COMMUNITY INSIGHTS

Emerging Benchmarks & Student Success Trends From Across The Civitas

CIVITAS
LEARNING®

PART-TIME STUDENTS MATTER

"15 to Finish" can be a heavy lift for the 80% of today's American college students who most likely are juggling work, family, and other responsibilities while trying to pursue their educational goals. The realities of today's students' lives and the increasing costs of higher education often move the finish line of completion further and further into the future.

Today, dozens of states support the idea that the most effective way for students to graduate from college is to carry 15 credit hours per semester. There is research that suggests that taking 30 credits each year is the fastest way to a degree, saving students money and time.

In the rush to "15 to Finish," we need to be careful that we do not set up a situation where more students are doomed to fail and drop out, rather than move toward achieving their goals.

At community colleges, an estimated 62% of students are pursuing their studies on a part-time basis, for financial or personal reasons. For those 6.5 million students, too many of whom never graduate, colleges must be prepared to have more expansive and nuanced conversations about completion. If our collective goal is to improve outcomes across higher education, we cannot and must not take our attention away from those students.

Karen Stout, Ed.D.
President & CEO, Achieving the Dream

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS

Welcome to the third issue of the Civitas Learning Community Insights Report. With these reports our intention is to illuminate unique insights and emerging trends from across our partner community, while highlighting examples of how institutions are acting on them to improve their students' success.

In this report we focus on better understanding the current state and potential for enhanced support for part-time students, many of whom tend to be nontraditional or post-traditional students and are a population that's growing in size and importance across higher education. Their size and complexity notwithstanding, part-time students are often either seen as a problem to solve — e.g., "how do we get them to go full time?" — or an afterthought in reporting. They are all but invisible in some graduation rate calculations and even in pathway formulations. This all-too-common orientation can lead to assumptions about these students' intentions, life situations, and likelihood of traversing the higher education pathway. This report is intended to shine a brighter light on these issues and perhaps challenge our assumptions as to our success strategies with part-time students and their potential to finish what they start.

The findings are based on data from a subset of our 300+ partner institutions: 60 institutions (30 community colleges and 30 4-year universities) representing nearly 1.4 million degree-seeking students.

Given the lack of data on part-time students across most of higher education, it is exciting to bring forth two new, cross-cutting insights. The first provides a view into the difference in persistence rates among students who take differing numbers of courses within a term. The second reflects on the gap in the persistence rates for part-time versus full time students across different types of institutions — and how some institutions with similar performance rates for full-time and part-time students are providing targeted and meaningful support to keep all students on path to a credential.

15 TO FINISH, OR ONE MORE COURSE?

What The Data Are Saying:
Persistence may be increased with increased course load for *some* students

When analyzing the data, we reviewed persistence rates for students according to the number of course sections attempted over a historical academic year, which is typically one calendar year. We then examined the difference in persistence rates between students who on average attempted between one and six sections per term.

On average, students were attempting 3.6 courses (or sections) per term across all institutions. The picture is different across institution types, with students at 2-year institutions attempting three courses per term and four courses being attempted at 4-years. At community colleges the two largest course-taking groups are those taking two or three courses, representing 60.75% of the population. Approximately one in four students enroll full-time or take four or more courses at community colleges. At 4-year and research institutions, the two largest groups are those taking four or five courses. This data are congruent with the findings that an average of 60% of students at the 2-year institutions were part-time compared to 23% of students at 4-year institutions.

