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Abstract

Part-time learners have had a history of campus isolation, fewer opportunities to engage on campus, and much higher attrition rates than their full-time peers (Jacoby, 2015; Rajasekhara & Hirsch, 2000). As a result, this study sought to uncover effective ways of enhancing the academic and social experiences of part-time learners and, in turn, increase retention rates. The attitudes, experiences, perceived needs, and challenges of 41 part-time students at a large Canadian community college during the fall 2015 semester were captured through an anonymous survey. From the data gathered, effective ways to enhance the college experiences of part-time students were identified and a relationship between school affinity and a part-time learner's motivation to remain in school and persist to graduation were established. Recommendations resulting from this study centre on flexibility, availability, and student choice for post-secondary programs, courses, services, and social events aimed at part-time learners.

Résumé

Historiquement, les apprenantes et apprenants à temps partiel vivent l'isolement sur campus, profitent de moins de possibilités d'engagement sur campus et présentent un taux d'attrition beaucoup plus élevé que la population étudiante à temps plein (Jacoby, 2015; Rajasekhara et Hirsch, 2000). La présente étude a donc cherché à découvrir des stratégies efficaces pour enrichir les expériences scolaires et sociales des apprenantes et apprenants à temps partiel et, par conséquent, augmenter les taux de rétention. Des données sur les attitudes, les expériences, les besoins perçus et les défis de 41 étudiantes et étudiants à temps partiel fréquentant un grand collège communautaire canadien ont été recueillies à l'aide d'un sondage anonyme. À partir des données recueillies, nous avons défini des stratégies efficaces pour enrichir l'expérience collégiale de la population étudiante à temps partiel et avons établi un lien entre l'affinité scolaire et la motivation d'une personne inscrite à temps partiel pour poursuivre et terminer ses études. Les recommandations découlant de cette étude sont axées sur la flexibilité, la disponibilité et les choix des étudiantes et

étudiants quant aux événements sociaux, aux services, aux cours et aux programmes postsecondaires offerts aux apprenantes et apprenants à temps partiel.

Introduction

Many students who consider furthering their studies after entering the workforce, starting a family, or establishing another realm of responsibility find it difficult to enter or re-enter post-secondary education, especially on a full-time basis. With a variety of reasons to further one's education, some of which include professional development, self-fulfillment, career advancement, a love for learning, or the decision to take a new direction in life (Jacoby, 2015; Neville, 2002; Swain & Hammond, 2011), many learners seek to continue their studies on a part-time basis.

However, research has shown that part-time students are at a significantly higher risk for premature withdrawal from their studies than their full-time peers (Price, 1993; Rajasekhara & Hirsch, 2000). Student attrition results not only in a loss of revenue for the learning institution, but in costs for both the student and society as a whole (Grayson & Grayson, 2003). Students who drop out before completing their credential often lose time, money, and the chance of better-paying job opportunities that would typically result from higher education (Drea, 2004). These effects not only have the potential to impact the local labour market and economy, but can (depending on the severity of attrition) carry forward to Canada's competitive position in the global market of highly skilled individuals. For part-time learners, who are typically older than full-time students (Tight, 1991) and more likely to attend school while maintaining jobs, dependants, or other responsibilities, the loss of time, money, and the potential for higher earnings is often unaffordable.

The allure of attending post-secondary studies as a part-time student began to grow in Canada between 1976 and 1992, a period when labour-market shifts in the requirements for many occupations influenced individuals to further their education (AUCC, 2007). For many, taking a reduced course load was integral to maintaining a school, work, social, and family life balance. In 1992, part-time student enrolment in Canada peaked at 316,000 (AUCC, 2007; Drewes & O'Heron, 1999), a stark contrast to the five years that followed, with enrolment declining to around 250,000 part-time students by 1997 (AUCC, 2007). Enrolment remained consistent until 2000, when part-time undergraduate numbers began to slowly climb again by an average of 1% yearly (AUCC, 2011). The Canadian Association of University Teachers theorized that the reason for the initial decline in enrolment was partly due to cutbacks faced by academic institutions, which caused institutions to begin prioritizing funds for the full-time student population, thereby jeopardizing part-time student resources and enrolment (CAUT, 1998).

Although part-time learners still comprise a significant learner population, constituting nearly a third of students in the Canadian post-secondary sector for the 2011–2012 academic year (Statistics Canada, 2013), they have historically been seen as a separate entity within the framework of higher education. Tracing back to the 19th century, extension courses, the first known notion of part-time studies (Burrows, 1976), offered educational programs and services separate from those of the traditional on-campus students. Subsequently, modern-day continuing education faculties have often continued this practice of segregation by operating as separate divisions within learning institutions, frequently offering courses

