

The Impacts of Ontario's Part-time Funding Model on Colleges and Students

Laura Gallant, Sarah Brumwell, Ken Chatoor and Julia Colyar

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Phone: (416) 212-3893 | Fax: (416) 212-3899

Web: www.heqco.ca | E-mail: info@heqco.ca

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A key strength of Ontario's publicly assisted college system is the range of programming options available to learners. Studying part time is one of these options and part-time learners¹ comprise a significant proportion of total college enrolments. In 2022-23, 31% of domestic enrolments at Ontario colleges were part time (Statistics Canada, 2024). Interest in part-time college programming has increased since 2016.² Given the growing demand for part-time study, HEQCO investigated the current funding formula for part-time college enrolments, which is distinct from the formula used for fulltime enrolments. Funding for full-time enrolments is largely based on headcounts and estimated program costs, with enrolments in more expensive programs assigned higher funding. Funding for part-time activity is calculated using student contact hours (a unit representing one student enrolled in one required hour of instruction) and converted into funding units without direct reference to program costs. Through a review of application and enrolment trends and interviews with key contacts at Ontario colleges, HEQCO also examined the impact of Ontario's part-time funding model on institutions and students. Our analysis revealed that though demand for part-time learning opportunities is strong and growing, the Ministry's college funding model does not support part-time program development and limits students' access.

Concerns regarding Ontario's part-time college funding model have been raised for more than 30 years. A 1991 task force reviewed the model and identified a number of barriers to part-time learning, including the availability of support services and enrolment restrictions in higher cost programs (Task Force, 1991). More recently, the report of the Blue Ribbon Panel (Harrison, 2023) noted that funding for part-time enrolments "represents a disincentive for the colleges to accept part-time students. It is also at odds

⁴ A full-time student is "an individual who is enrolled in a college program of instruction for at least 70% of the student contact hours or 66 ¾% of the courses required for the program of instruction in a given semester or reporting period. A student granted advanced standing or an exemption from a course is not considered to be enrolled in the course" (MCURES, 2023, p.10).



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¹ In Ontario, a part-time college student is defined as an individual enrolled in one or more courses comprising less than 70% of student contact hours (a unit representing one student enrolled in one required hour of instruction) or 66 ⅔% of the required courses for a full-time program in a semester or reporting period, with some exceptions (Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security, 2022a). Students with disabilities who require reduced courseloads may be considered full-time students if they are registered in 40% or more of a full courseload.

² HEQCO analysis of OCAS data. See Appendix A, Tables A1 and A2.

³ In its September 2023 Letter of Direction (LOD), the Minister of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security requested that HEQCO evaluate the current part-time college funding formula. The LOD raised concerns regarding the differences between the full-time and part-time funding models that may lead to inequitable program opportunities and access challenges for Ontario students.

with the stated importance of continuous learning for workforce preparation and reskilling" (p. 24). Questions about enrolment disincentives are particularly pressing in the current environment, as colleges saw a 17% decrease in domestic enrolment between 2018-19 and 2022-23 (Statistics Canada, 2024) and new federal limits on study permits for international students have been implemented. Changes in part-time enrolment funding may provide postsecondary education (PSE) opportunities for more domestic learners across Ontario and can support colleges' program development and delivery.

Reported challenges with the part-time college funding model present obstacles to the growing population of part-time learners who seek upskilling and reskilling opportunities. Labour market shifts over the last 50 years motivated many Canadians to pursue part-time learning opportunities at colleges and universities for employment and career progression (Lee, 2017; Roemer, 2022). Part-time study is appealing to many learners because of its flexibility. Some students need to maintain their employment to go to school (Lee, 2017) or must balance family and caretaking responsibilities while also pursuing a postsecondary credential (Cummins et al., 2019; Kember & Leung, 2004; Lee, 2017; Lopez-Rabson & McCloy, 2013; Peters & Draughon, 2017). Students with disabilities often study part time because the schedule can be more flexible and allows students to set an academic pace that best suits their individual abilities and needs (Ontario Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

By continuing to investigate the challenges identified by the 1991 task force and the report of the Blue Ribbon Panel, this report explores the extent to which Ontario colleges can meet the needs of part-time learners. This report draws on interviews with college and university administrators and leaders, a review of available data and a scan of relevant policy documents. We provide a description of part-time learners, describe the current funding model and explore the model's impact on institutions and students.

Research Questions and Methodology

The following questions guided this study:

Who are the part-time college students and why do they study part time?



- How does the current funding model account for part-time student enrolments in college programs? How does the model compare to what is used for universities in Ontario?
- What are the impacts of the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security's (MCURES's) part-time funding model on colleges and students?

Three primary approaches were used for this research: an academic and policy-based literature review related to Ontario college and university funding models; 25 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, drawn from a sample balanced in institution size, type and geographic location; and quantitative analysis of available enrolment and applicant data.

Enrolment and gender data presented in this report were based on Statistics Canada (2024) data. Funding eligibility and age data were accessed from MCURES's Postsecondary Enrolment Sandbox on the Open SIMS data-sharing platform. Applicant and application data were acquired for individuals who applied via the Ontario College Application Service (OCAS)⁵ to at least one part-time program and/or to at least one full-time program on a part-time basis. Since OCAS processes applications for a subset of Ontario colleges, these numbers are likely an underestimate of actual part-time applicants and applications. HEQCO received the dataset from OCAS in Spring 2024. The applicant and application counts for 2024 were incomplete since OCAS accepts applications on a rolling basis throughout the year to accommodate the college sector's summer, fall and winter semester intakes. Data cleaning and basic descriptive analysis was conducted in Stata 18.

Institutional interviewees included current and former leaders, administrators, registrars, deans, researchers and program advisors. Two non-profit organizations representing Ontario colleges also provided important perspectives. Interviews were transcribed and then coded using NVivo software. Table 1 provides an overview of interviewee affiliations.

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⁵ OCAS is a not-for-profit organization focused on creating new pathways for applicants to explore and connect with Ontario's 24 public colleges, and on delivering tools and services that support college partners.

Table 1

Interviewee Profile Summary

Institution/Organization	Completed Interviews
College	19
University	4
Not-profit organization	2
Total	25

Note: This table presents the number of completed interviews by institution and organization type. All institutions and organizations were based in Ontario.