Here is a breakdown of course sections attempted for all institutions and according to institution type.
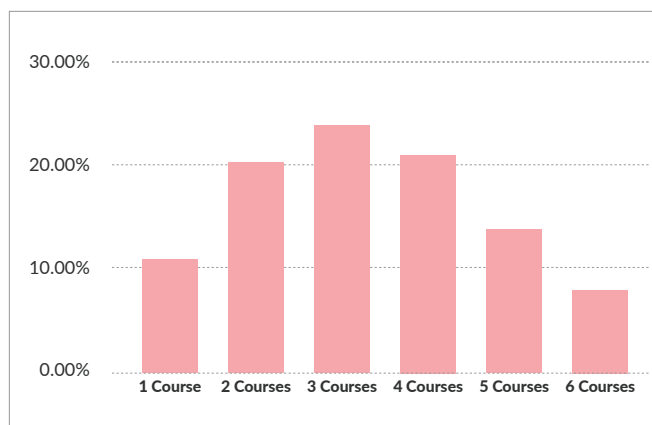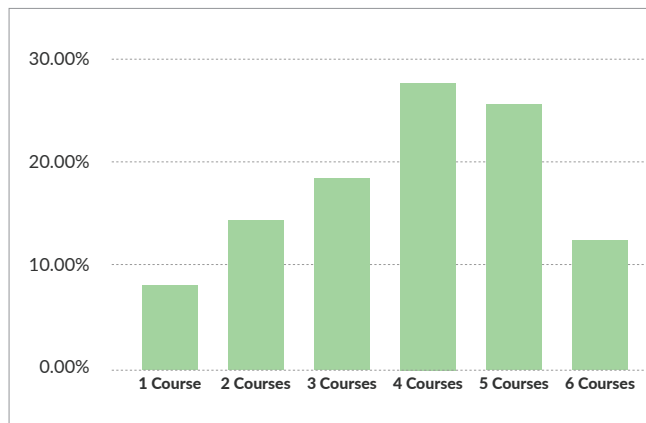
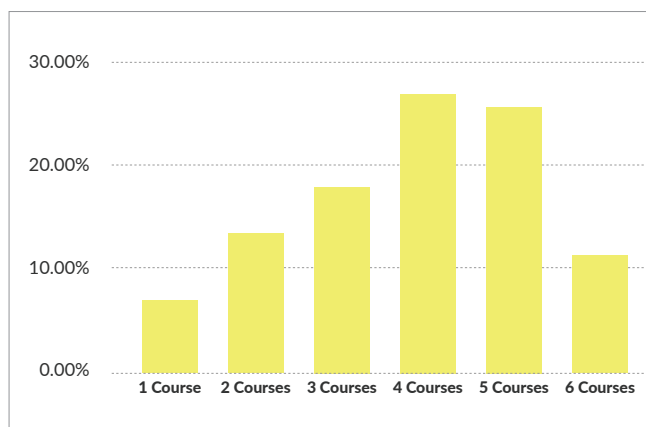**Figure 1.2:** *Analysis of sections (courses) attempted across Research institutions (N=18).*

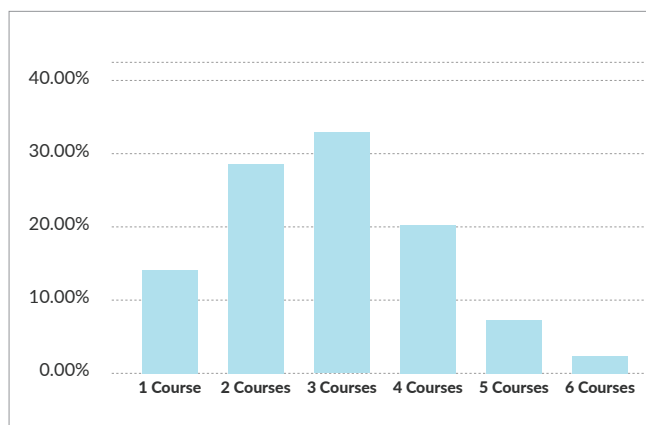**Figure 1.3:** *Analysis of sections (courses) attempted across 4-year institutions (N=23).*

Figure 1.1: *Analysis of sections (courses) attempted across all institution types (N=57).*

Figure 1.4: *Analysis of sections (courses) attempted across community colleges (N=34).*

15 TO FINISH, OR ONE MORE COURSE?

As we examined persistence rates across all institutions based on number of courses attempted, we saw persistence improve for students incrementally taking more courses. The most significant difference in persistence rates was seen between students taking one course and those taking two.
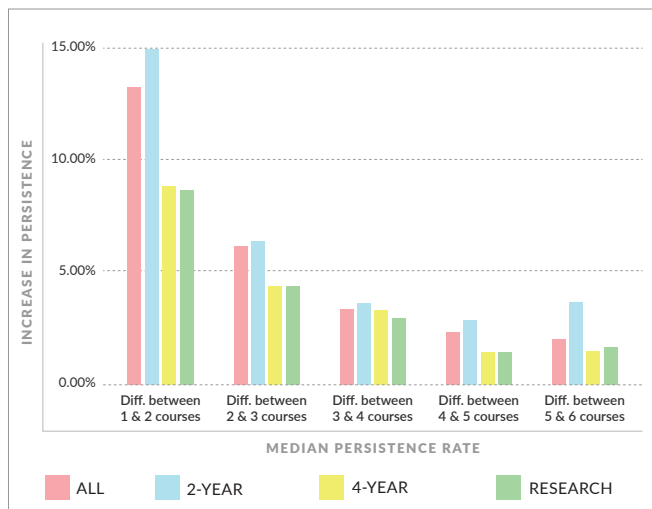

