



Widening the Door to Higher Education

The continuing growth in the number of part-time students challenges old notions about time to degree.

Here is a modest proposal, and it's guaranteed to generate even more sensationalistic media coverage of higher education than we're currently subjected to. Let's eliminate part-time student enrollment. This will place all colleges and universities on a more level playing field. After all, 30 years ago, my university, Northeastern Illinois University, and many other regional public colleges and universities, enrolled primarily full-time students. These students were often the first in their families to attend college, they worked to earn spending money and they were mainly the sons and daughters of White ethnics. They graduated within four years and took jobs within the corporate sector, education and public service.

Today at NEIU, more than half of our approximately 12,000 undergraduates come from underrepresented groups — Hispanics, Blacks and Asians. Whites and Middle-Easterners comprise the remainder. We are one of the nation's top degree producers for Hispanics in the fields of education and computer science and in ethnic studies for African-Americans. These graduates go on to earn doctorates and teach all across the United States. But what is different about these students? They take longer to graduate because they are often poorer than their predecessors at NEIU. They also work more hours, support families and are generally older than the average student 30 years ago. These students say that paying for college is a worthwhile investment, but they must enroll part time.

Today's students, like those of the past, aspire to a better life, but rising expectations face off with ever shrinking resources in support of public higher education. There is an unwillingness in Illinois to provide the financial support to ensure student success. In fact, we can document outright hostility toward these aspirants.

The *New York Times* ran an article in September analyzing how long it takes students to earn a degree. The piece led with a recent effort, known as the Consortium Study, to analyze Chicago public high school graduates and their time to a university degree. This study assumes that students who graduate from Chicago public schools and who begin their college careers as full-

time students continue on as full-time students. In fact, many of these students become part-time because of financial needs and in response to family and employment obligations. The study fails to address the cost of higher education and the corresponding reason it takes longer for the working poor to earn a degree. After all, time to degree is a function of full- or part-time enrollment, and it's been well documented that first-generation and/or minority college students do not like to borrow money.

Many of our students aspire to study full time. We know this from surveys, letters and scholarship applications. But it is all about the ability to finance an education. If a full-time student drops to part-time status, that student is fortunate; he or she remains in the system. But fortune is fickle. Just less than half of our students are receiving any kind of financial aid; 32 percent qualify for federal aid by way of Pell Grants. Why? Because they are gainfully employed. But in many cases they are also supporting a family. Sometimes that family includes their own parents. We believe fervently in affordability at NEIU; we have the evidence to show that we are a leader in our state in holding down the cost of tuition. Even so, affordability for the working poor is just not enough. Without some form of aid, adding just one or two more courses is too much.

We know that some students will earn their bachelor's degree in seven or even 10 years. Thus far, NEIU permits students to

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enroll part time, but not every university does. We continue to believe that a four- to six-year time to degree is also worthy. However, time to degree will not be shortened when the financial aid gap is widening.

The continuing growth in the number of part-time students challenges old notions about time to degree and academic success. The part-time student is not respected; even worse, the value of his/her degree is questioned. What if another metric were in place for quality assessment? What if it were one that leveled the playing field between universities that attract students from the top 10 percent of family income and those that educate students from the lowest 50 percent of income. What if universities with high percentages of self-supporting students received recognition in the national press and not just alumni magazines? ■

— *Dr. Salme Harju Steinberg is president of Northeastern Illinois University.*