only during the evenings, on weekends, or through online distance education. Segregation of this nature within the post-secondary community may account for why these learners are typically described as being less engaged and more likely to drop out of school (Gonzalez, 2009). Their infrequent presence on campus and lack of integration with the rest of the college community have traditionally been factors in their school engagement. Burrows (1976) indicated that 19th-century "extension courses have often lacked cohesion and a corporate spirit" (p. 109). Essentially, this type of deficiency in institutional connectedness is in contrast to academics who emphasize student engagement both inside and outside of the classroom as being key factors for social and intellectual development. For example, Vincent Tinto, a well-cited scholar in the field of student retention, suggested that the issue of student attrition can be addressed for all students, including those deemed as at risk, when learning institutions establish a communal environment (Tinto, 1987). Tinto (1987) asserted that the academic and social experiences of students are major factors in their decision to remain at the institution. Therefore, if we recognize a correlation between experiences and retention, we can also consider that students who do not gain a sense of belonging to their learning institution likely do not receive the full college experience, thereby contributing to increased attrition rates among this population. Equally as important is to acknowledge that the kinds of academic and social experiences needed to optimize student retention are likely to vary among student groups.

Although more contemporary times have seen part-time students become more integrated into the post-secondary setting, their particular needs, challenges, and experiences (academic and social) vary, and may differ from those of more traditional full-time students. Therefore, along with a greater institutional focus on sustainable retention initiatives aimed at enhancing the part-time student experience, it is critical that learning institutions understand the unique needs of this student population to appropriately address their high attrition rates. This phenomenon was the justification for further research into the specific needs of the part-time student population, their experiences, their perceived sense of belonging to the institution, and their motivations to persist to graduation.

Literature Review

Part-Time Student Needs and Challenges

The three overarching factors that contribute to the alarming attrition rates among the part-time student population are commonly identified as *academic, personal,* and *financial* (Bourner, Reynolds, Hamed, & Barnett, 1991; Drewes & O'Heron, 1999; Kember & Leung, 2004; Neville, 2002; Price, 1993; Tight, 1991). Although these factors are not necessarily unique to part-time students, the challenges associated with these factors may be further compounded by the mere nature of studying part time.

Academically, part-time students often face anxiety and lack confidence when it comes to their ability to produce and complete quality work at the post-secondary level. Literature shows that many part-time students have returned to formal education after an extended period or may have never experienced the rigour of higher education (Bourner et al., 1991; Swain & Hammond, 2011). Therefore, their transition into college can present distinctive and possibly harder challenges than for those students coming directly from high school or another post-secondary institution. Price (1993) described "syllabus shock" as a way in

which students self-deprive themselves from the school experience (p. 8). These students withdraw early in the semester due to a paralyzing fear that they are unable to meet the academic demands outlined in their course syllabus (Price, 1993). A major contributor to the lack of confidence is said to arise from a student's inability to manage their time appropriately (Bourner et al., 1991; Jacoby, 2015; Neville, 2002; Perna, 2010).

Time management contributes significantly to both the academic and *personal* challenges that part-time learners face, as school, personal life, and work commitments are often seen as non-negotiable factors (Kember & Leung, 2004). Part-time students often rank their work commitments as a higher priority than their schooling, as they rely heavily on their income to support their personal commitments (Drewes & O'Heron, 1999; Kember & Leung, 2004). Therefore, it is not surprising that a major need for part-time students is to maintain their employment while studying. Since part-time students are less likely to qualify for bursaries and awards to supplement their income (OUSA, 2012), sacrificing their *financial* livelihood is not typically an option.

A study of part-time students in the United Kingdom found that 90% were in paid employment while attending classes (Bourner et al., 1991). These commitments often impact a student's schooling, as pressures from work may result in missed classes (Bourner et al., 1991). Literature also suggests that part-time students would not entertain the option of reducing their income at the cost of pursuing their education (Drewes & O'Heron, 1999; Kember & Leung, 2004). This means that as tuition costs increase, so does the probability of attrition among part-time learners (Drewes & O'Heron, 1999). This could account for part-time students temporarily dropping out, otherwise known as *stopping out,* of college to save for the surges in tuition fees.

Although research points to student employment outside of college as a contributor to attrition, the opposite is found when students are employed on campus (Astin, 1975, 1984; Perna, 2010; Price, 1993). Students that work on campus become less isolated, as they have a higher likelihood of interacting with members of their college community (Astin, 1984). However, since many part-time students are typically employed outside of the college, understanding other ways of fostering a sense of belonging could be critical for their retention.

Sense of Belonging and Retention

Using a customer service model to illustrate the type of positive experiences that can paint a vivid and lasting impression for all students requires the college to go beyond a decent environment and endeavour to earn the student's business (Babla, 2012). Babla (2012) offered six influences for businesses to achieve loyal customers. Applying these influences to the college setting means that students are looking for (1) experiences that provide certainty, (2) occasional positive surprises from the college, (3) a feeling of significance from the college, (4) a connection to the college and to be treated like family, (5) a college that is constantly improving and progressing, and (6) a college that will provide opportunities for student feedback (Babla, 2012).