Figure 2: *Differences in persistence rates between number of sections attempted, according to institution type.*

While the largest lift in median persistence was seen for students taking two courses over those taking only one, a notable increase in the median persistence rate (6.10 percentage points) was also seen between students who took three courses versus two courses. Smaller lifts of about 2-3 percentage points were found for students taking three versus four, four to five, and five to six. While the data show continued improvements occur with each course addition, it's worth noting that students who take four versus six courses may be different types of students with different non-academic obligations.

Although the data show that there is continued, but declining, value in an increased course load, adding even one more course will not be a reality for all students. The assumption that some students are not taking enough courses is why they're not finishing is likely confounded by correlation to causation.

Capitalizing on this opportunity will rely on knowing *which* students have a strong probability of finishing, and then determining the right nudge that considers their particular life and logistics.

As the largest increase in median persistence (14.91 percentage points) was seen between community college students taking one course per term versus those taking two, there is an increased opportunity for community colleges to take a look at their student population and determine whether there are part-time students that could benefit from taking additional courses. For instance, are there high GPA students with high persistence probability scores who are close to finishing their degree? Are there students who have not completed the FAFSA and may be unaware of additional financial resources available to help them focus more on school?

It's important to remember that part-time students can vary greatly in their strengths in the classroom and the logistical challenges they face in life. The key to better serving this population is to understand those differences and make realistic recommendations to the right students. Moreover, high school dual-enrollment students are likely to confound some analyses, particularly in community colleges. (Note: They were excluded from this analysis.) Shining a brighter light on who these part-time students are will certainly make outreach strategies more precise.

While well-intended in theory, campaigns like 15-to-Finish are likely an ineffective recommendation for all students, because they disregard the individual circumstances and realities of our diverse array of students, especially those who are part-time. Some students might benefit from a faster path to a degree, while others might benefit from maintaining a lighter schedule. Education is not one-size-fits-all. This insight, coupled with persistence probability scores, can empower institutions to have an even more informed conversation about their students' needs and how they might best navigate their educational journeys.

15 TO FINISH, OR ONE MORE COURSE?

SOUTH TEXAS COLLEGE

Partner Insight:

In late Spring 2017, South Texas College (STC), where nearly two-thirds of students attend part-time, found this trend held true for their student population. Students who enrolled in one course had a persistence rate of 68.7%, while students who enrolled in two courses (or 5.69 credit hours) showed an improved persistence rate of 76.1%.

Previously, STC focused outreach on encouraging part-time students to become full-time students — or for full-time students to enroll in 15 credit hours, or five courses. According to STC, there was clearly a larger opportunity for impacting persistence (7.4 percentage point increase) by encouraging the right students to take just one more course. This information gathered through Illume countered commonly held beliefs that persistence could be impacted more by encouraging part-time students to become full-time students (enrolled in 12 credit hours or more).

Figure 3.1: As uncovered using Illume Students, this is the STC tipping point for average credits attempted — or course enrollment — occurs when students move from one course to two courses.

Figure 3.2: Surfaced using Illume Students, this shows that when STC students move from one course to two, there are dramatic gains in persistence. There is also meaningful impact when a student goes from two courses to three, but the impact is dramatically lower as the number of credits increase, especially at the 15 credit mark.

"This was the first time we saw the data on part-time students," said Dr. Laura B. Sanchez, Dean of Institutional Research, Effectiveness and Strategic Planning at STC. "When this data was presented to our Planning and Development Council, it shifted our conversations from 'How do we get part-time students to become full-time students?' to 'How can we get part-time students to register for 1 to 2 more courses?' We now know these are areas where we can — and should — focus. It's an opportunity, and it's spurring new conversations and plans for targeted action."

STC's cross-functional team now can explore opportunities to deploy outreach, including nudges, and encourage these students, when appropriate, to take one more course based on this new insight into student persistence. Across our community of practice (and higher ed), there is an opportunity to take immediate, informed action to support these students, and especially, to support part-time students. As a next step, Civitas Learning partners will be able to deploy and measure precise mindset-based nudges according to student-level prediction scores.