Part-time College Students in Ontario

The proportion of part-time learners across Ontario colleges has been relatively stable between 2018-19 and 2022-23. During this period, an average of 29% of domestic enrolments were part time (Statistics Canada, 2024),⁶ the majority of which (96%) were eligible for funding.⁷ By comparison, in the same period, only 11% of total international enrolments were part time (Statistics Canada, 2024).⁸ Part-time learners were almost exclusively domestic because in-study and post-graduate work permit rules for international students typically require full-time enrolment (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2025).

⁸ This is a five-year average from the 2018-19 to 2022-23 period. See Appendix A, Table A4.



⁶ See Appendix A, Table A3

⁷ See Appendix A, Table A5. Funding eligibility refers to whether institutions receive funding for enrolments through the core operating grant, whether those students are enrolled on a full-time or part-time basis. International students are typically considered funding ineligible. Part-time enrolments are funding ineligible in Board of Governors' programs, collaborative nursing programs, tuition-short programs, full-cost-recovery programs and other programs like dual credit programs and apprenticeship certificates. Full-time enrolments in Board of Governors' programs, collaborative nursing programs and full-cost-recovery programs are funding ineligible.

Part-time enrolment trends vary widely by institution. Some colleges experienced shrinking part-time enrolments between 2018-19 and 2022-23. These declines were most pronounced among Ontario's largest colleges, to whom the bulk of the total decline in part-time enrolments can be attributed. Three colleges, however, experienced increases over the same period, with their part-time enrolments growing by 5%, 8% and 21% respectively. These enrolment gains are less visible in province-wide statistics but reflect intentional institutional efforts to prioritize part-time study options.

Between 2018-19 and 2022-23, about 62% of part-time domestic students identified as women or gender diverse, and 38% identified as men (Statistics Canada, 2024). Part-time students also tended to be older. For example, between 2019-20 and 2023-24, do 67% of part-time domestic students were aged 25 and older. This trend differs slightly by gender. About 32% of male students each year consistently fell into the 20–24 age group, with another 59% each year belonging to the 25–34 and 35+ age groups (30% and 29% respectively). The majority (94%) of female and gender-diverse students were aged 20 or older, with about 72% over the age of 25 (32% on average aged 25–34, and 40% on average 35+). Students aged 19 or younger comprised the smallest proportion of part-time enrolments regardless of gender (about 6% for female and gender-diverse students, and about 9% for male students). This reinforces that most part-time students are not entering PSE directly from high school.

Information regarding field of study for part-time domestic college students in Ontario between 2018-19 and 2022-23 is limited. Each year, about half of these enrolments were classified as "other" or "unclassified" (Statistics Canada, 2024). An average of 40% of part-time learners were in business, humanities, health, arts, social science and

¹⁶ "Other" includes pre-technology education/pre-industrial arts programs; multidisciplinary/interdisciplinary studies, other; and high school/secondary diploma and certificate programs (Statistics Canada, 2024).



⁹ See Appendix A, Table A7. These are five-year averages, and these proportions remained relatively stable in this period.

¹⁰ Our analysis relied on a combination of data sources. We used the most current reference years that were available in March 2025. The sources have slightly different five-year reference periods: 2018-19 to 2022-23 (Statistics Canada, 2024) and 2019-20 to 2023-24 (MCURES Postsecondary Enrolment Sandbox, Open SIMS, 2025).

¹¹ See Appendix A, Table A6.

¹² See Appendix A, Table A8.

¹³ See Appendix A, Table A9.

¹⁴ See Appendix A, Tables A8 and A9.

¹⁵ See Appendix A, Table A10.

education (BHASE) programs. These BHASE enrolments were relatively stable in this period, with a slight decline (-3%) from 2018-19 to 2022-23. In the same period, an average of 8% of part-time learners were in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) programs. These STEM enrolments increased every year, apart from a 10% decrease in 2021-22. Overall, STEM enrolments increased by 18% between 2018-19 and 2022-23.

Applicants' interest in part-time study has increased since 2016:¹⁷ the number of part-time applicants through OCAS has trended upwards, growing from 2,131 in 2016 to 9,292 in 2023.¹⁸ Demographic detail for applicants aligns with enrolled student characteristics. Part-time college applicants tended to be older than the average full-time student: the median age of part-time applicants increased from 28 in 2016 to 31 in 2023.¹⁹ Part-time applicants were also primarily women, with about 76% of part-time applicants each year identifying as female.²⁰ Like the patterns among enrolled part-time students from 2018-19 to 2023-24 (MCURES Postsecondary Enrolment Sandbox, Open SIMS, 2025; Statistics Canada, 2024), college applicants were almost exclusively domestic.

Funded part-time students at Ontario colleges generally fall into three enrolment categories:

- Students who apply for and matriculate into part-time programs;
- students who are admitted into full-time programs but pursue their studies on a part-time basis,²¹ and

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¹⁷ "Unclassified" includes all programs without sufficient information to be classified within the primary groupings variant of the Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) Canada 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2024).

¹⁸ The timeframe for examining trends in part-time applicants is slightly different than the timeframe used for enrolments because of data availability. OCAS has data going back to 2016 and is included here. ¹⁹ The number of colleges using OCAS to handle part-time applications increased from 8 in 2016 to 17 in 2023 (See Appendix A, Table A1). Though the number of part-time applicants saw annual increases at the individual college level throughout this time, some colleges were more responsible for the total increase in part-time applicants than others; the colleges with the most part-time applicants in 2023 had 34%, 13% and 13% of total part-time applicants that year (n=9,292) (See Appendix A, Table A2). ²⁰ See Appendix A, Table A2.

²¹ Students with disabilities may be included in this category or may seek admission to part-time programs.

 students who are enrolled part time to re-take or complete final program requirements.