The need for students to connect with at least one member of their learning institution is seen as a positive and crucial step to building a communal sense of belonging (Perna, 2010), resulting in a higher probability of persistence to graduation (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Gonzalez, 2009; O'Brien, 2002; O'Keeffe, 2013). Major findings point to the student-faculty

relationship inside and outside the classroom as the premier factor for enhancing student motivation and engagement; however, connections can be made with a peer, faculty, or staff member (Batt, 1979; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Perna, 2010; Tinto, 1987). Moreover, student-services practitioners—with roles that can include student advisors, personal and career counsellors, and orientation coordinators—have increasingly been seen as professionals that seek to provide "experiences that enhance student learning and success" (Schuh, 2005, p. 428). They play a large role in the post-secondary community bridging gaps in academic and social engagement by linking students to resources. However, as noted by Nguyen (2011), their support must be both visible and accessible to part-time students to be effective. Nevertheless, the problem of attrition among part-time students at community colleges arises because they are generally considered commuter schools. Students do not connect on campus; instead, they attend classes and then leave with fewer chances to engage. This makes it harder for part-time students to associate with college staff members, faculty members, and other students. This may also lead to a harder transition into the academic and social fabric of the institution and, consequently, create a lower probability of garnering a sense of belonging.

While scholars have suggested that academic and social engagement both inside and outside the classroom will lead to the overall retention of students (Astin, 1984; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; O'Brien, 2002; O'Keeffe, 2013; Tinto, 1987), other academics have argued that various student groups require different types of institutional engagement. For example, Dietsche (1990) and Grayson and Grayson (2003) contended that a better-suited retention model for commuter students, such as part-time learners, is to focus on their academic integration into the school community rather than their social integration.

In either scenario, making connections with members of the college community would theoretically coincide with effective retention strategies. Yet for the part-time population (as many, if not all, are commuter students), the possibility of them making direct connections with members of their school may prove to be much harder. Also, their need to connect (whether academic or social) may differ.

Research Questions

This study was conducted to gain a better understanding of the 21st-century challenges facing part-time students, including what it means for part-time students to feel connected to their institution and how the feeling of connectedness influences their success and decision to remain at their learning institution. Therefore, to address the concern of attrition among the part-time student population, four research questions were examined to explore the social and academic experiences of these learners at a Canadian community college. The four research questions were:

1. What (if any) are the unique challenges and needs faced by today's part-time students?
2. How do part-time students perceive their institution can effectively support their social and academic experiences?
3. What (if any) are the perceived needs that part-time students require to feel a sense of belonging/connectedness to their institution?
4. How do experiences and gaining a sense of belonging/connectedness influence part-time students to remain at the institution and persist to graduation?

Methodology

Research Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 875 students taking courses on a part-time basis at a large Canadian community college in the fall 2015 semester through programs within the Faculty of Business and the Faculty of Applied Health and Community Studies. Of the 875 students, 530 were business students among nine business streams that included human resources, finance, accounting, marketing, and general business. Each business stream consisted of two- and three-year diploma programs, with the exception of general business, which was offered only as a two-year diploma program. The remaining 345 participants were students from the early childhood education (ECE), educational support (ES), and educational support—intensive (ESI) diploma programs. Due to the small enrolment numbers in the ES and ESI programs, both programs were categorized with the ECE group to help preserve participant anonymity. Although these participants did not represent the entire part-time student population in the college system, they were selected because they represented all diploma programs in which a student could apply directly to the study college as a part-time student. They were also representative of a diverse group of students, since all part-time students in these programs were requested to participate in the study regardless of age, gender, socio-economic status, or any other factors.

Instrumentation

A quantitative research methodology was employed through the use of a cross-sectional survey to gather attitudinal data (Creswell, 2012). Open-ended questions were used within the survey and analyzed for themes to capture qualitative elements in the study. The survey questions were vetted through college professionals knowledgeable about the issues of student attrition. Feedback and suggestions were used to improve the survey before administering it to the participants. Similar survey tools have been referenced in the Nadelson et al. (2013) quantitative study, which used Likert-type scales to measure students' level of awareness of college influences. Results from the Nadelson et al. (2013) study indicated that the survey was valid and reliable.

Instrument Questions

The survey contained 22 questions that included a mixture of five-point Likert-type scales, rank-order scales, and closed- and open-ended questions designed to address the four research questions presented in the research study.

Research Procedure

An invitation email was sent to all students enrolled in a business (two- or three-year diploma), ECE, ES, or ESI program and identified by the college's registrar's office as a current part-time student. A non-probability convenience sampling research method was employed, as potential participants were contacted based on their program and part-time status (Creswell, 2012). Only one survey was sent per student college email address. A second email was sent as a reminder two weeks after the initial invitation email was sent. The survey remained open for three weeks, from weeks six to eight of the fall 2015 semester.

The survey was purposely administered during the midway point of the first semester so that first-year students could become familiar with the college and make a reasonable assessment of their experience. In that time, a total of 55 surveys were received.

