Community Colleges and Older Learners in Ohio Higher Education[1]

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Introduction

About half of US workers are between the ages of 40 and 64 years.[2] Many older adults entered the labor force with only a high school education when such training was more than adequate to secure stable employment. However, labor force participation rates (LFPR) vary by level of education. Individuals with only a high school diploma have lower LFPR than those with an associate's degree or higher. Likewise, good paying jobs requiring only a high school diploma are in decline, while those requiring a postsecondary credential are increasing. Although tending to experience lower unemployment rates, older adults also tend to experience longer unemployment durations, especially during the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009, resulting in some older workers exiting the labor market. The high school education of many older workers is no longer adequate in the current labor market.

The Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) established a goal that 65% of 25 to 64 year-old state residents will have a postsecondary credential by 2025.[3] Additionally, *Finish for your Future* establishes the goal to increase the proportion of adults over age 25 enrolled in public higher education in Ohio from the current 27% to at least 40% by 2025.[4] Such increases are especially important given declining numbers of high school graduates in Ohio from a post-2000 peak of 137,000 in 2010 to a projected 108,000 in 2028.[5] Attaining these goals is very unlikely without efforts to increase the enrollment of 40 to 64 year-old Ohioans. Informed by these issues, and focusing on public postsecondary institutions in Ohio, this study addressed the following research questions:

> **Research Question 1:** How are Ohio students ages 25-39 and 40-64 distributed across public higher education, particularly community colleges versus baccalaureate institutions?
>
> **Research Question 2:** To what extent do community college students ages 25-39 and 40-64 enroll on a part-time basis as compared with full-time?

Data and Analysis

Our data come from the Integrated Postsecondary Education System, addressing U.S. Title IV-eligible institutions.[6,7] Our analyses are limited to all 14 Ohio public universities as well as 22 (of 23) Ohio community colleges. Rio Grande community college is excluded from analyses as its data are indistinguishable from baccalaureate information from the University of Rio Grande. We restrict our analyses to even years from 2004 to 2016. We examine fall semester enrollments for adult students, defined as those 25 years old and older. We divide this group into 25-39 year-olds and 40-64 year-olds to differentiate those federally protected from age discrimination (age 40+) and those who are not protected.

RESULTS

Figures 1 and 2 show that enrollments for Ohio's working-age adult learners were greatest following the Great Recession. Peak community college enrollment for both the 25-39 and 40-64 age groups occurred in 2012. A similar but less pronounced peak is observed at baccalaureate institutions. Subsequently, enrollments declined to the 2006 level for baccalaureate institutions and have fallen below the 2006 level for community colleges.

Additionally, at the 2012 peak, students 40-64 years of age were 33% more likely to select a community college over a baccalaureate institution compared to students 25-39 years of age at 21%.