Overview of the Part-time Funding Model for Ontario Colleges

MCURES provides funding for public colleges through four grant programs: the enrolment-related Core Operating Grant (COG), performance grants, special purpose grants²² and capital grants (MCURES, 2022a). The majority of funding (84%) is distributed through the COG and the performance envelope. Performance funding is based on colleges meeting institutional-specific targets across ten metrics, as set out in 2020–25 Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs).²³

COG funding is based on eligible enrolments²⁴ expressed as Weighted Funding Units (WFUs). A single WFU has a fixed value determined annually by MCURES. The 2023-24 value of one WFU was \$4,150 (Harrison, 2023). Each eligible student enrolment generates a specific WFU value, depending on formula variables that attempt to approximate program length and delivery costs.²⁵ In 2023-24, a student enrolled in a one-year program in business, for example, generated 1.0 WFU, or \$4,150 in enrolment funding. A student in a two-year nursing program generated 3.2 WFUs or \$13,280. Each college's annual COG funding is determined using a three-year average of WFUs slipped two years (MCURES, 2022a).²⁶

²⁶ To add further stability to the funding model, MCURES has established an "enrolment corridor." WFUs are used to determine the midpoint of the corridor; actual enrolments may be above or below the midpoint in a given year (MCURES, 2022a).



²² MCURES provides special purpose grants to support first-generation students, Indigenous students, French-language programming, students with disabilities, Northern institutions, campus safety, health and human resources and other priorities.

²³ In 2023-24, 10% of funding was affected by performance metric changes; this was planned to increase to 25% in 2024-25. Increases in funding through the performance grant are accompanied by decreases in funding through the COG (and reduced Weighted Funding Unit values) (MCURES, 2022a).

²⁴ Eligible enrolments do not include international enrolments or cost-recovery program enrolments such as continuing education.

²⁵ Differences in college program delivery costs are outlined as Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology program weights.

WFUs reported to government for COG funding allocations include full-time and parttime enrolments. For full-time students, WFU values are calculated using four variables (MCURES, 2023):

- student program enrolments, measured in headcounts;²⁷
- program length (in years or hours), expressed as a funding factor;
- Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAAT) program weight;²⁸ and
- an additional 2.5% for applied degree programs.

Part-time college enrolments²⁹ are captured³⁰ with a complex formula³¹ that converts part-time enrolments to WFUs (MCURES, 2023). The conversion uses an average program weight rather than specific weights (as are used in the full-time formula). The formula to convert part-time enrolments to WFUs uses three variables:

- part-time student contact hours (or hours of instruction);
- conversion factors (used as denominators in the formula) intended to convert part-time contact hours to a full-time equivalent value:
 - 25% of student contact hours are converted using a denominator of 700,
 an estimated volume of contact hours associated with a full-time student

²⁷ The formula calls for headcounts to be converted to Full Time Equivalents (FTEs), which are calculated by multiplying the term duration by headcount and dividing this value by program duration, the result of which is multiplied by the funding unit (MCURES, 2023).

²⁸ College program weights are intended to reflect costs associated with class size, instructional setting (e.g., classroom, lab, field placement) and equipment requirements.

²⁹ Part-time students are defined as individuals "enrolled in one or more courses but in less than 70% of the student contact hours or 66 3/3% of the courses required for a full-time program of instruction in a given semester or reporting period" (MCURES, 2023). Colleges count part-time enrolments using one of two methods: counting part-time students registered for at least two-thirds of a course duration (in terms of weeks or contact hours, or according to date); or counting part-time students who remain registered to complete the course. Colleges are asked to choose one method and apply it consistently.

³⁰ Part-time college enrolments are not captured in regular enrolment reports but are included in the off-count report.

³¹ See Appendix B for further detail on the part-time funding model.

- 75% of student contact hours are converted using a denominator of 1,120³²; and
- Weighting factors used to reflect program delivery costs:
 - 24% of converted student contact hours are multiplied by a collegespecific average program weight.
 - 75% of converted student contact hours are multiplied by a systemaverage program weight.

Two aspects of the formula to convert part-time enrolments to WFUs result in lower program funding for part-time students. First, while the contact hours for full-time students are estimated at 700, the majority of part-time enrolments (75%) are converted to full-time student contact hours using a denominator of 1,120, which results in lower WFUs. Second, the formula relies on average program weights (institution specific and system wide) rather than weights that more accurately reflect the cost of individual program delivery. Most part-time student contact hours (75%) are weighted using a system average, which means that the associated funding is further distanced from actual program delivery costs.

This approach to capturing and funding part-time enrolments reflects historical practices related to colleges' programming. Until the early 1990s, part-time students generally studied at night,³³ and it was assumed that these learners did not need all of the services and supports that full-time (daytime) students required, such as disability services, career counselling or tutoring (Task Force, 1991). Calculating part-time activity using two different student contact hour conversion factors can be traced back to these assumptions. A recommendation of the 1991 Task Force on Funding of Part-time Activity was that 10% of part-time enrolments be funded at the same rate as full-time, which includes provision for support services, and 90% at a relative rate that would account for differences in non-teaching costs and costs per student contact hour. These

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³² This conversion factor reflects the assumption that the cost of delivering 1,120 hours of part-time activity is equivalent to the costs associated with delivering a one-year, full-time business program.
³³ Some of the distinctions between traditional programming and part-time activities are still in place today through continuing education faculties that generally operate as separate entities and often deliver non-MCURES-funded programs.

assumptions persist in the current model with an updated percentage split of 25/75 used as a proxy for estimating program delivery costs and student enrolment patterns.

Program delivery further shifted at Ontario colleges in the 2000s from a cohort-driven model to one that became more focused on student progression. Most ministry-funded programming was offered on a full-time, cohort basis, where students proceeded through required courses on a set schedule. When students failed to complete a particular program requirement successfully, their course progression fell out of sequence, precluding them from continuing with their peers according to the set schedule. These students often looked for opportunities to enrol part time to get back on track. With the cohort model, required courses may not have been available when students needed them, which could lead to students dropping out or stopping out. Colleges adapted their program delivery to be more flexible by adding online program options and more opportunities for part-time enrolments in full-time (daytime) programming.

The formula used in Ontario's university sector to determine funding for part-time students is distinct from the college model. University part-time enrolments are expressed as a proportion of a full courseload and used to capture Weighted Grant Units (WGUs), which include weights by program and level of study (MCURES, 2022b). If a student is enrolled in 60% of a full courseload, the grant associated with that student is 60% of the full-time value.³⁴ Using this approach, university part-time enrolments more directly capture the costs associated with program delivery, including non-teaching costs such as student supports.