Data Analysis

The data were statistically analyzed to measure part-time student experiences, perceptions, and needs. This was done through the calculation of percentages and/or mean scores for each Likert-type, closed-ended, and rank-order question. Participant answers from open-ended questions were assigned a code and analyzed for frequency and meaning (Creswell, 2012). Codes were then grouped based on reoccurring themes discovered in participant responses (Creswell, 2012). The frequency of the themes was found through the calculation of the mean score and reported in the findings (Creswell, 2012). Although participants were given the option to skip the core instrument questions, surveys missing five or more responses (constituting at least 25% of the core instrument questions) were deemed to imply a lack of interest for full participation in the research study and were considered incomplete. Of the 55 surveys received, 14 were deemed incomplete and were subsequently eliminated from the study; two of these were disqualified for non-consent to survey participation.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study were shaped by the responses of 41 part-time learners, a response rate of 4.69% and a survey completion rate of 74.55% among all programs surveyed. Although the survey was purposely administered at the midway point of the semester to allow time for new students to get acquainted with their surroundings so they could reasonably evaluate their college experience, the timing of the survey request may have also contributed to the low response rate. The administering of the survey during weeks six to eight coincided with two major events in the student life cycle: reading week and mid-term exams. Both reading week, when students have a break from their regularly scheduled classes, and the mid-term exam period may have detracted student focus away from the survey and toward activities such as intense studying or even travel during the break week. Additionally, student unfamiliarity with the study college's technology, including accessing their college email account, may have factored into the low response rate. Nevertheless, the careful screening process of participants, coupled with the survey's design to solicit participant comments throughout the survey, are believed to have accounted for the depth, relevance, and layers uncovered in this research study. Details in respondent answers, although from a small sample size, still uncovered important themes that provide a voice for the part-time student population. The study results are presented below in four sections to represent each of the research questions.

Research Question One: What (if any) are the unique challenges and needs faced by today's part-time students?

Substantiated from the results of this study is the notion that today's part-time learners still endure many of the same challenges previously cited in literature. Part-time students still commonly face academic, financial, and personal challenges (Bourner et al., 1991; Drewes & O'Heron, 1999; Kember & Leung, 2004; Neville, 2002; Price, 1993; Tight, 1991); however, academic advances and contemporary technology add to the range of needs confronting

this population. In fact, results reflect that the majority of today's part-time learners identify with multiple challenges, with 56.10% ($N = 41$) of the respondents experiencing at least two challenges and 39.02% ($N = 41$) at least three or more (see Figure 1). Although participants of this study were presented with a list of challenges to select from, participants could also opt to enter a challenge(s) not included in the list of choices.
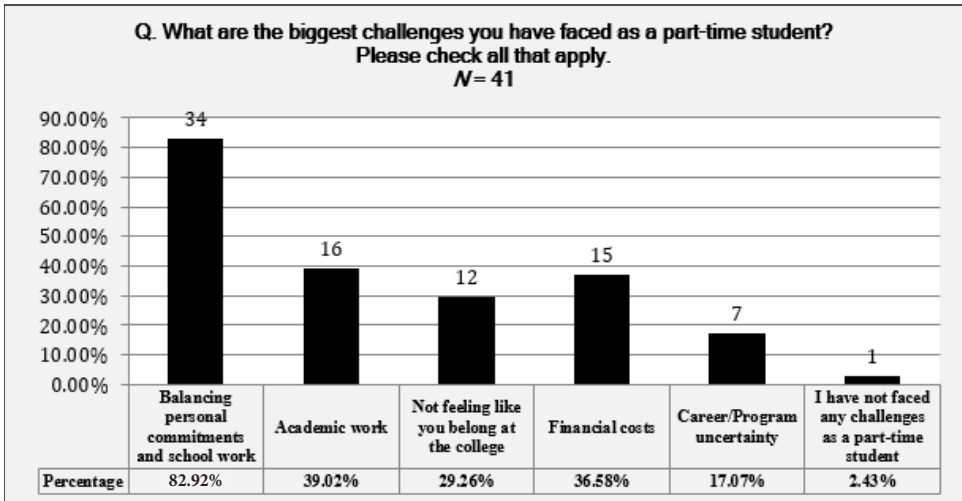

Q. What are the biggest challenges you have faced as a part-time student? Please check all that apply. N = 41

	Balancing personal commitments and school work	Academic work	Not feeling like you belong at the college	Financial costs	Career/Program uncertainty	I have not faced any challenges as a part-time student
Count	34	16	12	15	7	1
Percentage	82.92%	39.02%	29.26%	36.58%	17.07%	2.43%

Figure 1. The biggest challenges of part-time students at the study college.

Not feeling a sense of belonging. One of the new and notable challenges that surfaced from this study is the concern of part-time learners not feeling a sense of belonging to their school. Almost a third (29.26%, $N = 41$) of part-time learners considered this to be among their biggest challenges. One student indicated, "As a mature student only taking one class, it's hard to replicate the 'college experience.' I don't really feel part of the culture, although I didn't really expect to." This expectation of not receiving the same educational experience or connection based on a person's part-time status supports assertions from O'Brien (2002), who suggested that part-time learners are more likely to feel disconnected from their school community. It also corresponds directly with Babla's (2012) customer service model, which explained that customers, in this case students, are looking for a connection to their institution, to be treated like family, and to feel important. Given this premise, institutions that connect with their learners in ways that foster a sense of community are more likely to enhance the learner experience and increase the probability of retaining their students.

