing issues of equity was important to assessment efforts and disaggregation of evidence of learning by various groupings of students was beginning to occur. However, using assessment data to support the achievement of equity goals was uncommon. What is the role of assessment in addressing issues of equity (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017)? What are the best approaches to assess learning of different groups of students? These are questions that the field of assessment has yet to fully explore. (p. 26)

Part-time students are only one of the many "different groups of students" whose learning could be explored in new and different ways. Diversity and equity are important considerations for higher education, and we need to be able to speak to and account for how all students learn, not just the majority of our students. Part-time students are themselves a kind of diversity, and they bring with them other facets of diversity including race, gender, ethnicity, parenting status, and socioeconomic status. Equity and diversity are also different concepts, even though we often use the words interchangeably; not all students experience higher education equitably, and part-time students are one of the many groups of students who epitomize that concept. We would be well served to consider the ways that part-time students experience higher education, and ensure that we can measure and articulate their learning as well.

Conclusions: Reason to celebrate

As Tight (1991) described, part-time education is not just a poor shadow of full-time education, and our assessment practices can evolve to account for this population of students. They are not lesser students, or less-than-full-students, just because they are not enrolling in a full-time course load:

> Rather than always focusing on the "problems" of accommodating part-time students in the "normal" life of the university, there is reason to celebrate the flexibility in the system which offers the possibility of combining formal learning with non-formal learning, learning related to work and career development with abstract knowledge, and personal with social development. (Davies, 1999, p.153)

These words from more than 20 years ago recognize and celebrate the contributions of part-time students to higher education and to society. A system of higher education that facilitates these kinds of transitions into and out of formal learning, that makes it possible to earn a degree while working and raising a family, and that creates pathways for all students to succeed is not a distant or impossible future. In many ways, the history of higher education is the story of ever-increasing access; and while part-time students are not new to our institutions, they deserve to be more visible. This means, among other things, ensuring that we know what they are learning. Much more work is needed to explore the questions raised in this dissertation, but hopefully this study provides a framework and direction for that research.

Appendices

Appendix A. Interview Questions for Phase I of Study: Assessment Practitioners

1. Brief introduction and purpose of interviews:

    a. Wondering how to work with part-time students as higher education demographics shift

    b. We are interviewing experts in part-time student learning assessment generally to explore best practices.

2. Permission to Record and Consent Form

3. Warm-up

    a. According to my notes, your title is _____ - is that correct? Can you describe your position for me?

    b. According to what I've been able to find, your institution's enrollment numbers are approximately _____ - is that accurate?

4. Part-time Students Assessment Questions

    a. How does your institution approach student learning assessment generally? How would you describe your philosophy and methods?

    b. How would you describe a typical part-time student at your institution? What benefits do they bring to their education, and what challenges do you see them facing?

    c. Do you have any assessment practices that are different for part-time students than for full-time students? Has this always been the case at _____ ? If not, how have your assessment practices changed over time?

      d.   What are the challenges in assessing part-time student learning in terms of

              program learning outcomes?

5. Conclusion

      a.   How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your assessment practices of

              part-time students (and/or assessment practices in general)?

      b.   Is there anything else that you would like to talk about around assessment

              of part-time students?

Appendix B. Interview Questions for Phase II of Study: Part-time Students

1.   Brief introduction and purpose of interviews

2.   Permission to Record and Consent Form

3.   Warm-up

      a.   Tell me about your experience at JMU.

      b.   How would you describe your enrollment at JMU? (All part-time, mix of

          part-time and full-time, etc.)

      c.   What are the other roles you hold in your life? How do these roles impact

          your studies?

      d.   What do you see as the challenges and benefits to earning your education

at JMU as a part-time student?

      e.   How would you describe your experience learning to navigate JMU

(policies, enrollment, learning resources, faculty)?

4.   Part-time Students Assessment Questions

      a.   What can you tell me about your experiences with assessment at JMU?

(Did you participate in Assessment Day as an incoming student/after completing 45-70

credits? Have your instructors, advisor, or other academic authorities ever mentioned the

idea of program assessment?)

      b.   How would you describe your learning experience at JMU?

      c.   How do you think that might be similar to or different from full-time

students?

5.   Conclusion

      a.   If you have been a part-time student prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, do

you think this has impacted your learning experience at JMU as a part-time student?

       b.   Is there anything you would like to talk about regarding the assessment of

part-time students and their learning at JMU?

Appendix C. JMU Bulk Email Request Form

JMU Email Request   *Page 1 of 5*

For **student** mail, fill out this request (including Student Selection) and email to the Office of the Registrar (hansenda@jmu.edu).   For **employee** mail, fill out **ONLY** the first two pages of this request (including Employee Selection) and email to Human Resources (thoma2an@jmu.edu). For a **combined** mailing, do both. Please allow **5 working days** for mailing, approval and processing.