Impacts of the Part-time Funding Model on Ontario Colleges

Interviews revealed four key impacts of the part-time funding model. Interviewees shared how the part-time funding model affects their colleges' part-time programming, resources and data infrastructure. They acknowledged the constraints their colleges

³⁴ The university funding formula also includes provisions for instruction and research activities (Snowdon, 2022).



face and described various ways that they strategize part-time study offerings and resource allocation.³⁵

Ontario's part-time college funding model disincentivizes the development of part-time programming and part-time enrolments.

Nearly all interviewees shared that their colleges are disincentivized to offer part-time programming or to provide part-time enrolments in full-time programs. Part-time programs are expensive to develop and administer; programming for part-time students requires built-in flexibility and course options, which are challenging to include in program design without robust funding. Interviewees noted that part-time programs generally lose money, as the costs for running them exceeds revenue from MCURES funding and tuition.

Interviewees also reported that it is not financially viable for their colleges to offer part-time enrolments in full-time programs since per-student funding for part-time students is heavily discounted. Colleges reserve their enrolment spaces for full-time students to maximize the available funding. In some cases, colleges may sometimes allow part-time enrolments in courses associated with full-time programs if they do not meet full-time enrolment targets. Under this approach, a student cannot be sure they can enroll as a part-time student throughout their studies, as their enrolment options depend on how many full-time students are enrolled. As a reflection of this prioritization, most interviewees indicated that their colleges' marketing and recruitment efforts are targeted to full-time students.

Interviewees explained that this affordability challenge is compounded for high-cost and high-demand programs. They described how they do not receive funding per part-time student commensurate with actual program costs. For example, a registrar reiterated how all programs, including those that are in demand and costly, are treated the same in the part-time funding model.

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³⁵ Interviews were conducted not long after the federal international study permit caps were established (March to May 2024). Program suspensions and cancellations and other cost reduction measures had not been implemented at this point in time.

Colleges have difficulty providing part-time-specific administrative resources.

Some interviewees shared that their colleges experience staffing shortages for part-time program administration. In some student-facing roles, interviewees explained that there are one or two staff members who oversee hundreds of part-time students from various programs. One program manager noted: "I have over 400 students studying part-time in the 27 programs I oversee. That's a huge number." Another college administrator in a similar situation reiterated that this is a significant human resource constraint that places a burden on administrators who do not have discipline expertise in every program area. In terms of personnel required for program development, a college administrator shared that their college does not have the human resources that full-time programs have, including access to instructional designers and specialists necessary for program creation and ongoing maintenance.

Data collection for part-time students is challenging and inconsistent, which limits colleges' understanding of part-time students and their pathways.

Ontario college representatives confirmed their colleges comply with annual off-count audit reporting to MCURES. However, beyond this requirement, part-time student data-collection procedures vary. Most interviewees expressed that outdated enrolment software makes counting and identifying part-time students and their pathways difficult. For example, a college representative described how their college's software is designed to track students who enter PSE directly from high school and who enrol and finish on time. Interviewees explained that it is very expensive to update this software, and the ability to afford this necessary upgrade is hampered by underfunding. Colleges often have to do manual workarounds to monitor part-time students, which produce idiosyncrasies across colleges.

Colleges also vary in their access to part-time applicant data. Interviewees shared that they acquire information on part-time applicants through OCAS data. However, some colleges do not process part-time students through OCAS, and some programs are not available on OCAS. Without part-time applicant information, institutions lack important demographic data as well as data regarding the demand for part-time programming.



Student satisfaction data collected directly from part-time students is also challenging to access and analyze. According to a registrar:

Satisfaction surveys are hard because students are in and out. Trying to separate full time and part time is hard. Students change status throughout a term and our systems are challenged to stay current. I think all of those things make it challenging to get at student experiences and satisfaction ... We often don't know a lot about students within short programs and studies. We don't have sophistication in our system to know everything about the complexities of students.

Part-time students' educational pathways are rarely linear; students navigate a variety of challenges as they work toward graduation. While these pathways are difficult to capture in the best of circumstances, colleges are further constrained in their work to understand student profiles, experiences and pathways because of outdated data infrastructure. In addition, standard key performance indicators for Ontario, including graduation and employment rates, do not disaggregate part-time and full-time students; publicly available enrolment data also focuses on full-time enrollees (for example, Ontario's Open Data catalogue). A sector-wide understanding of part-time student pathways and outcomes is challenging in this context.

Colleges have developed community-specific and collaborative approaches to part-time programming.

Despite the funding challenges associated with part-time enrolments, colleges are working to ensure opportunities for students. According to a registrar, "We're constantly looking for unique ways to develop part-time opportunities. The funding model doesn't always work well for that." Interviewees from northern colleges outlined the ways they develop and provide part-time study options that work best for the communities they serve. For example, a registrar explained that there is generally less competition for jobs in Northern Ontario, and that there are well-paying jobs in local industries. Because of this context, one- and two-year programs are popular among the populations they serve. They shared that their college consults with community members, employers and nearby postsecondary institutions to ensure that program offerings align with local community and labour market needs.



A senior administrator at a rural college explained that they have to find creative ways to meet the needs of nearby communities and part-time students. This college considers the demographic composition of local communities, such as those with aging populations, when developing part-time study options. Additionally, interviewees described the importance of offering flexible part-time options for small colleges in rural areas and larger colleges with satellite campuses outside urban centres.

Many colleges also leverage online learning to expand opportunities for students. Some interviewees from smaller colleges shared that they use OntarioLearn (OL) as a way to share costs with other institutions. OL is a consortium of 24 of Ontario's publicly assisted colleges and Indigenous institutes and supports institutions offering online, asynchronous courses (OntarioLearn, 2023). Institutions post their course content to OL's online platform, and OL facilitates the delivery of the courses. This facilitation, including learning platform and information technology support, helps to keep costs down for institutions and can be used to offer part-time enrolments. In another example, an interviewee from a medium-sized college explained that they leveraged their expansion of online learning into opportunities for part-time enrolments, as senior administrators and leadership saw an unmet demand for part-time study opportunities in their catchment area

Impacts of the Part-time Funding Model on Part-time Students

College representatives explained how the part-time funding model impacts part-time learners throughout the student lifecycle, from recruitment and registration to persistence and graduation. Interviewees also outlined the importance of a robust support system to ensure part-time students' academic and social success. Three key issues were identified in our discussions, as interviewees described how providing adequate supports for part-time learners is challenging given the underfunding associated with the model.