Also important to note is that the majority of part-time learners (73.17%, $N = 41$) indicated that it was important for them to feel as though they belonged to their college, but many of these learners cited being minimally engaged with their school in a social context outside of class time. Moreover, part-time learners indicated that they spent less than one hour a week engaging in school events. This highlights that part-time students are more likely to have fewer opportunities to form their desired connections with members of their school community.

Program and course offerings. Analysis of participant comments revealed that part-time students perceived there to be a limited offering of classes to accommodate their schedules.

Specifically, comments were made about the limited availability of evening classes and the limited number of programs offered on a part-time basis. One student commented that "courses should be offered during the evening times to accommodate part-time students at work," while another student articulated, "I wish there were additional programs that could be taken part time…offerings are quite limited."

Coupled with these findings were results that revealed a moderate number of participants experiencing some degree of program uncertainty (34.14%, $N = 41$). As a result, it is probable, although inconclusive, that a proportion of learners who enroll in part-time programs do so because it is their only option to pursue a post-secondary credential. Many part-time learners (65.85%, $N = 41$) felt they could not pursue their education if the option of attending school on a part-time basis was unavailable. One student revealed, "Due to a health issue I can only manage school part time," while another commented that "I could not afford to attend school if I did not work." These results suggest a learner's decision to pursue a particular program can be solely because the program is offered part time rather than due to the content of the program being pursued. Furthermore, these results align with literature that suggests part-time students view their employment as a non-negotiable factor and would not reduce their employment hours to pursue an education (Drewes & O'Heron, 1999; Kember & Leung, 2004). Therefore, retaining these students is problematic when learners enroll in programs because they fit with their working schedules and then later encounter difficulties when trying to find classes to accommodate their employment hours. This reaffirms research from Bourner et al. (1991), who concluded that workforce commitments often lead to part-time learners missing classes. Missed classes could also lead to poor academic performance or even to a full withdrawal from studies.

Awareness of academic expectations. It is believed that the challenges faced by part-time learners are intensified, and their attrition rates more probable, when they enter higher education without a clear understanding of the academic expectations needed for their success (Bourner et al., 1991). Having an awareness of the academic expectations of post-secondary life was not initially seen as a challenge for part-time learners of this study. Most students (80.49%, $N = 41$) cited having an awareness of the college's academic expectations prior to starting their program; however, participant comments illustrated another story. There was substantive uncertainty about college policies (including the time frame permitted to complete a credential on a part-time basis), services, and the time needed to complete course work successfully. Nevertheless, these academic expectations were shown to vary by program.

For programs requiring significant essay writing, such as in the ECE/ES/ESI group, top academic expectations that posed the most challenges were related directly to course performance. Participant comments revealed a theme of unfamiliarity with the academic rigour, essay writing, referencing, and technology used at the college. Learners indicated that much of their unfamiliarity was the result of returning to school after an extended period. One student commented that their challenge was in "adapting to the concept that all work is done on computers." This participant went on to say that "I have not been in school for over 20 years." Another participant stated that "it has taken longer than I expected to get comfortable navigating my laptop and [the school's learning management system]." Both comments highlight that the main challenge in this area is students' lack of experience with institutional technologies and the expected use of them prior to entering their program. These results could imply that part-time learners who enter formal education after an

extended period away from school and who enroll in programs that require proficiencies in evolving academic tools, such as referencing style or technology, are more likely to face additional academic challenges. These learners already enter post-secondary education with the anxiety of not being able to meet the academic demands outlined in their course curriculum (Price, 1993); however, these findings illustrate that this anxiety, for some, is also increased by a fear of not understanding how to properly use the academic tools required to complete their work.

For business students, much of their academic unawareness coincides with the challenge of time management. Business students cited that they did not account for the time needed to complete course work, to negotiate personal responsibilities, and to meet with group members outside of class time to complete their assignments. Although time management was not in the top three academic expectations that the ECE/ES/ESI group felt unprepared for or deemed most challenging, it was ranked fourth. The interpretation of this is that part-time students who enter higher education have a general understanding that time management will be a challenge; however, learners do not realize the extent of this challenge until they actually enter school and attempt to manage their new commitments with their existing ones. The ECE/ES/ESI participants considered time management a challenging academic expectation, but their unfamiliarity with the academic tools needed for academic success was an even greater challenge. For business students—a program that requires more group assignments—the challenge of time management appeared to be heightened when they had to coordinate their already congested schedules with that of their classmates for group work.

Help to address their needs. Part-time learners who chose to speak with someone about their academic or personal needs (60.98%, $N = 41$) primarily chose to connect with their college instructor (76.00%, $N = 25$), followed closely by a college staff member (64.00%, $N = 25$), then by a classmate (40.00%, $N = 25$). The primary reason for choosing not to seek guidance for their needs was time constraints (61.54%, $N = 13$). One student commented, "My schedule at work does not allow me to come into the College in office hours to speak to someone," while others simply said "Haven't got the time" or "Too busy with work and family life." Although a small proportion of participants (15.38%, $N = 13$) stated that they were unaware of the available resources and therefore did not seek support, these findings affirmed Nguyen's (2011) assertion that support services need to be both visible and accessible for learners.