Request

Department: _____ MSC: _____
Date of Request: _____

Requestor / Contact: _____ Phone: _____

Date Required: Not before: ____/_____/____   At least by:
____/_____/____

**When this form is emailed from the Department Head or Student Group Advisor's JMU email address (@jmu.edu), the form will be accepted without a physical signature. Both the email text and the completed form should be emailed to the appropriate offices listed above. Acceptance of the form via email, without signature, is a temporary measure due to the number of people working remotely.

Data Approval: ☐ Human Resources

_____
                              ☐ Registrar's Office   Signature(s)
        Date

Output

Employee Output Options (choose one or more):
- ☐ File to **mailservice@jmu.edu**
- ☐ Email Distribution
- ☐ Email Distribution to IDs   For this, you must send a file of fully-qualified email IDs to

     request-bulkmail@jmu.edu

Student Output Options (choose one or more):
- ☐ File (JMU Mail Services)   **Please fill out items 1-8 under Student Selection.**

- ☐ Email Distribution
- ☐ Email Distribution to IDs   For this, you must send a file of fully-qualified email IDs to

     request-bulkmail@jmu.edu

NOTE: For all requests (email, and file), a hardcopy of the text must be attached <u>and</u> the text must be sent to request-bulkmail@jmu.edu. If this is not done the request will be delayed. *

How many students/employees do you expect to be selected (based on the criteria you chose below): _____

If Email, complete ALL 4 steps below (see FAQ for guidelines). Choose either @jmu or @dukes for each:

1. Email the text of your message to **request-bulkmail@jmu.edu**,

   The message was sent on ____/____/____,   by _____
   ☐ @jmu.edu
              ☐ @dukes.jmu.edu

2. Attach a printed copy of the text to this form

3. Define the email addresses (use ONLY your Official JMU e-ID) and subject
   You may use the same or different mailboxes for the 2 addresses below.   Faculty/Staff may request a departmental mailbox from http://www.jmu.edu/computing/communication-and-collaboration/exchange-email.shtml.

   From   _____ ☐@jmu.edu   Reply-To
   _____ ☐@jmu.edu
                   ☐@dukes.jmu.edu
   ☐@dukes.jmu.edu

   Subject
   _____
   _____

4. If the request is for a survey that requires IRB approval, please list that number: _____

5. Choose which option best describes your email: ☐ Informational
            (see FAQ for details on criteria)   ☐ Official

Page 2 of 5

Employee Selection ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬

Note: Please email Human Resources (thomasce@jmu.edu) with status questions.

1. Employee Population

- ❑ Full-time & Part-time Employees (112100, 112300, 112600, 112700, 112800, 112810, 112820, 114100, 114500, 114530,
     (includes ALL JMU Faculty & Staff)   114900, 114910, 114920)
- ❑ All Full-time Faculty ONLY   (112100, 112600, 112810, 112820)
- ❑ All Full-time Employees ONLY   (112100, 112300, 112600, 112700, 112800, 112810, 112820)
- ❑ A/P Faculty ONLY   (112100, 112820)
- ❑ Classified ONLY   (112300, 112700, 112800)
- ❑ Instructional Faculty ONLY   (112600, 112810)
- ❑ All Faculty ONLY   (112100, 112600, 112810, 112820, 114500, 114910, 114920)
- ❑ All Part-time Employees ONLY   (114100, 114500, 114530, 114900, 114910, 114920)
- ❑ Wage ONLY   (114100, 114900)
- ❑ PT Faculty ONLY   (114500)
- ❑ PT Non-Teaching ONLY   (114530)
- ❑ Department Heads, Associate Vice Presidents, Deans, and Vice Presidents ONLY
- ❑ Affiliates   (113600)

2. Division - specify one or more, (only necessary if you wish to send information to a specific division)
- ❑ Select employees working in these Divisions

_____,_____,_____,_____,_____
____,_____

3. Department - specify one or more, (only necessary if you wish to send information to a specific department)

- ❑ Select employees working in these Org Codes

_____,_____,_____,_____,_____
____,_____

Student Selection

Note: E-mail addresses are available only for those students eligible to enroll or enrolled.

       Students who have graduated or have withdrawn cannot be emailed via this process.

       Please email questions to **request-bulkmail@jmu.edu**.