Inadequate funding leads to varied approaches to parttime registration, enrolment and administrative resource allocation, which presents navigational challenges for part-time students.

De-prioritization of part-time programming has led to idiosyncratic approaches to part-time student recruitment, registration and enrolment that can negatively impact students. Many colleges process part-time applications through OCAS, while others process applications through their institutional websites. A student seeking part-time learning opportunities cannot find comprehensive information through one portal; instead, they have to find information through multiple sites. Some institutions do not widely publicize available part-time offerings, so they are not easy to find even if students know to look for them.

Course registration procedures for part-time study also vary. Some colleges have course-based registration, while others use cohort- or block-based registration. Interviewees described how these different approaches create confusion for students and the college staff who serve them. In addition, some administrators shared how their colleges' registration systems are not user-friendly for prospective students or the registrar staff trying to assist them. In some cases, these systems cannot recognize or track part-time student status and require significant workarounds. Frustration and disorientation in registration is particularly concerning because it can occur as students transition from work or secondary school into the postsecondary environment — a point in the student's lifecycle when they are most at risk of dropping out (Finnie et al., 2012).

Part-time students can experience academic challenges involving persistence, course progression and completion.

Persistence is associated with students' ability to socially and academically integrate into PSE life (Brumwell & Pichette, 2024; Carter et al., 2020; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Interviewees shared that part-time students experience challenges with persisting in their programs. They discussed how some part-time students do not study continuously because of complex life circumstances that require leaves of absence. Interrupted



enrolment patterns can result in lower completion rates (Lee, 2017; McKinney et al., 2019).

College representatives described the importance of part-time students having regular touchpoints with program administrators to support student persistence and success. They explained how these touchpoints are particularly important for this student population, many of whom are mature learners who have not been in school for several years and may need additional navigational support. Some colleges do not have the funding necessary to maintain staffing levels needed for working with part-time students. A dean noted: "If there was an equalized funding model, we would have more advisors and coordinators. It's sorely missing. There's the student support part that's missing."

Challenges for part-time students are particularly acute when they are enrolled in cohorts that have been designed for full-time students, where learners typically progress through courses together and in sequential order. Part-time students may face course scheduling issues in a cohort model because of their restricted availabilities. Further, a college administrator noted that enrolment numbers can shape whether a course becomes available for a given term, which disproportionately affects part-time students. Course cancellations may not be announced until close to the start of the term, making student planning and scheduling — for academics, work or other responsibilities — difficult in this environment. Part-time students may have to wait another term or year to take required courses, which challenges persistence and delays graduation. All of these issues compound with the lack of support staff.

Not all interviewees reported concerns regarding part-time students' success. One interviewee explained that non-completion is more prevalent in online learning than among part-time learners. Others explained that although part-time students often take longer to progress through their programs, their completion rates are higher than full-time students. While research indicates that non-completion is experienced more frequently by mature students (Ryu, 2020), an interviewee reported high completion among mature students, many of whom study part-time. These comments illustrate part-time students' diverse academic experiences and outcomes.



The provision of academic, wellness and financial supports for part-time students is inconsistent across colleges.

Without adequate supports, part-time students often struggle with isolation or a lack of belonging (Lee, 2017). This may be exacerbated when part-time students participate in full-time cohorts: one registrar described that part-time students often experience "outsider syndrome." Part-time students may also have fewer opportunities to participate in on-campus activities or access supports because of non-academic responsibilities (Borovilos, 2015; Hunt & Loxley, 2021; Jamalof et al., 2022; Lee, 2017). Interviewees noted the importance of connection and engagement to students' success. Current funding and staffing levels serve as a barrier to providing robust student supports.

Supports available for part-time students varied across colleges.³⁶ Some interviewees described how their colleges provide the same access to supports for all students, while others explained that part-time students do not have access to certain supports, such as tutoring, counselling and bus passes. Support gaps are problematic in concert with academic and social challenges among part-time students. A senior administrator emphasized the need for enhanced wraparound and navigational supports for part-time students. Because the model is designed to support full-time enrollees, part-time students may not have access to the resources they need to support their wellness and well-being. Interviewees also shared that part-time students are not always aware of the resources available to them. In other cases, student supports are only available during traditional operating hours, which may not align with part-time student availabilities.

College representatives also raised concerns regarding differences in financial aid for full-time and part-time students. A registrar explained how bursaries and grants are primarily designed for full-time students at their college, which presents a barrier for part-time students seeking financial assistance. Interviewees also commonly spoke about the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) and other funding sources — including the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, band sponsorship or employers

³⁶ Part-time students do not always have access to the same supports and services as full-time students due to colleges' varied approaches to ancillary fee payments and part-time students.



— that students increasingly rely on to fund their PSE. Many funding sources require students to have full-time courseloads. Interviewees noted that some full-time students who receive OSAP struggle to keep up with full-time courseloads but are hesitant to become part-time students because it reduces the amount of OSAP funding students receive. Interviewees noted that for many students, OSAP for part-time enrolment does not provide adequate support.

In addition to institutional and provincial financial support options, the federal government announced a new Canada Pension Plan (CPP) benefit for part-time students "whose parents are disabled or deceased and contributed to the CPP" (Employment and Social Development Canada [ESDC], 2025). This benefit took effect on January 1, 2025, and eligible part-time students aged 18 to 24 will receive \$150.89 monthly (ESDC, 2025). Acknowledging that many part-time students are also caretakers, ESDC's (2025) announcement highlights an effort to offset rising living costs for part-time students balancing academic and family responsibilities.

Discussion

Underfunding associated with the college part-time funding model is clear in the model itself through the student contact hour conversion factors and the non-program-specific weights used in calculating WFUs. It is also evident from interviewees' discussions of their operations, programming and student opportunities. At many colleges, part-time enrolment and programming cannot be a priority. Part-time opportunities are available only in relation to full-time enrolment demand, particularly for high-cost and high-demand programs. In these cases, colleges are not planning for part-time learning; rather, they are carving out spaces for students as part of a losing proposition. These opportunities are important for supporting access to lifelong learning across Ontario's PSE system, and application trends show a clear demand for more of them.