Figure 1. Ages 25-39, Ohio Public Postsecondary Enrollment

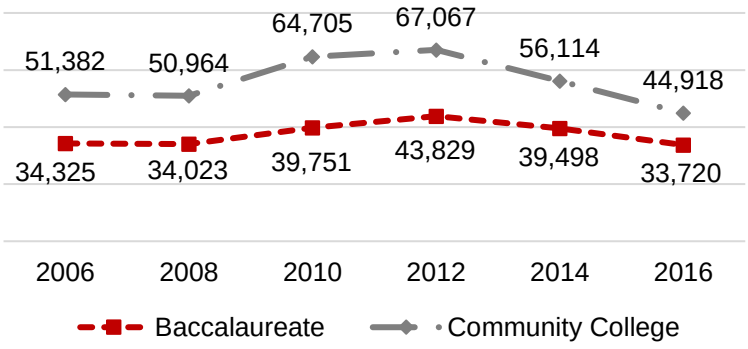


Figure 2. Ages 40-64, Ohio Public Postsecondary Enrollment

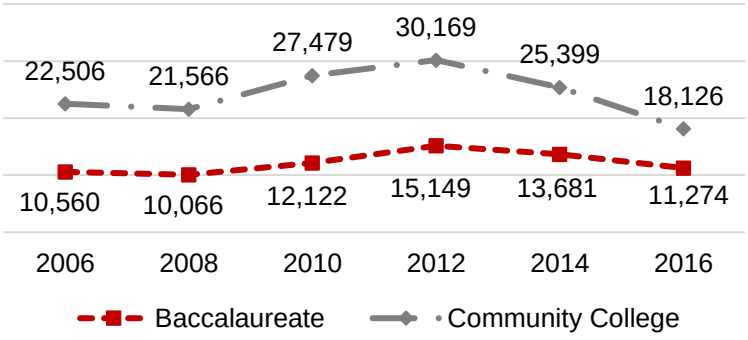
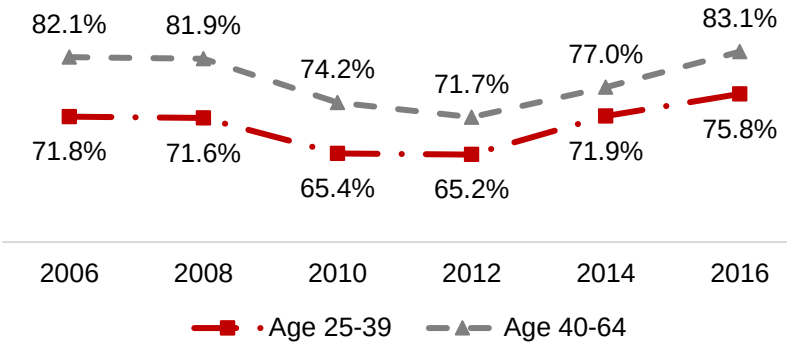


Figure 3 shows the percentage of community college students enrolled with a part-time status. A majority of community college students ages 25-39 and 40-64 enroll part-time, and a greater share of 40-64 year-olds enroll part-time than the share of 25-39 year-olds across the observed period. However, the percentage of students enrolling part-time, and the relative size of the gap in part-time enrollment between 25-39 year-olds and 40-64 year-olds has varied over time.

In 2010, in the wake of the Great Recession, full-time enrollment of older students rose proportionately faster than part-time enrollment. By 2012, more than one-third of age 25-39 students and more than one-fourth of age 40-64 students were enrolled full-time. Subsequently, however, part-time enrollment of students in both age groups has risen dramatically. As a result, among 25-39 year-olds, a larger fraction of students were enrolled part-time in 2016 than in 2006. The share of 40-64 year-old students enrolled part-time also has rebounded in the post-recession period to 2006 levels.

Figure 3. Ohio Community Colleges, % Part-Time Enrollment, ages 25-39 & 40-64, 2006-2016



CONCLUSIONS

Our results reveal a number of similarities and differences in the higher education enrollments of 25-39 and 40-64 year-olds. Both age groups experienced a substantial increase in enrollment during the Great Recession. This growth occurred in both community colleges and baccalaureate institutions.

Both 25-39 year-olds and 40-64 year-olds tend to choose community colleges over baccalaureate institutions, but 40-64 year-olds choose community colleges at a higher rate than do 25-39 year-olds.

In community colleges, a majority of both 25-39 year-olds and 40-64 year-olds enroll part-time, but 40-64 year-olds are more likely to enroll part-time. Although we did not investigate possible causes, the higher part-time enrollment among 40-64 year-olds may reflect greater responsibilities or commitments outside of school or a more widespread need to upgrade workforce skills while continuing to work.

During and immediately following the Great Recession, both part-time and full-time enrollment of community college students grew, but full-time enrollment grew considerably faster than part-time enrollment. In the post-recession recovery period, the share of part-time 25-39 year-olds in community colleges has risen to exceed pre-recession levels, while the share of part-time 40-64 year-old community college students rebounded to 2006 levels.

These findings have implications for Ohio. ODHE has established a goal that two-thirds of adults ages 25 to 64 years achieve a postsecondary certificate or other credential by 2025, as well as substantially increasing college enrollment among this group. While growing enrollment following the Great Recession was encouraging, more recent declines in enrollment may make achieving these goals difficult. To develop strategies to increase older students' college matriculation and completion of postsecondary degrees and certificates, it is imperative that Ohio understands issues in recruitment and retention of older students. Clearly, the importance of community colleges in this process cannot be underestimated, and such institutions should be a key focus of Ohio's attention.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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END NOTES

[1] This work is derived from:
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[3] Ohio Department of Higher Education. (2017). The case for Ohio attainment goal 2025. Retrieved from https://www.ohiohighered.org/attainment

[4] Ohio Department of Higher Education [ODHE]. (2019, April). Finish for your future. Presented at the Adult Learner Working Group Meeting, Columbus, OH.

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[6] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. (2006-2014). Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/Home/UseTheData

[7] Jaquette, O., Parra, E. E. (2016). The problem with the delta cost project database. Research in Higher Education, 57, 630-651. doi:10.1007/s11162-015-9399-2

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