



How Community Colleges Meet Working Adult Learners' Needs

CCB DATA POINTS
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College class times and instructional modes tend to cater to full-time, traditional-age students despite an increasing interest among working adult learners to secure a college degree. New research reveals community colleges exceed universities in instructional delivery formats that working adult learners seek, helping to explain why community college baccalaureate (CCB) degrees are growing in the U.S.

College course scheduling and instructional formats impact whether adults pursue and finish a college degree. Many higher education institutions seek to increase the number of adults of age 25 and older, referred to as [non-traditional age students](#), but they fall short of achieving this goal. These [disconnected priorities](#) help explain the gap in enrollment and completion for older learners compared to traditional-age students, defined as students of age 18 to 24 years. A National Student Clearinghouse [study](#) shows that traditional-age students complete degrees at higher rates than older students at public four-year institutions (68.6 percent versus 56.3 percent, respectively). The completion rate at public community colleges is lower overall, but the gap between traditional-age and older students is much smaller, at 3.5 percent (44.5 percent versus 41.0 percent, respectively).

Numerous studies show class times and instructional modes matter to older working learners. A growing number of community colleges [nationwide](#) address these students' aspirations by opening the door to baccalaureates. Like community colleges generally, students pursuing CCB degrees are older, more racially diverse, and more likely to work and have dependents than traditional-age students. Flexible course schedules contribute to older students' decisions to pursue a bachelor's degree from a community college, according to recent [interviews](#) of CCB students and graduates.

Assessing the importance of college-going for older learners, a [recent survey](#) of 14,000 working-age adults shows these students see college as a "valuable, but obstructed path to great jobs and lives." The survey found nearly 60 percent of older learners without a college degree indicated "having control over the days and times that you need to take classes" was extremely or very important to their staying enrolled in college, slightly less than "getting a good job" (68 percent) and "the cost of the program" (66 percent). Having "greater flexibility in course delivery" and "desire/ability to finish program quickly" were very or moderately important to over 80 percent of adult learners who stopped out or never enrolled in college.

New Research on Times and Modes of Instruction in Illinois

To understand when and how community colleges and universities schedule instruction, an exploratory study¹ used "dyads" – a pair of higher education institutions consisting of a public community college and a public four-year institution – in Illinois that had a substantial number of students transferring, based on federal [dyad bachelor's completion rates](#). The study documented class times and instructional modes at six institutions (3 dyads) having some of the highest transfer bachelor's completion rates in the state. From these schools, courses in business/management, computer science, and engineering technology/integrated systems were selected because these programs are offered by community colleges at the baccalaureate level across numerous states, according to the [CCBA national inventory](#). Computer science and engineering technology are also the focus of [CCB research in Illinois](#) to understand what it could mean to authorize CCB degrees in the state.

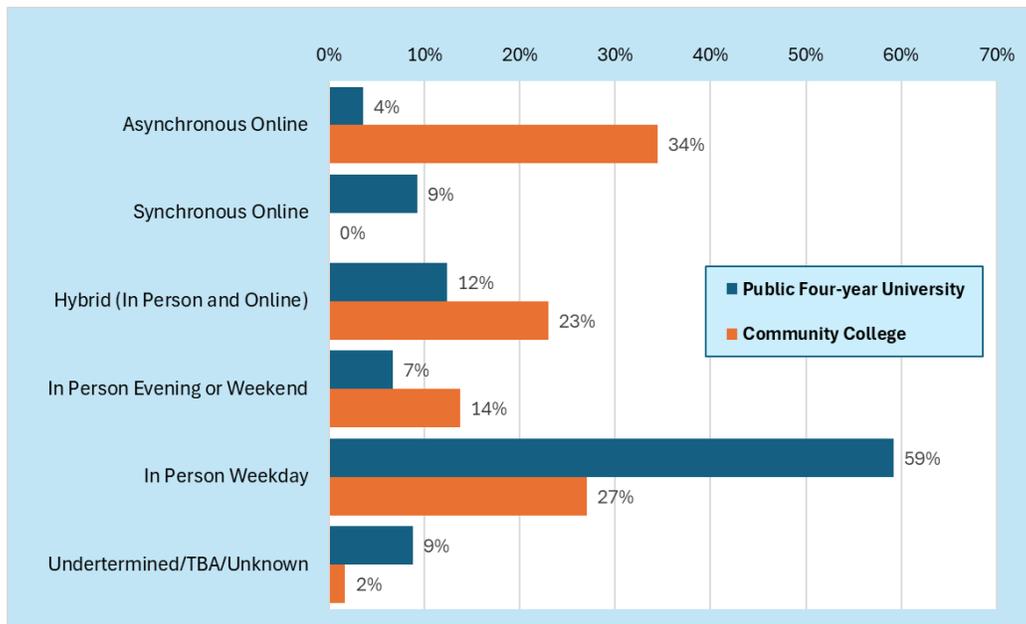
To conduct the research, class schedules for the Spring 2024 semester were accessed from the six college and university websites, then coded and analyzed. A total of 593 class sections were analyzed

¹ This *CCB Data Points No. 6* is based on a research brief authored by Harmon, T. (2024, June). [Don't quit your day job: Times and modes of instruction as a potential barrier to baccalaureate attainment for working students](#). Illinois Council of Community College Trustees (ICCCT) and Workforce Enterprise Services, Inc. Mr. Harmon thanks the ICCCT and Joyce Foundation for their generous funding of this work.

according to course name, section number, mode of instruction, day of the week, time of day, and location.

Results show substantial differences in the modes of instruction and times of in-person instruction between community colleges and universities (Figure 1). Importantly, in-person weekday classes comprised 59 percent of schedules offered by the three universities compared to 27 percent of schedules of the three community colleges. The proportion of synchronous online, hybrid (in-person and online), and in-person evening or weekend courses offered by community colleges exceeded the universities, ranging from a large 30 percentage point difference in asynchronous online and 7 percentage point difference in hybrid in favor of community colleges. Whereas neither type of institution relied on in-person evening or weekend classes to a great extent, community colleges were twice as likely as universities to do so (14 percent versus 7 percent, respectively).

Figure 1. Modes of Instruction and Times of In-Person Instruction Between Community Colleges and Universities



Results also revealed differences in modes and times of instruction across the three program areas. For example, 59 percent of computer science classes were offered by community colleges using an asynchronous online mode compared to only 2 percent of universities. Almost half of community college engineering technology class sections were offered in-person during the day, but 24 percent were offered in-person in the evening or weekends and 22 percent were delivered using a hybrid format. These results differ markedly from instructional modes used by university engineering technology programs, wherein 68 percent of classes were offered in-person during the day, and only 5 percent were offered in-person in the evening or weekend and 8 percent via hybrid.

Overall, large differences exist in the times and modes of instruction offered by selected Illinois community colleges and universities in program areas consistent with CCB degree conferral in numerous states authorizing these degrees. Replicating this study in more states with more community colleges and universities and a wider array of program areas could provide even more insight into instructional modalities used in higher education. Disentangling the role times and modes play in working adult learners' college-going, alongside other variables that can affect access and completion, such as proximity, cost, and selectivity, could provide additional insight for improving the college experience and outcomes for working adult learners, including students who pursue CCB degrees.

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