Colleges have worked to provide part-time opportunities for students despite the constraints of the funding model. They recognize the need for part-time options among domestic students, and they recognize part-time learners as a potential revenue stream. Some have been very successful. Because colleges have different capacities to offer part-time programming and enrolments, opportunities across the province are uneven. Some of the growth in part-time offerings occurred during the period of expanded international enrolments and revenues at Ontario colleges. With new limits on



international study permits, many colleges are experiencing significant financial challenges, resulting in program closures and suspensions. In this environment, colleges are further constrained in developing part-time programming and offering part-time enrolments.

Where colleges can offer part-time enrolments, they are not necessarily able to provide the full suite of supports and services students need to persist and graduate. The funding model for full-time enrolments includes provisions for non-teaching costs, but the part-time model only partially accounts for these costs. Concerns regarding the equitable provision of student supports are not new. The 1991 task force report, Funding for Part-Time Activity in Ontario's Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, highlighted this issue and noted that "the support services required by part-time students should be provided on par with those made available to full-time students" (Task Force, 1991, p. 2). Changes to the model since the 1991 report have helped address some of the concerns raised by the task force, but inequities in part-time student supports and services continue.

Funding constraints are also evident in the uneven and incomplete data collection related to part-time students. Graduation and labour market outcomes for part-time students across the province are not available. This means that policymakers and researchers do not have a clear understanding of student outcomes for nearly a third of college attendees. Comprehensive, longitudinal data is essential as the PSE landscape shifts alongside students' program choices, program delivery and the skills or credentials needed for the labour market.

The variety of approaches to part-time programming and enrolments across the province reflect differences in institutional priorities, strategies, geographic locations and overall program mix. Interviewees noted that while part-time funding is inadequate in covering program delivery costs, the current model is well understood and has been used to guide strategic decisions, despite that these have often not been in favour of emphasizing part-time study. Interviewees highlighted the risks associated with changes to the model without a Ministry commitment to increased funding levels. For these college leaders, the known constraints of the model offer stability, which is essential in the context of an ongoing tuition freeze, decreases in domestic enrolment and limits on international study permits.



Conclusion

Part-time programming across Ontario colleges offers a crucial pathway for students to upskill or reskill to advance in their current profession, learn at a pace that meets their needs or participate in PSE in a manner that works with their household obligations and financial realities. Domestic part-time enrolments have been relatively stable across Ontario since 2018-19, but divergent enrolment patterns, with increases at some colleges and decreases at others, mirror the variety of approaches colleges have taken to provide access for these students.

The funding model does not support the development of part-time programming nor account for the full costs of providing high-quality learning experiences. A funding model that provides cost-based funding for part-time programming and enrolments would benefit students, institutions and government. Students could have access to a broader range of PSE opportunities in Ontario with the resources that can support their educational ambitions and their transitions into the labour market. Those already in the labour market could have better opportunities to upskill, reskill or switch careers while balancing existing work and personal responsibilities. An equitable funding model could ensure that colleges have the resources they need to develop in-demand programs and tap into a growing part-time applicant pool. Expanded part-time studies could also effectively support government priorities regarding upskilling to meet labour market gaps.

Despite the constraints of the current funding model, systemic, disruptive change without significant investment would present logistical and operational challenges for Ontario's colleges. This disruption could exacerbate existing frustrations for students and administrators. With this in mind, we offer the following recommendations:

Support Ontario colleges in collecting and reporting enrolment and outcomes
data for part-time students. Individual colleges have varied approaches and
infrastructure capacity to collect and report part-time student data. Government
can provide funding for infrastructure upgrades and can work closely with college
leadership to develop, cost and fund new reporting standards. Better access to
data can help government and the sector enhance student opportunities and
pathways.



- Gather input from part-time learners in Ontario colleges to understand their motivations for accessing part-time PSE. For example, government can partner with OCAS to add relevant questions to their annual Applicant Experience Survey.
- Engage a table of college leaders and sector experts³⁷ to explore options for a
 new funding model. In January 2025, Colleges Ontario raised the issue of the
 need to modernize the part-time college funding model (Colleges Ontario, 2025).
 An important part of this effort would be a cost study for part-time program
 delivery, including non-teaching costs. An expert table could also model costs
 associated with converting the college part-time funding model.
- Given MCURES's intention to review the PSE funding model as a whole in the next two years, the timing is right to review part-time funding in the context of broader change. The recommendations above can be incorporated into MCURES's planned processes.

Implementing a new approach to funding part-time learning at Ontario colleges will be a significant challenge and will require new investments. These investments, however, will support government priorities for flexible learning opportunities aimed at upskilling to meet labour market needs. Ultimately, this work can strengthen Ontario's PSE system and improve student access and success.

³⁷ The Colleges Ontario Heads of Continuing Education Committee may be a useful resource to government.



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Appendix

The Impacts of Ontario's Part-time Funding Model on Colleges and Students

Appendix A: Application and Enrolment Trends

Table A1Part-time OCAS Applications, 2016–2023

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Total part- time OCAS applications	2,491	2,630	2,836	4,220	8,657	11,072	12,053	12,627	56,586
Year-over- year change in total part- time applications		5.6%	7.8%	48.8%	105.1%	27.9%	8.9%	4.8%	
Number of colleges using OCAS for part-time applications	8	9	13	14	15	15	18	17	

Source: OCAS, 2024

Notes: This table includes all part-time applications submitted by the applicants in the sample, who applied via OCAS to at least one part-time program and/or to at least one full-time program on a part-time basis. Applicants may apply to up to six different programs in an application cycle. OCAS handles applications for only a subset of Ontario's publicly assisted colleges, so these figures likely represent an undercounting of Ontario's part-time college applications.