15 TO FINISH, OR ONE MORE COURSE?

Why It Matters:
If you don't see all students, you can't serve all students.

While there's growing recognition of the large numbers of part-time students, they often aren't the first priority of campus efforts focused on completion. This is especially problematic given that retention rates for part-time students lag behind those attending full-time. (In the next insight for this report, we dive into these differences.) This is not surprising given that part-time students are often left out of policy-driven reporting and many national conversations on improving completion, not to mention discussions on improving overall retained tuition revenue for institutions.

The reality is that colleges and universities are not rewarded for better serving part-time students in the same way they are rewarded for better serving full-time students. Federal methods for tracking graduation rates do not count part-time students. When even the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System is biased against part-time students, it's not difficult to see why the kinds of solutions educators focus on to improve graduation rates don't address the unique needs of part-time students.

The discussion around completion continues to be dominated by solutions better suited to full-time students, with campaigns like 15-to-Finish receiving significant attention in recent years. This concept, while helpful for many traditional full-time students, does little to encourage part-time students, who are taking fewer courses per term yet still aspiring to achieve a credential. There is a considerable difference between encouraging a student who is taking 12 credit hours to take 15 next semester and asking a student who is currently enrolled in two courses to take five courses.

For many part-time students, this change would be impossible. Part-time students are typically going part-time for a reason. They may not have the finances to add many additional courses to their schedule. They may be working full-time jobs in addition to going to school. They may be raising children. They are all-too-often wrestling with all of the above. While we may be able to help with some of these — providing financial aid or child care — there are often life and logistical issues that just won't budge.

In short, *15 is not a magic number for every student*. Likewise, 15 is often not the most productive number to build student success efforts around, particularly in access-focused institutions. If an institution's aim is to drive overall improved outcomes, focusing on the number one — as in one more course — may be the most impactful route for policy and practice change, especially for part-time students.

BENCHMARKING THE CIVITAS

This benchmark is based on data across 57 institutions comprised of 34 community colleges and 23 4-year institutions.

- *Across all institution types, persistence rates were higher for students with increased course taking, the most significant difference being a median 13.29 percentage point increase seen between students taking one course compared to those taking two.*

- *The largest increase in persistence was seen at community colleges, where the difference in the median persistence rate for students taking one course compared to those taking two courses was 14.91 percentage points.*

MINDING THE GAP

What The Data Are Saying:

In addition to analyzing the potential persistence impact of students incrementally adding courses, we also wanted to better understand the difference in persistence of part-time versus full-time students across institutions. For this specific analysis, we looked at historical persistence of full-time and part-time students over a historical academic year, which is typically one calendar year.

We found the average gap between full-time and part-time persistence rates for institutions included in this analysis to be 12.03 percentage points, with large variation between specific institutions. Some had persistence rate gaps as large as 31.8 percentage points, while others had gaps as small as less than one percentage point.

We also found a wide range of differences in persistence rates between full-time and part-time students across different institution types. The largest average gap found was 13.9 percentage points for 2-year institutions, and the smallest was nine percentage points for research institutions.

Partner Insights

As part of this analysis, we wanted to learn more from outlier institutions that have below-average gaps between full-time and part-time student persistence rates. At these partner institutions, part-time students are persisting at similar rates to their full-time student peers. Below are reflections from some of these institutions regarding the policies and practices they have put into place to serve their students. We learned that while each well-performing institution has a slightly different approach, they typically focused on better serving nontraditional students, with an understanding that for many students, academics are not their first priority.

Even though part-time students represent a significant portion of their population, we did not find that these institutions had numerous specific part-time student initiatives. Despite that, part-time student outcomes at these institutions are better than other peer institutions included in the analysis.

UNIVERSITY OF Central Oklahoma

Difference in FT vs. PT Persistence Rates:
4.4 percentage points

Their Part-Time Students: More than 80% of students at the University of Central Oklahoma are commuter students, many of whom are part-time. Additionally, officials said that the majority of students are taking night classes to accommodate other responsibilities they have during the day.

