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Full-time or part-time status? Which leads to success?

Report for the Canadian Association for University Continuing Education

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Abstract

Are part-time mature students more academically successful than full-time mature students? To investigate this question, 765 mature student academic records were analyzed over four years of academic attendance at The University of Western Ontario. Results indicate that on four of the five measures of success, part-time students did appear to be more successful. However, full-time students displayed a much greater retention rate throughout their studies. This analysis will be followed up with interviews with at least 20 students designed to test transition theory and assess role change.

Introduction

At The University of Western Ontario, the only applicants who need to make a formal request for full-time status are mature applicants. Applicants are asked to write a letter to the Admissions Office explaining why they feel it is necessary to study on a full-time basis, why they believe they will be successful at a full course load, and what they wish to gain from the experience. Given that part-time students do not need to write this letter, there is an underlying assumption that it is more manageable to adjust to a part-time course load than a full-time one. Our study is an attempt to determine if in fact the academic achievement of part-time students is better than the achievement of their full-time counterparts.

Related literature

The profile of mature students is diverse in terms of both demographic and personality variables. The ages of this cohort range from 21 to over 71. Many mature students have only been away from full-time education for four years, while others have been away from formal education for 20 or more years. Thieman and Marsh-Williams (1984) found that age, years away from school, and the amount of prior college experience were unrelated to academic success when they studied the performance of adult female college students. However, many mature students express concern about their ability to be successful in university due to the length of time away from formal education.

Work demands while studying varies among this cohort. From a survey of 662 "lifelong learning" students at Western, Forder and Dawson (2001) reported that 73% of these students were employed at the same time as they were studying. Twenty-two percent worked between 30 and 40 hours per week, 18% worked 20 to 29 hours weekly, 13% worked 10 to 19 hours, and 18% worked under 19 hours per week. Hartley and Trueman (1997) concluded that, "an unmarried mature student aged 21 years living in a hall of residence is probably closer to a traditional-entry student than is one aged 30 years, married and living at home with young children." (p. 180) Age, prior educational background, work commitments all vary among this population. Hence, it is difficult to create a profile of the typical mature student, and it is important to recognize differences when attempting to comment on their experiences.

Mature students face role changes. Schlossberg (1984) claimed, "any role change-whether primarily positive or negative in affect-involves some degree of stress." (p. 74) In a study investigating mature students' experience of higher education, Walters (2000) discussed changes in self-concept and roles: "the self-concept is learned, develops out of our experience and is closely identified with - and affected by -- the roles one plays. This can create difficulties when the role changes: both role and self-concept may become redundant." (p. 272) Full-time mature students may encounter role changes that are more significant than do their part-time counterparts. For some part-time students, university studies are added to a relatively stable lifestyle.

Relationships with family and friends may change when adults take on the student role. In a study of first-year part-time graduate students, Wiesenberg (2001) found that students "sometimes experienced less support from family and friends than they had expected, as these people also struggled to adjust to changes in their relationship and routines." (p. 45) The family and friends of full-time students may be asked for an even greater level of support than the family and friends of part-timers. And, perhaps, the family and friends of full-time students themselves experience more adjustment in relation to the student in their lives than the family and friends of part-time students.

Not only does becoming a student represent a role change, but the adult learner may have experienced a life change which itself has created role and self-concept changes. Walters (2000) notes:

Existential questioning may itself be a trigger for entering higher education, or a life event may provide the trigger. Examples are redundancy or retirement from work, divorce, or the youngest child going to school or leaving home. All of these involve redundancy of one's role and skills. (p. 272)

Hartley and Trueman (1997) summarized the findings of studies on mature students and academic success from 1970 to 1997. While their summary does not include reports that speak of the differences between full and part-time mature students, they indicate that older students usually perform as well as, or sometimes better, than younger ones. Arthur and Hiebert (cited by Wiesenberg, 2001) suggested, "over time, people may become more selective and effective in their use of coping strategies." (p. 37) Perhaps maturity is a factor affecting academic success.

Another theory that may help us understand the success of mature students is Schlossberg's transition theory. Schlossberg et al. (1995) defined a transition as "any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles." (p. 27) Mature students do experience changes in all of these arenas. There are several aspects involved in understanding the transition that adult students face. Schlossberg et al. presented a model of counselling adults in transition that included 3 parts: approaching the transition; taking stock of one's resources to deal with the currently faced transition; and taking charge of the transition. Wiesenberg (2001) reasoned "The process of moving into, through, and out of a formal program of study represents a strain that requires not only a variety of transition coping skills but also the ability to use them in a flexible/appropriate manner." (p. 38)

We have analyzed academic records for mature students, and assessing grades is typically the measure of academic success. There is, however, reason to believe that there are other outcomes of equal importance to mature students. Walters (2000) pointed out that "the positive outcome of participation in higher education for the majority of mature students is a massive increase in their self-esteem, and this promotes a feeling of self-confidence." (p. 276) While achieving good grades is important to most mature students, they seek self-satisfaction beyond what marks and credits can give.