Table A2Part-time OCAS Applicant Characteristics, 2016–2023

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Distinct part-time applicants	2,131	2,192	2,391	3,514	6,790	8,792	9,329	9,292	44,431
% Indirect	87.4%	89%	91.8%	91.1%	92.4%	91.4%	91.1%	92%	91.3%
% Female, other	76%	75.9%	76.6%	75.2%	78.1%	76.7%	74.7%	75.8%	76.2%
% Aged 25+	54.7%	55.2%	58%	58.7%	65%	66.8%	67%	69.1%	64.6%

Source: OCAS, 2024.

Notes: These individuals applied via OCAS to at least one part-time program and/or to at least one full-time program on a part-time basis. OCAS handles applications for only a subset of Ontario's publicly assisted colleges, so these figures likely represent an undercounting of Ontario's part-time college applicant population. The "other" gender category includes applicants who did not report their gender or reported a non-binary gender. This group was combined with the "female" gender category due to small cell sizes to prevent accidental disclosure.

Table A3Ontario College Domestic Enrolment Proportions by Registration Status, 2018-19–2022-23

Registration Status	2018- 19	2019- 20	2020- 21	2021– 22	2022- 23	5-Year Average
Full-time	72.2%	72.0%	70.9%	68.9%	69.3%	70.7%
Part-time	27.8%	28.0%	29.1%	31.1%	30.7%	29.3%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Statistics Canada, 2024.

Notes: This table displays Ontario domestic college part-time enrolment proportions for the academic years 2018-19 to 2022-23 inclusive. The five-year average proportions for both categories are included. The following International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) filters were selected: "Post-secondary non-tertiary education"; "Short-cycle tertiary education"; "Bachelor's or equivalent"; and "Not applicable."

Table A4Ontario College International Enrolment Proportions by Registration Status, 2018-19–2022-23

Registration Status	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021– 22	2022-23	5-Year Average
Full-time	86.1%	86.7%	88.6%	91.6%	92.9%	89.2%
Part-time	13.9%	13.3%	11.4%	8.4%	7.1%	10.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Statistics Canada, 2024.

Notes: This table displays Ontario international college part-time enrolment proportions for the academic years 2018-19 to 2022-23 inclusive. The five-year average proportions for both categories are included. The following International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) filters were selected: "Post-secondary non-tertiary education"; "Short-cycle tertiary education"; "Bachelor's or equivalent"; and "Not applicable."



Table A5

Ontario College Part-time Domestic Headcount Proportions by Funding Eligibility, 2019-2023-24

Funding Eligibility	2019- 20	2020-21	2021- 22	2022- 23	2023- 24	5-Year Average
Funding eligible	97.3%	96.0%	95.9%	96.0%	97.0%	96.4%
Funding ineligible	2.7%	4.0%	4.1%	4.0%	3.0%	3.6%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: MCURES Postsecondary Enrolment Sandbox (Audited Data, March 4, 2025 Update), Open SIMS.

Notes: This table displays Ontario domestic college part-time headcount proportions by funding eligibility for the fiscal years 2019-20 to 2023-24 inclusive. The five-year average proportions for both categories are included. For the "Funding eligible" category, the following filters for "Part-Time" registration were applied: "Funding Eligible FT Program" and "In a Course which has PT Activity Number." For the "Funding ineligible" category, the following filters for "Part-Time" registration were applied: "Board of Governors"; "Collaborative Nursing"; "Full Cost Recovery"; and "Tuition Short." For the "Immigration Status" filter, all types of "Domestic" were selected ("Coop," "Eligible" and "Other").

Table A6

Ontario Part-time Funding Eligible Domestic Headcount Proportions by Age Group, 2019-20–2023-24

Age Group	2019- 20	2020- 21	2021- 22	2022- 23	2023- 24	5-Year Average
0–19	6.7%	6.4%	6.3%	7.4%	8.2%	7.0%
20–24	26.7%	27.2%	25.8%	25.4%	26.0%	26.2%
25–34	31.3%	32.4%	31.8%	31.2%	30.1%	31.4%
35+	35.3%	34.0%	36.0%	36.1%	35.8%	35.4%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: MCURES Postsecondary Enrolment Sandbox (Audited Data, March 4, 2025 Update), Open SIMS.

Notes: This table displays Ontario domestic college funding-eligible part-time headcount proportions by age group for the fiscal years 2019-20 to 2023-24 inclusive. The five-year average proportions for each category are included. The following filters for "Part-Time" registration were applied: "Funding Eligible FT Program" and "In a Course which has



PT Activity Number." For the "Immigration Status" filter, all types of "Domestic" were selected ("Coop," "Eligible" and "Other").

Table A7Ontario College Part-time Domestic Enrolment Proportions by Gender, 2018-19–2022-23

Gender	2018-	2019-	2020-	2021-	2022-	5-Year
	19	20	21	22	23	Average
Man	39.2 %	38.6 %	36.5 %	36.4 %	38.3 %	37.8%
Woman and Gender	60.8	61.4	63.5	63.6	61.7	62.2%
unknown	%	%	%	%	%	
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Statistics Canada, 2024.

Notes: This table displays Ontario domestic college part-time enrolment proportions by gender for the academic years 2018-19 to 2022-23 inclusive. The five-year average proportions for both categories are included. As of October 2021, Statistics Canada has three gender categories: Man, woman and non-binary person. However, for this table, Statistics Canada (2024) notes that "due to low counts, the 'Non-binary person' category has been rolled into 'Gender unknown' for the purposes of dissemination." Due to low cell sizes of "Gender unknown," this table further combined "Woman" and "Gender unknown" to prevent accidental disclosure. The following International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) filters were selected: "Post-secondary non-tertiary education"; "Short-cycle tertiary education"; "Bachelor's or equivalent"; and "Not applicable."

Table A8

Ontario College Part-time Funding Eligible Domestic Male Headcount Proportions by Age Group, 2019-20–2023-24

Age Group	Gender	2019- 20	2020- 21	2021- 22	2022- 23	2023- 24	5-Year Average
0–19	Male	8.2%	8.2%	7.7%	9.3%	10.1 %	8.7%
20–24	Male	32.0 %	33.7 %	32.7 %	31.6 %	31.9 %	32.4%
25–34	Male	29.7 %	30.3 %	30.3 %	30.0 %	29.3 %	29.9%



35+	Male	30.1 %	27.8 %	29.2 %	29.1 %	28.7 %	29.0%
Total		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: MCURES Postsecondary Enrolment Sandbox (Audited Data, March 4, 2025 Update), Open SIMS.