Research Question Two: How do part-time students perceive their institution can effectively support their social and academic experiences?

Part-time students offered a variety of suggestions for institutional support to help with their academic and social experiences. Suggestions mainly encompass three categories: support services, course and resource delivery offerings, and social engagement.

Support services. Part-time learners perceived a student advisor as the most valuable resource for their success. Workshops such as career planning, study tips/resources, essay writing, time management, financial budgeting, and computer skills/technology followed respectively (see Table 1). Having a peer mentor was perceived to be the least valuable contributor to the success of part-time students, but was still deemed to be a valuable resource. Although having a student advisor was clearly ranked as the top contributor to the

success of part-time learners, the rank of the workshops is inconclusive. Since the results of this study indicated that the unawareness of academic expectations differed by program, it is therefore reasonable to conclude that the types of resources seen as most valuable to support these gaps would also differ by program (however, this question was not segmented by program).

Table 1: Supports That Contribute to Success

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	*N* Value
A **peer mentor** (a senior student to answer your questions, provide information, and invite you to college events)	19.51%	36.59%	26.83%	7.32%	9.76%	41
A **student advisor** (a college staff member that will answer your questions, provide advice/guidance throughout your educational journey at the college, refer you to appropriate college resources)	35.00%	47.50%	7.50%	7.50%	2.50%	40
A workshop to help with **time management**	31.71%	31.71%	17.07%	14.63%	4.88%	41
A workshop to provide **study tips/resources**	31.71%	36.59%	19.51%	7.32%	4.88%	41
A workshop to help with **career planning**	41.46%	24.39%	19.51%	12.20%	2.44%	41
A workshop to help with **computer skills/technology**	27.50%	30.00%	22.50%	10.00%	10.00%	40
A workshop to help with **essay writing**	34.15%	34.15%	14.63%	9.76%	7.32%	41
A workshop to help with **financial budgeting and resources**	30.00%	30.00%	17.50%	15.00%	7.50%	40

Note. Percentages are within +/- 0.01%

Course and resource delivery. Part-time students perceived that more flexible course offerings, greater financial support, and services that target the needs of part-time learners would also enhance their experiences. One participant suggested allocating designated times for part-time learners to ask questions, while another suggested a "permanent office

for part-time student support at the college." Participant comments also showed uncertainty about the types of services part-time students can access. For example, one participant stated, "I am not really sure who to talk to or what information they need in order for me to access any academic services." This uncertainty appeared to create resentment and detract from the sense of belonging so many learners seek.

Although participants of this study suggested that the college offer more evening classes, this did not translate to services. On average, part-time learners cited a preference for online delivery of institutional support, regardless of the type of service. Online support, in many ways would provide flexible options for student communication, engagement, and assistance, which could support those learners who indicated a challenge with finding the time to access support resources yet who also commented on the value of accessing these resources for their success.

Social engagement. Part-time learners also considered social engagement to be positive for enhancing their experiences and success at the college. However, participants ranked social activities, such as participating in and attending school events/activities, as the least important aspects of their college life (see Figure 2). This is not to say that part-time learners do not want to be socially engaged with their institution. Participants commented that "I would love to get more involved but I never know what is going on at school" and "I think it is important and fun to participate and attend school events, but as you get older and work full time, you have other priorities." This can be interpreted that part-time learners have a willingness and desire for more opportunities to engage with their school; however, this engagement comes with two conditions.

The first condition is that institutional events and activities must be flexible and geared toward the interest of part-time learners. One student called for events to be more suited for older students, while others suggested that event formats include evening, weekend, and online delivery options. The second condition is that social activities cannot be achieved at the expense of the learner's grades. Participants of this study ranked attaining a high grade point average as the most important aspect of college life. Therefore, flexibility in event format is critical for creating a diversity of options for a variety of part-time learner schedules.
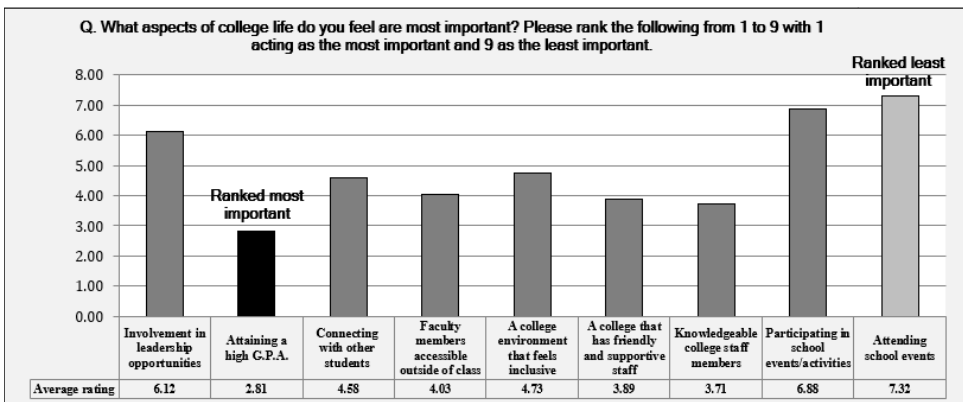

Q. What aspects of college life do you feel are most important? Please rank the following from 1 to 9 with 1 acting as the most important and 9 as the least important.