Hypothesis

We hypothesized that part-time students have greater academic success than their full-time counterparts because they have more time to make role and lifestyle transitions. Part-time students have more stability in the rest of their lives than full-timers; therefore they have more stable life roles and self-concepts than full-time students. This stability will contribute to success in university studies.

Method

First, this study involves an analysis of archival data from academic records for mature students who entered Western. Second, interviews will be conducted based on transition and role change theories to help us to understand the experience of these mature students.

A. Archival data

Archival data was collected from the Registrar's Office at The University of Western Ontario for 765 full and part-time students designated as having been admitted under the mature applicant category for the years 1997 through 2000.

In order to obtain admission as a mature applicant, all of the following criteria must be met:

- be a Canadian citizen or permanent resident at the time of application
- be at least 21 years of age in the calendar year in which admission is sought
- do not have an academic basis of admission (that is, do not have formal education which qualifies them under another applicant category)
- have not normally been in full-time attendance at an educational institution within the previous four years
- have achieved at least a "C" (60%) in any academic work attempted within the previous four years

For each student record obtained, demographic and academic information was coded into SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Demographic information included the students' names, student number, age, gender, program, and plan. Academic information included number of courses attempted, number of courses passed, number of courses failed, number of courses withdrawn, number of credits attempted, number of credits obtained, status in the program, academic comments, marks and grades. The grades were coded following The University of Western Ontario's grading scale:

Grade	Percentage
A+	90 - 100
A	80 - 89
B	70 - 79
C	60 - 69
D	50 - 59
F	below 50

All academic information was entered for each term (fall and winter) and for each year students attended the university over the four-year time span. From this academic information, a number of items were coded, as follows.

From the number of credits attempted each term, a decision was made as to the full or part time status of the student using The University of Western Ontario's criteria (full-time status is obtained when a student is taking a minimum of 3.5 credits during the fall and winter terms of the academic school year). For any student who was taking 3.0 or fewer credits during the fall and winter terms for a given academic school year, part-time status was coded.

Five quantitative "Measures of Success" were coded as follows:

1. Each student's scholastic average was calculated from their marks. This average is a reflection of only those courses passed by the student as no mark is given by The University of Western Ontario for a course designated with an "F" for "failed attempt".
2. A ratio of the number of courses obtained divided by the number of courses attempted per term was calculated.
3. The total number of courses attempted was divided by the number of each grade obtained (the total number of courses attempted divided by the number of A+'s obtained, then by the number of A's obtained, etc.).
4. The academic status of each student was coded as being successful or unsuccessful.
 - a. Successful students had the following status or comments noted on their files: "Active in program," "Completed program," "Dean's Honor List," "Eligible for requested Honors program," or "May proceed in program."
 - b. The number of students were coded as unsuccessful if they had the following status or comments noted on their file: "Must consult Dean of your program regarding grade points," "Registration change" (forced by the University, not the student), "Required to withdraw from the University," "Not eligible for full-time registration," "Discontinued," "Withdrawn," "Dismissed," or "Cancelled."
5. Retention Rates were calculated for both full and part-time students for each year of the program as well as over the entire four years.

The student records were grouped in two different ways. First, the records were grouped by academic year (1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000). From this, frequency of occurrence, mean and standard error were calculated using SPSS for demographic information on all students for each year as well as being separated for full-time and part-time students. Second, the records were grouped by year in program (first, second, third, and fourth). From this, demographic information was again calculated. However, measures of success were also calculated for this grouping of student records and were compared between the full-time and part-time students over the years of their studies using a Repeated Measures Design using SPSS.

B. Interviews

Interviews will be conducted with at least 20 students to explore role change and transition theory. The interviews will include some free response and forced choice items. The responses of full-time students will be compared with the responses of part-time mature students. For example, a 35-year-old female who has completed 5 courses on a full-time basis and a 35-year-old female who has completed 5 courses on a part-time basis will be interviewed.

We will control for the choice of course load by asking if the students chose full or part-time study or if it was chosen for them. In order to determine how or if the students' roles have changed, we will ask about their history of work, family and other major responsibilities, both prior to attending university as well as during their university career. We hope to obtain the Transition Coping Questionnaire to assist in assessing the nature of the transition experienced.

Results

A. Demographics

Of the 765 students, 427 were female (55.8%) with 79% of the students being between 25 to 40 years old (48% were between the ages of 25 to 30 years old with an additional 31% being from 31 to 40 years of age). Of these students, 89% were working towards a 3-year Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree, with 46.8% enrolled in Social Science, 21.6% in Arts, and 20.8% in Science.

When comparing part-time to full-time status for these 765 students, 436 students (57%) were registered as part-time, 252 students (33%) were registered as full-time, and an additional 77 students (10%) withdrew before beginning classes and thus could not be categorized as either full or part time. Of the part-time students, 61% were female, 43% were between the ages of 25 to 30 years old, 88% were working towards a 3-year BA, and 53% were registered in a social science program. In comparison, 45% of full-time students were female, 68% were between the ages of 25 and 30 years old, 64% were working towards a 3-year BA, and 39% were registered in a social science program.