Notes: While Statistics Canada uses "man," "woman" and "gender unknown" as gender categories, MCURES uses "male," "female," "another" and "undisclosed" categories. This table displays Ontario domestic college funding-eligible part-time headcount proportions by age group and the "male" gender category for the fiscal years 2019-20 to 2023-24 inclusive. The five-year average proportions for each category are included. The following filters for "Part-Time" registration were applied: "Funding Eligible FT Program" and "In a Course which has PT Activity Number." For the "Immigration Status" filter, all types of "Domestic" were selected ("Coop," "Eligible" and "Other").

Table A9

Ontario College Part-time Funding Eligible Domestic Female and Gender-diverse Headcount Proportions by Age Group, 2019-20–2023-24

Age Group	Gender	2019- 20	2020-	2021-	2022-	2023- 24	5-Year Averag e
0–19	Female, Another, Undisclose d	5.8%	5.3%	5.5%	6.2%	6.9%	5.9%
20–24	Female, Another, Undisclose d	23.1 %	23.3	21.8 %	21.4 %	22.0 %	22.3%
25–34	Female, Another, Undisclose d	32.3 %	33.7 %	32.7 %	31.9 %	30.6 %	32.2%
35+	Female, Another, Undisclose d	38.8 %	37.7 %	40.0 %	40.5 %	40.5 %	39.5%
Total		100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: MCURES Postsecondary Enrolment Sandbox (Audited Data, March 4, 2025 Update), Open SIMS.

Notes: This table displays domestic college funding-eligible part-time headcount proportions by age group and the "female," "another" and "undisclosed" gender categories for the fiscal years 2019-20 to 2023-24 inclusive. "Another"



and "undisclosed" genders had small cell sizes and were grouped with "female" to prevent accidental disclosure. The five-year average proportions for each category are included. The following filters for "Part-Time" registration were applied: "Funding Eligible FT Program" and "In a Course which has PT Activity Number." For the "Immigration Status" filter, all types of "Domestic" were selected ("Coop," "Eligible" and "Other"). Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Table A10

Ontario Part-time Domestic College Enrolment Proportions by Field of Study 2018-19–2022-23

Field of Study	2018- 19	2019- 20	2020- 21	2021- 22	2022- 23	5-Year Average
BHASE	37.3%	37.4%	42.9%	40.4%	39.6%	39.5%
STEM	6.9%	8.5%	8.9%	7.7%	8.9%	8.2%
Other	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%	0.5%	0.2%
Unclassified	55.6%	53.9%	48.0%	51.8%	51.0%	52.1%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Statistics Canada, 2024.

Notes: This table displays Ontario domestic college field of study proportions for part-time enrolments for the academic years 2018-19 to 2022-23 inclusive. Enrolments are based on students enrolled at the time of the fall snapshot date (between September 30 and December 1). Students not enrolled at the time of the snapshot date are excluded, which impacts college students to a greater extent because colleges have a continuous intake of students and shorter programs (Statistics Canada, 2024). Enrolments are based on program counts and not student counts. If a student is enrolled in more than one program at the snapshot date, then all of their programs are included in the count (Statistics Canada, 2024). The five-year average proportions for each category are included. The following International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) filters were selected: "Post-secondary non-tertiary education"; "Short-cycle tertiary education"; "Bachelor's or equivalent"; and "Not applicable." Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.



Appendix B: Formulae for Calculating Fulltime and Part-time College Weighted Funding Units

Full-time	Part-time
$WFU_{FT} = FTE_{FT} \times WT \times (AD)$ Where:	$WFU_{PT} = \frac{0.25 \times SCH}{700} \times Implicit WT \\ + \frac{0.75 \times SCH}{1,120} \times 1.1$ Where: SCH = student contact hour, a unit representing one student enrolled in one required hour of instruction. Implicit Weight (WT) = the ratio of full-time WFU to full-time FTE calculated for each college $\left(\frac{\Sigma WFU_{FT}}{\Sigma FTE_{FT}}\right)$

Source: MCURES, 2023.



Appendix C: Interview Data Tables

The tables below provide an overview of findings from interviews with sector representatives. Reference count refers to the number of times the descriptions in the first column appeared in the interview transcripts overall. Case count refers to the number of interviews in which these descriptions appeared.

Table C1Reference and Case Counts for the Research Question: "Who are part-time students and why do they study part time?"

	Reference Count	Case Count
Accessibility	95	16
Modality options	40	11
Employment	28	14
Skills training	28	14
Career advancement	20	10
Family responsibilities	16	10
Has dependents	13	9
Increased part-time enrolments	9	7
Affordability	9	7
Increased demand for part-time enrolments	8	6
Career changes	8	6
Scheduling flexibility	7	7
Domestic students	6	5
Changes over time for domestic students	5	4



Students with disabilities	5	4
International students	3	3
Caregiving	1	1

Source: HEQCO interviews with Ontario college representatives, n=19.

Table C2Reference and Case Counts for the Research Question: "What are the impacts of MCURES's part-time funding model on colleges?"

	Reference Count	Case Count
Part-time program development	29	16
Part-time offerings and strategy	24	17
Staffing resources	21	10
Part-time students in full-time programs	19	14
Marketing and recruitment	18	11
Data infrastructure	14	8
High-demand or high-cost programs	13	7
Standalone part-time programs	7	6

Source: HEQCO interviews with Ontario college representatives, n-19.



Table C3Reference and Case Counts for the Research Question: "What are the impacts of MCURES's part-time funding model on students?"

	Reference Count	Case Count
Program administration	38	15
Course progression	23	12
Completion	15	10
Limited service access	15	9
Financial aid access	15	8
Persistence	13	9
Enrolment and registration issues	12	9
Supports and services (same as full-time students)	12	11
Ancillary fee payment (not the same as full-time students)	10	9
Supports and services (not the same as full-time students)	6	5
Awareness and use of services	6	5
Isolation and lack of community	5	4
Ancillary fee payment (same as full-time students)	5	5

Source: HEQCO interviews with Ontario college representatives, n=19.