	Involvement in leadership opportunities	Attaining a high G.P.A.	Connecting with other students	Faculty members accessible outside of class	A college environment that feels inclusive	A college that has friendly and supportive staff	Knowledgeable college staff members	Participating in school events/activities	Attending school events
Average rating	6.12	2.81	4.58	4.03	4.73	3.89	3.71	6.88	7.32

Figure 2. Aspects of college life that part-time students ranked as most important.

Research Question Three: What (if any) are the perceived needs that part-time students require to feel a sense of belonging/connectedness to their institution?

Most part-time learners (80.49%, *N* = 41) felt it was important for them to feel connected to their school community. Participants described the connections they made with faculty members, college staff, and peers inside and outside the classroom, in college clubs, and through on-campus jobs as experiences they have enjoyed. Social engagement/outside classroom experiences (37.50%, *N* = 32), inside classroom experiences (31.25%, *N* = 32), faculty interactions (21.88%, *N* = 32), and college staff interactions (9.38%, *N* = 32) were categorized as the most enjoyable school experiences. In contrast, some of these same types of interactions, if unpleasant, led to experiences that fostered frustration, stress, anxiety, and isolation. For example, experiences relating to the college structure/college staff (23.33%, *N* = 30), inside classroom/academic matters (23.33%, *N* = 30), outside classroom/social engagement (16.67%, *N* = 30), and interactions with faculty members (10.00%, *N* = 30) were among the most unenjoyable part-time student experiences. In some cases, students described frustration in the current structure of college support services. One participant described the experience of having to take time off work to address administrative items. Others described not being fully informed on institutional policies and processes, or even on how to engage with the school community. Other key examples included the inability of students to schedule courses to accommodate their work commitments. These examples of unenjoyable experiences suggest negative effects on the sense of belonging for these learners to their college and again align with Babla's (2012) customer service model. Retaining these students requires not only that they feel important, but that they have experiences that provide certainty. Clear and consistent processes that foster inclusion are considered key elements to achieving Babla's (2012) loyalty level experience for students.

Research Question Four: How do experiences and gaining a sense of belonging/ connectedness influence part-time students to remain at the institution and persist to graduation?

The survey revealed that the majority of part-time learners (78.05%, *N* = 41) are more likely to remain at their institution and persist to graduation if a sense of belonging is established. Learners who experience positive social interactions on campus and positive interactions with college staff and faculty members are more likely to feel connected to their school community. One respondent commented, "Interactions with instructors [are] really helpful. It makes you special if they give you a little bit of their time out from their busy schedule." Another said, "I would likely remain at the college if I had a connection with the staff (my teachers) and classmates." And another stated, "It definitely makes the college experience much better." Although 21.95% (*N* = 41) of participants remained neutral, no students disagreed with the notion that feeling connected to their school would likely increase their chances of staying. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the responses.

Table 2: Likelihood of Remaining at College if There Is a Feeling of Connectedness

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	*N* Value
Are you more likely to remain at the college if you feel connected to your college community?	31.71%	46.34%	21.95%	0.00%	0.00%	41
Response count	13	19	9	0	0	

Note. Percentages are within +/- 0.01%

Conclusion

The literature suggests that part-time students face challenges that occur under three overarching umbrellas: *academic, personal,* and *financial* (Bourner et al., 1991; Drewes & O'Heron, 1999; Kember & Leung, 2004; Neville, 2002; Price, 1993; Tight, 1991). These three areas are consistent with the results of this research study, with notable additions uncovered. These additions include the challenge for part-time learners to feel connected to their institution, the issue of limited institutional availability of part-time programs, and a lack of flexible course offerings. The part-time learner population continues to grow along with their challenges. Today's part-time learners not only continue to face traditional challenges such as the responsibilities of juggling employment, family, and school commitments, but also are challenged with navigating school policies, being academically underprepared with the academic tools to complete their course work, having to juggle their time with other students for group work, and feeling like they do not belong at their own institution. It is clear from this research study that part-time learners are open to engaging with their college community. Part-time students want to connect with their peers, yet find it difficult to negotiate their commitments to accommodate the traditional ways in which the institution seeks to engage its learners. Instead, it was found that post-secondary institutions must provide more flexible ways of engaging all learners. This would include those who spend the least amount of time on campus and who have limited time for travel to and from school to engage in on-campus activities. The data show that part-time learners want to feel connected to their institution and are more likely to remain at an institution that seeks to consider their needs and is flexible in providing services, activities, and programs that are inclusive of all learners. Therefore, post-secondary institutions must seek to enhance the learner experience by ensuring retention initiatives are not aimed solely or primarily at the full-time, on-campus population, but rather that they equally consider all learner populations regardless of the number of hours students spend on campus. This would also include online programs serving both full-time and part-time populations.