When comparing part-time to full-time status by start year, a definite pattern was seen in that the number of part-time students was always greater than full-time students, and the numbers from year to year were very consistent (see Page # 1 in the attached PDF document "Demographics by Start Year").

B. A comparison of the success of part- to full-time students as they progressed through four years of academic work, on each of the five measures of success, resulted in the following information (see Page # 2 for a summary of these findings).

1. When comparing the academic grades, the part-time students tended to score higher for each of the four years (see Pages # 3, 4, 5, and 6 in attached document).

2. There was no significant difference in the number of courses completed between part-time and full-time students when the results were adjusted for the difference in workload between the two groups (i.e. part-time students, by definition, attempted fewer courses, therefore the number of courses completed was divided by the number of courses attempted for both groups).
3. Only in the second year of study was there a significant difference between part-time and full-time students in the number of B grades obtained with part-time students obtaining a higher ratio of B grades to number of courses attempted. All other grades were not significantly different between the two groups.
4. When comparing the success of part-time to full-time students, as measured by academic comments, part-time students appeared to be significantly more successful than full-time students in all years of study except the third year (see PDF document Page # 7).
5. When comparing retention rates between part-time and full-time students for each of the four years of study, full-time students obtained significantly higher retention rates for each of the four years. It is interesting to note that in the fourth year of study, the gap between full-time and part-time retention rates narrowed considerably, which may be due to more full-time students completing their three-year degree while part-time students continued their studies (see PDF document Page # 8).

Discussion

The general demographic results indicate that slightly more females enroll as mature students than male students, and that the majority of students are between the ages of 25 and 30 years of age. Also, more mature students seek a 3-year BA and are enrolled in a social science program than any other. All of these findings support current literature (Forder & Dawson, 2001; Hartely & Trueman, 1997) pertaining to mature students as a whole. Interesting differences within this classification of student arises when comparing part-time to full-time status. There were significantly more part-time than full-time mature students. Far more of the part-time mature students were female, were slightly older and a vast majority were enrolled in a social science program than those with full-time mature status. These differences may indicate distinct differences in motivation, objectives, and perceptions of success between these two groups that need to be addressed during the interview process.

When attempting to determine academic success, the question of how to define success and thence how to measure this success arises. In this study, five possible measures of success were employed to cover a broader definition of success than just academic grades. When mature students are presented with their academic record each year, they see not only their overall grade, but the grade for each course they attempted, the number of courses completed compared to the number of courses attempted, and the academic comments. All of these parameters will assist students to build an impression of their academic success and thus were incorporated into this study as well as retention rates.

Of these parameters, it would appear that only overall grade, academic comments and retention rates are accurate quantitative measures of academic success with part-time mature students being more successful in overall grade and academic comments whereas full-time students were more successful in remaining in school over the four years of this study. In reference to this last measure, after the first year of study, there was an alarming drop in retention for part-time students (only 43% returned for the second year of study) while full-time student retention remained strong at 80%. This pattern continued into the third year of study where only 21% of the part-time students that started in first year were still attending in the third year compared to 61% of full-time students. These statistics are alarming and need to be addressed in the interview process and may lead to important recommendations for learning institutions who are interested in retaining their part-time mature students to completion of their degree.

Conclusion

The definition of mature status at The University of Western Ontario contains the provision of being away from full-time study in an academic setting for at least four years and not having an academic basis of admission. While length of time away from school has been shown to not influence academic success (Thieman and Marsh-Williams, 1984), many mature students consider these aspects as possible detriments to their success. This dichotomy between student's perceptions and statistical facts poses a very interesting aspect of student's success. This study has attempted to set out the facts as they pertain to mature student success by comparing five measures of success between part-time and full-time mature students and then to conduct interviews with a representative group of these two groups of students and compare their perceptions of success to the facts.

The results of this study have several implications in understanding the experience of this cohort. Since part-time students do better academically than full-time students, is this evidence that their roles and self-concept are more stable and therefore aided them in managing the transition? Do full-time students engage in more activities that prepare them for the transition than part-time students? For example, given that full-time applicants need to convince the Admissions Office that they are worthy of full-time status, does this inspire them to view the transition more positively than part-time applicants who do not have to make such an appeal? Do full-time applicants seek out additional information and resources which contribute to their ability to be successful through the process of itemizing their reasons for expecting success at a full course load? Understanding the factors that influence academic success will assist in defining appropriate policy decisions, counselling and designing programs.

As this is a work in progress, the results of the interviews and the comparison of student's perceptions of success to quantitative academic facts have yet to be completed. By conducting the quantitative analysis of the data before conducting the interviews, a more efficient interview process can be developed that will randomly select students from various categories of success as well as asking focused, relevant questions that will assist to shed some light on the differences between students' perceptions of success and qualitative measures of success. Such insight may lead to effective recommendations for policy decisions, counseling and designing assistive programs.

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