Check boxes as directed – these are Required:

1. **Term*** (choose one)
    - ❑ Fall   Year _____
    - ❑ Spring   Year _____
    - ❑ Summer   Year _____
      *The term you choose will be used for the criteria below

2. **Population** (choose one)
    - ❑ Students
    - ❑ Instructors of Record (Email Distribution is the only output choice available)

If you chose the Instructors of Record population, this is Required:

3. **Academic Organization**
    - ❑ Select instructors of record who work in this Academic Organization—specify <u>one</u> college or department—or specify UNIV for all:
      _____

If you chose Student population, this is Required:

4. **Type of Student** (choose one)
    - ❑ Enrolled   *(Already enrolled)*
    - ❑ Eligible to Enroll   *(Already enrolled or approved to enroll)*

If you chose File Output Option, these are Required:

5. **Sequence** (choose one)   *Sequence will be vertical on each page*
    - ❑ Name
    - ❑ Zip, Then Name
    - ❑ JMU Mail Box
6. **Name to Print** (choose one)
    - ❑ Primary Full Name   ❑ Preferred Full Name

7. **Address Usage** (choose one)   *Cascades until it finds an active address:*
   ❑ Home   *Home*
   ❑ Mailing   *Mailing (includes JMU box), Home*
   ❑ Bill-Here   *Billing, Mailing (includes JMU box), Home*
   ❑ Bill-Away   *Billing, Home*

8. **Add "To" Line**   *Printed on first line of label*
   ❑ To The Parents/Guardians Of
   ❑ To The Family Of

If you chose Student population, these criteria limit the population further, and are Optional:

Fill out needed criteria only. Each criterion is an additional limit of the population.

9. **Use Random Sampling**
   ❑ Yes, Number of students to select is _____

10. **Resident Type**   (choose one)
    ❑ Residents assigned to housing
    ❑ Residents with a housing contract   (*In spring before Housing assignments are complete*)
    ❑ Commuters

11. **Residence Hall** (specify one or more):
    ❑ Select students in these Residence Hall(s):
    _____,_____,_____

12. **Residence Area, such as Village** (specify one or more)
    ❑ Select students in these Residence Areas:
    _____,_____,_____

13. **Admit Type** (choose one or more)
    ❑ First Year Freshman   ❑ Continuing Education
    ❑ Transfer   ❑ Graduate
    ❑ Re-entry   ❑ Doctoral

14. **Residency** (choose one)
    ❑ In-State   ❑ Out-Of-State

15. **Graduating Students** (choose one)   *Must also choose Academic Career(s)*
    ❑ Expected to Graduate
    ❑ Applied (Planning to Graduate) *Data is available 2-3 weeks before graduation*
    ❑ Graduated

16.   Academic Career (choose one or more)
    ❏ Undergraduate   ❏ Continuing Ed   ❏ Graduate   ❏
Doctoral
        Operator: If more than one career is chosen, and criteria below #18 are chosen, see operator instructions.

17.   Undergraduate Academic Level (choose one or more)
    ❏ Freshman   ❏   Junior
    ❏ Sophomore   ❏   Senior

18.   Academic Program   (specify one or more)
    ❏ Select students in these Academic Program(s)—i.e., for undergraduates,
       specify UGEN;
    for graduate students, specify major;   for continuing education, specify
    level: _____,

    _____,_____,_____,_____,_____
    ____,_____

19*.   Academic Plan   (specify one or more)
    ❏ Select students in these Academic Plan(s), i.e., majors, minors, and pre-
       professional:

    _____,_____,_____,_____,_____
    ____,_____,

    _____,_____,_____,_____,_____
    ____,_____

20.   Academic Subplan   (specify one or more)
    ❏ Select students in these Academic Subplan(s), i.e., concentrations:

    _____,_____,_____,_____,_____
    ____,_____

21.   Restrict by Cumulative Credit Hours Earned
    ❏ Yes, Range _____ to _____

22.   Academic Subplan   (specify one or more)
    ❏ Select students in these Academic Subplan(s), i.e., concentrations:

    _____,_____,_____,_____,_____
    ____,_____

23.   Restrict by Cumulative Credit Hours Earned

❑   Yes, Range _____ to _____

24.   Restrict by Cumulative GPA
❑   Yes, Range _____ to _____

25.   Academic Standing (choose one or more)   *Data is only available after*
final grades are posted
                                                for the term you chose above.
❑   Academic Suspension   ❑   Academic Warning
❑   Academic Probation   ❑   Good Standing

26.   Honors (choose one or more)
Undergraduate Honors: *High School Honors:*
❑   Dean's List   ❑   Valedictorian
   ❑   National Merit Finalist Sclr
❑   President's List   ❑   National Merit Commended Sclr
   ❑   National Merit Semi-Finalist

27*.   Academic Organization
❑   Select students whose major academic plan is in this Academic
   Organization—specify <u>one</u> college:
   _____

28*.   Instructor of Record (specify one)
❑   Select students who are enrolled in classes of this Instructor of Record:

                              _____
                        _____
                          Name   Student
                   Admin emplid
29*.   Course Id (specify one or more)
❑   Select students who are enrolled in these Course Id's, i.e., *all* sections:

_____,_____,_____,_____,_____
____,_____

30*.   Advisor (specify one)
❑   Select students who are advised by this Advisor:
   _____   _____
                          Name   Student
                   Admin emplid

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