

# Part-Time Students

By Laura Horn and David Radwin

*Over 60 percent of community college students attend part time, yet many measures of progress and success are limited to full-time students.*

Many of *The Completion Arch*<sup>™</sup> indicators present data on key subsets of student populations. Looking across all available indicators, what can we say about these populations? This is the first in a series of Research Briefs to profile one such group—part-time students—who represent a majority of all community college students. Not all the metrics are directly comparable, but they can provide a general outlook at different stages of part-time students' pathways and identify possible intervention points at stumbling blocks along the way.

Enrollment indicators tell us that over 60 percent of community college students nationwide were enrolled part time in the fall of 2012. Transfer and Completion indicators reveal that only 14 percent of part-time students had completed a certificate or an associate degree within six years, and 13 percent were still enrolled—for an overall six-year persistence rate of 27 percent. It took an average of nearly four years (46 months) for part-time associate degree completers to finish their associate degrees, and an

average of two years for certificate completers to obtain their credentials.

If 27 percent of part-time students persisted for six years, what happened to the nearly three-quarters who dropped out along the way? From the Progress indicators we know that a majority of part-time students do not persist to their second year. In 2012, some 42 percent nationwide were enrolled one year after they started, and this one-year persistence rate ranged from 10 percent in Alaska to 54 percent in South Dakota. Among the national cohort, about one-half of all part-time students completed 12 units (about three to four courses) in six years, but very few (only about 5 percent) completed 12 units in their first year, which is considered a strong signal of momentum toward completion. Still, about one-fifth (21 percent) of part-time students had completed 30 credits, the halfway milestone to an associate degree.

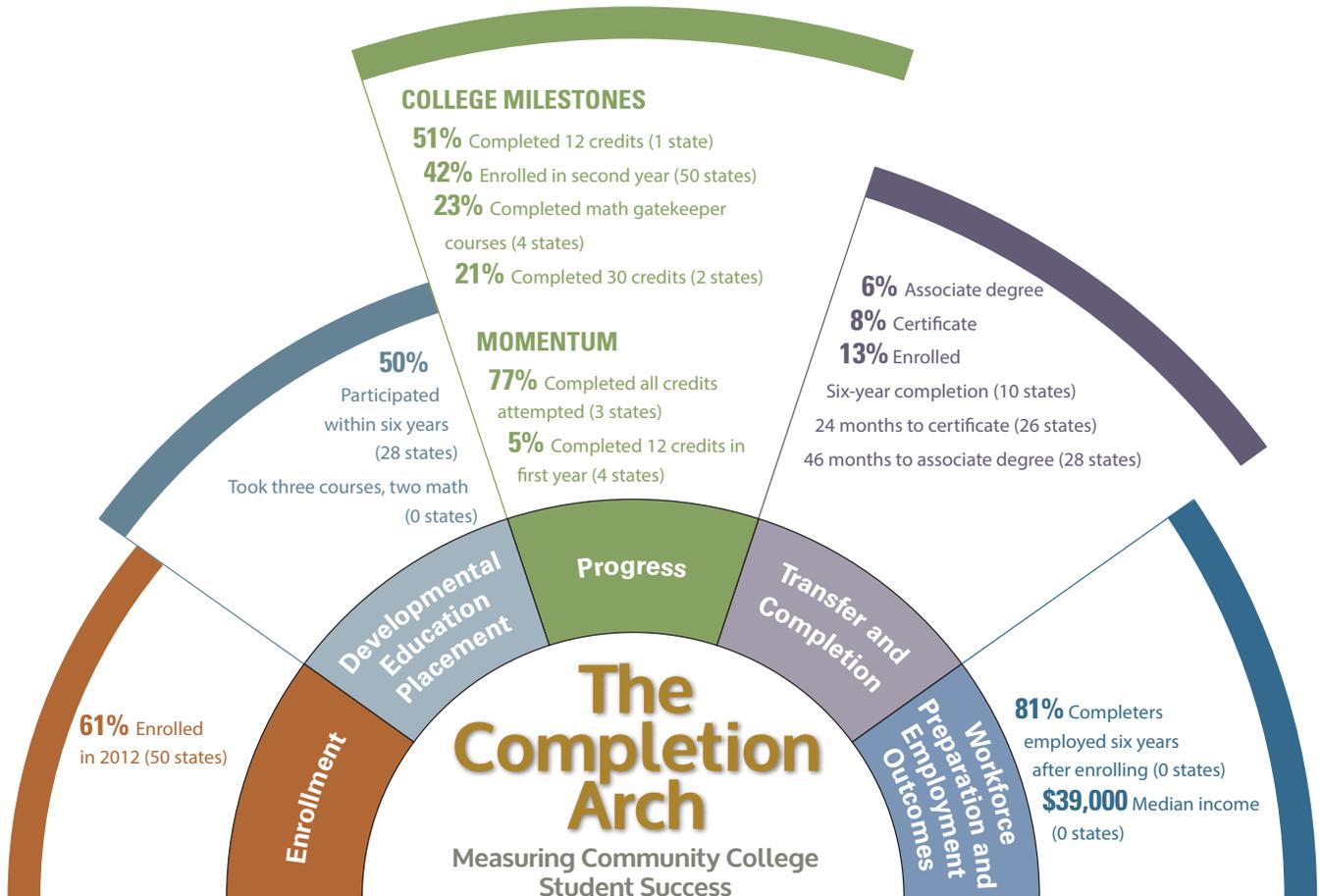
Though part-time students' participation in developmental education was high—at

This research brief was produced by RTI International for *The Completion Arch*<sup>™</sup>, available at [www.completionarch.org](http://www.completionarch.org), which presents indicators of community college student progress and success within a framework of five key areas. Each brief in this series highlights a particular topic, describing the context, strengths, and limitations of existing measures and how they can inform policymakers, educators, journalists, researchers, foundations, and the public.

50 percent—it was lower than that of the 62 percent of full-time students who took developmental courses. Over six years, part-time students took an average of three developmental education courses, including two math courses, which did not differ from the number of courses taken by full-time students. College-level math gatekeeper courses proved to be a significant obstacle for many part-time students, with only 23 percent completing a course within the six years, about half the rate of full-time students. On the other hand, part-time students completed all the credits they attempted at a rate nearly comparable to that of full-time students (77 percent vs. 79 percent).

While none of these individual results are surprising, when considered together, they illuminate part-time students' experiences and indicate possible intervention points for those students. The first year is critical. Most part-time students do not persist to their second year nor have they established significant momentum in credit completion. On most outcomes, they are outperformed by full-time students, especially the completion of the math gatekeeper course, but part-time students are less likely to take developmental courses, and they are nearly as likely to complete all the credits they attempted.

Figure 1 What we know about part-time students



One-fifth of part-time students had made a significant commitment toward a credential by completing 30 credits, and 13 percent were still enrolled after six years. While this rate appears

low, 13 percent of part-time students represents more than half a million “near completers,” a highly motivated group and a good target for interventions to help them finish a credential.

## About the Authors

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Laura Horn is the director of the Center for Postsecondary Education at RTI International.

David Radwin is a senior research associate in the Center for Postsecondary Education at RTI International.

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RTI International  
2150 Shattuck Ave, Suite 800  
Berkeley, CA 94704

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