Institutional Support:

- Faculty at the University of Central Oklahoma are encouraged to be flexible and understanding of the realities these students may be facing outside of the classroom. The university has created a unique student affairs office to specifically serve commuter students, which supports the competing needs of this student population

- Faculty who teach night classes are encouraged to be sympathetic and accommodating to students who might be running late from an earlier obligation. In many cases, they provide coffee and added flexibility along with the evening's lesson.

UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON

Difference in FT vs. PT Persistence Rates:
4.4 percentage points

Their Part-Time Students: More than 80% of UW Tacoma's students are enrolled full-time. According to UW Tacoma officials, most of their students are older, transfer students. They were described as already "persisting safely" in their majors, meaning they have a clearer sense of the path they are on and may already possess closer relationships to specific faculty members. Many of the UWT students — working full-time, parents, financially struggling — have decided that taking two courses per quarter, not three, is the best arrangement for them.

Institutional Support:

- University officials often coach students to be realistic about their limits. Administrators and faculty tell students that they should be aware of the time requirements for in-class and out-of-class work and to balance those with personal and work commitments.

- The university is aware of the many life and logistical challenges their part-time students face and believe that staying healthy is key to staying on track. They encourage students to address personal and health problems immediately. One of the worst mistakes that students make, the university says, is to deny that they are overloaded or unable to cope. They may need to lighten their load by dropping a class, deciding to leave school for a quarter, or having a frank talk with their instructor about alternatives. Advisors work to stay in touch, even if students leave for a quarter. If a personal problem is keeping them from concentrating on their studies, the campus encourages the student to discuss the situation with a counselor and work out a solution.

- The campus recently began offering hybrid classes and has doubled down on online courses. In five years, the university went from having four instructors teaching online to nearly 60 – with at least 10% of the students taking at least one online course any given quarter, all because their students needed more flexibility. Their course and time scheduling solution allows students to better screen for online and hybrid options.

- The university plans its schedule around quarters, rather than semesters. Research also suggests that persistence increases with a shorter-length schedule. "Any program that can reduce the longitudinal commitment to a course can improve success and reduce barriers," officials said.

SINCLAIR COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Difference in FT vs. PT Persistence Rates:
4 percentage points

Their Part-Time Students: Officials at Sinclair think of time as the enemy, especially for part-time students, who represent approximately two-thirds of their student body. A majority of their students are balancing life and logistics throughout their educational journey. Completion is not always their first priority, but it is a requirement to unlock their professional aspirations.

Institutional Support:

- To improve outcomes and reduce time to completion, officials are focused on reducing the number of credits that don't count toward graduation. In fact, Sinclair has reduced number of credits required by an average of 5 credits per program in over half of their programs, which is saving students time to degree by a full semester in some programs.

- By providing students with an academic map to monitor progress toward degree, the institution is also increasing student agency for all students. Advisors and faculty have access to the degree-planning information, as well, which means multiple stakeholders can intervene and support students as they navigate their path.

- Officials also streamlined developmental education by either combining courses, such as reading and writing, and offering one-week course bootcamps to jump-start their academic programs. With the course bootcamps, students are passing at a rate of 80-85% and eliminate at least one remedial course. This means enrollment in developmental education has decreased, but all students are on path to graduate sooner. Officials believe this ensures that part-time students are able to make meaningful progress toward their degree.

- Sinclair also ensures that every student — even part-time students — have one specific advisor. As part-time students balance life and their education, sometimes these students don't create social connections like their full-time student classmates. By having a consistent contact with experts in their Career Community (or Meta Major), these students now are connected with someone who knows their story as they progress through their academic journey.

- Sinclair officials have designed highly intentional pathways to align with career options. From the beginning of their academic journey, Sinclair advisors ensure students have identified a career goal. If it's unknown at that time, the advisor works with the student to understand his or her options and then be placed in the appropriate pathway. This helps to make sure every student starts strong on their path.

BENCHMARKING THE CIVITAS

This benchmark is based on 60 partner institutions comprised of 30 community colleges and 30 4-year universities.

- *Among the institutions in our study, the average gap in persistence rate between full-time and part-time students was 12.03 percentage points. At some institutions, the gap was as large as 31.8 percentage points.*

- *Across institution types, the largest average gap found was 13.9% for 2-year institutions, and the smallest was 9.72% for research institutions.*

- *A select number of institutions showed similar performance for part-time and full-time students. These institutions also had varying part-time student enrollment and reported different practices and policies in support of their students.*

CONCLUSION

Taking a step back and understanding how we help all of our students make the most of their education journey is far from easy. We often fall prey to focusing on what we are forced to measure most — first-time, full-time students — rather than forming a full picture of our diverse students and their diverse needs. This report is intended to help catalyze a broader conversation by drawing more attention to students who are sometimes forced into the reporting shadows: part-time students.