Recommendations

Although synthesizing existing literature with the results of this study resulted in the following nine recommendations, not all recommendations will integrate perfectly into all institutional structures—nor should they. The intended purpose of these recommendations is to provide adaptable suggestions for institutions to enhance the academic and social experiences of their unique part-time learner population, with the intent of increasing retention rates.

Recommendation one: Clear and visible descriptions of policies and services. Institutions should clearly define the length of time part-time students have to complete their studies, as well as identify available support services and how they can be accessed. This information should be accessible to all learners prior to the start of their program. This will allow students to create a realistic plan to complete their credential in a timely fashion given the parameters set by the institution. Students should not assume, but rather enter into an honest and upfront relationship with their school. All policy and service information (clearly indicating who can access them) should be visible on the institution's website and outlined in a student's welcome package, in their offer letter, and in an online resource repository (see recommendation nine).

Recommendation two: Baseline training of academic tools for all learners. Institutions should communicate academic expectations (including the requisite abilities needed for each program) up front. A description of these expectations should be presented in information sessions and linked on the college's website for each program offered. Along with this information, there should be resources to help learners attain the requisite skills needed for success in their program, either prior to or early in their educational journey. Workshops could be created to support this initiative; however, they would need to be flexible and cover topics that address the needs of part-time learners. Specifically, workshops on essay writing, referencing styles, computer skills, time management skills, and college readiness should be developed. Furthermore, college readiness workshops should include information about college resources, key college policies, and how to navigate the institution's learning management system.

Recommendation three: Flexible resources. Institutions should deliver online resources, workshops, and events in both synchronous and asynchronous formats. Synchronous delivery may be best suited for advising sessions where learners are able to engage with college staff members without having to seek time off work to visit the campus. Online asynchronous workshops would allow learners to access information at a time most convenient for them. Learning institutions should offer a variety of online workshops prior to and throughout the academic year that target the variety of challenges that part-time students face. If particular student services are not included in part-time student tuition fees, the institution should consider how these costs can be covered or subsidized.

Recommendation four: Flexible events for part-time learners. Institutions should offer events that relate to the interests of the part-time student population. These events should be social as well as academic and should be held both on campus and virtually to accommodate varied schedules. An online social community should be considered as a means of connecting part-time learners to one another as well as to other students, since they spend little time on campus. This could also act as a channel for part-time learners to provide feedback.

Recommendation five: Flexible course offerings. To help accommodate varied learner schedules, institutions should create more flexible course offerings. This does not necessarily equate to more classes, but rather more flexible evening, weekend, and online offerings. Changes to course delivery methods should only be implemented based on learner preference surveys. Learners should be polled on high-demand classes and varied course delivery options to determine how to expand or allocate course sections to different delivery methods.

Recommendation six: Expansion of program choice. Many participants of this study chose to attend college on a part-time basis because it was their only option to further their education; institutions should take stock of the number of programs offered part time and, based on student need, consider expanding part-time program offerings to increase learner choice.

Recommendation seven: Financial support for part-time learners. More funding opportunities for part-time learners could alleviate the financial burden that many of them face. Institutions, in partnership with their financial aid offices, should determine how new part-time student bursaries and awards can be established; for example, institutions might consider creating a campaign to solicit donors, possibly part-time alumni, who are willing to contribute to part-time funding options.

Recommendation eight: Dedicated advisor for part-time students. Part-time students perceived a student advisor as the top contributor to their success. Therefore, institutions should consider dedicating a student advisor to building connections with new and existing part-time students. A dedicated advisor would act as a conduit of information by providing part-time learners with clarity about institutional policies and by bridging informational gaps.

Recommendation nine: Online resource repository. Since many learners seek support from faculty and staff members, institutions should create a user-friendly online resource repository to house key baseline information for faculty members, staff members, and part-time students. This repository should store important dates, key contact information, and major academic policies. Part-time learners should be familiarized with this resource through college communications prior to starting school. This resource should be reinforced during orientation sessions and by faculty members during the first week of classes. Therefore, faculty and staff members should also be made well aware of this resource so that they are equipped to provide accurate and supportive information should learners approach them about their challenges.

Future Research

The groundwork has been set for future research into how the implementation of targeted intervention programs that seek to enhance the communal sense of belonging of part-time students affect actual retention rates. Further research should be conducted with a larger sample size and over a longer period to accurately capture changes in retention rates and in part-time learner attitudes and perceptions. Therefore, a mixed-method approach to gather both quantitative and qualitative data should be considered (Creswell, 2012). Further research would help to determine if gaining a sense of belonging significantly increases the retention rates of part-time learners, or if outside personal factors ultimately lead to their attrition. As a qualitative measure, one-on-one interviews with part-time learners should

be considered to further explore and understand their experiences. In addition, one-on-one interviews should be conducted with those who decide to withdraw during the course of the research to determine whether reasons for withdrawal were institutional-based or beyond the student's control. Furthermore, deeper exploration of part-time student affinity would help to uncover whether part-time students who decide to withdraw or stop out of their program are more likely to return to the institution if their loyalty to the school community had been established. Lastly, future research should be conducted to determine the impact that providing greater funding options for part-time learners might have on their retention, success, and affinity to the learning institution.

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