Part-timers make up a significant portion of students in access universities and community colleges. And, while some may indeed be able to go full-time (and we should help make that happen), a significant portion will not be able to fit into more standard models, such as, 15 to Finish.

It's crucial to not force the same practice or policy on every student.

ADDING JUST ONE MORE COURSE FOR THE RIGHT STUDENT...
**May improve persistence.
15 is _not_ a magic number.**

FT/PT PERSISTENCE GAP RANGES FROM 32 TO <1 %PP...
Supporting part-time students in the right way can help close the gap.

We offer the following to consider:

- **Part-time students are here; let's pay attention.**

  We should take the time to understand their profile and specific needs at our individual institutions. Most part-time students are attending part-time for a reason. We should help them be successful and optimize their own educational journey. We should be thoughtfully addressing part-time student issues in our policies, practices, conversations and innovations, even if they don't show up in standard reports. Moreover, if we are embracing a strategy of making our colleges and universities more student ready, we need to make sure we take the time to look at all of our students.

- **One more may matter, so let's learn together about how to use this strategy to make a difference.**

  For many of our part-time — and our full-timers, for that matter — taking one more course may increase their likelihood of persisting and completing. We should identify students who are most likely to benefit from this strategy, nudge them toward a heavier course load and provide the support they need to be successful. Then, let's measure the impact of one more course to understand how to optimize more pathways for more students.

- **Jump into your gap.**

  What is your institution's gap between full-time and part-time success? Does it vary for different numbers of courses? What do you think is widening or closing this gap? What can you learn from other institutions who are succeeding at higher levels with part-time students?

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY INSIGHTS REPORT

Community Insights is an on-going, research-based project with reports based on collective data from across the Civitas Learning customer base. This particular study included approximately 1.4 million student records. The data was analyzed using Civitas Learning's Student Success Intelligence Platform, our tailored data science, and the Illume Students product.

ABOUT OUR PROCESS

Better Intelligence Through Unique Predictive Models

We take in data from disparate silos and unify the data, and derive features. We see 95% of the predictive power of our Student Success Intelligence Platform comes from derived features that inform more than 1,500 predictive models, which are surfaced for advisors, faculty, administrators and students in both our personalized pathways and precision engagement solutions.

Our platform was built to learn. It leverages data from across your institution data to find and distribute the strongest signals across the student lifecycle. It powers continuous learning from decisions made, actions taken and outcomes achieved.

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS REPORT EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

The findings in this study are based on data from a subset of our 300+ partner institutions. For the first insight in this report, 57 institutions were considered, representing 34 community colleges and 23 4-year institutions. Eighteen of these were Research (R1, R2, R3) institutions. Eleven institutions had a significant online student population (> 20%). For these institutions, the populations were split into two groups for analysis — on-ground vs. online — to look at the findings independently. Institutions excluded from the analysis were those that have non-traditional patterns of term and/or course enrollment, such as, institutions with four-week terms where students take one course at a time. In addition, findings were excluded if the number of students at an individual institution who attempted a specific number sections was less than 200. Finally, high school dual-enrollment students were also excluded.

For additional questions regarding the study or how Civitas Learning segments, clusters, and creates predictive models, please email communityinsights@civitaslearning.com.

ABOUT CIVITAS LEARNING

Civitas Learning is a student success company delivering the clearest path to improved higher education outcomes. The company's Student Success Intelligence Platform leverages each institution's unique data to find and distribute the strongest signals across the student lifecycle. These signals empower students to make the best possible decisions along their academic pathway. Advisors, faculty, and administrators can personalize support, scale meaningful action, and measure impact to dramatically improve student outcomes.

Today, Civitas Learning is a strategic partner to more than 300 colleges and universities, serving more than 7 million students. Together with our growing community of partners, Civitas Learning is making the most of the world's learning data to graduate a million more students per year by 2025.

Previous issues of our Community Insights Report can be accessed at:

- Volume I, Issue I: http://info.civitaslearning.com/community-insights-issue-1
- Volume 1, Issue 2: http://info.civitaslearning.com/community-insights-issue-2