DESIGNING FOR MOMENTUM AT TRI-C

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Executive Summary

At Tri-C, the traditional distinction between full-time and part-time enrollment describes student status more neatly than it describes student experience. Most students move between enrollment intensities as work schedules shift, family demands change, financial pressure rises or recedes, and available time expands or contracts from one term to the next. That pattern matters because Cuyahoga Community College's (Tri-C) prevailing categories shape how student progress is understood, yet those categories often flatten the very enrollment behavior that most defines the institution's student population.

That complexity is reflected in the College's numbers. In any given semester, 75% of students enroll part-time. Over the course of their academic journey, roughly 95% enroll part-time at some point. Fewer than 5% follow the traditional full-time, four-semester path to an associate degree.

75% Enroll part-time in any given semester	**95%** Enroll part-time at some point	**<5%** Follow the traditional 2-year path

Tri-C's three-year graduation rate of 23% and six-year rate of 28% both fall below national averages for public two-year institutions (29% and 39%, respectively). Notably, Tri-C's six-year rate remains lower than the national three-year average, suggesting that additional time alone does not close the completion gap. Meanwhile, institutional research reveals that even brief periods of increased credit intensity are associated with substantially higher completion likelihood, pointing toward a framework in which the pace and continuity of credit accumulation (momentum) may be more informative than traditional enrollment classifications.

This brief explores how the full-time/part-time distinction interacts with student enrollment behavior at Tri-C and considers whether a momentum-oriented framework offers a more productive lens for understanding completion patterns and informing institutional strategy.

The Tri-C Landscape

The traditional model of a two-year associate degree assumes students enroll full-time across four consecutive semesters. At Tri-C, fewer than 5% of students follow this pattern. Among students who begin full-time, only 60% return at full-time intensity the following semester. That rate compounds. By the fourth semester, only 22 of every 100 initially full-time students remain at full-time intensity.

1st Semester	2nd Semester	3rd Semester	4th Semester
100 FT students	60 remain FT	36 remain FT	22 remain FT

Table 1. The 60% rule. Full-time enrollment attrition at Tri-C across four semesters.

The two-year degree timeline, while a useful benchmark, does not describe the enrollment trajectory of the vast majority of Tri-C students. The data instead describe a population that moves fluidly between enrollment intensities in response to work, family, health, and financial circumstances, often within the span of a single academic year.

Yet in conversations and surveys, degree-seeking students at Tri-C consistently express optimism about their prospects. Most believe they will complete a credential, and many expect to do so within two years. This confidence persists across enrollment intensities. Students enrolling in six credits often hold similar completion expectations as those enrolling in twelve. What many students do not appear to fully appreciate is the relationship between their credit load and the timeline to completion. A student enrolled in six credits per semester would need roughly seven semesters to reach the 60 credits typically required for an associate degree, assuming no course failures or withdrawals. At three credits per semester, the arithmetic extends to twenty semesters, a timeline that few students anticipate when they begin.

> This gap between expectation and arithmetic is not a reflection of naïveté. Students are responding to institutional signals that emphasize enrollment itself (getting registered, starting classes, being a college student) without always making explicit the relationship between credit load, pace, and realistic time to completion. When the path to a credential is not clearly understood at the outset, students may invest considerable time and effort before recognizing that their current enrollment pattern will not lead where they expect it to.

Making the path to completion more legible— helping incoming students understand how credit load translates into time to degree and what different enrollment intensities mean for their trajectory, would allow students to make more informed choices about how they

invest their time. This is not about discouraging part-time enrollment. It is about ensuring that students have realistic information about what their enrollment pattern is likely to produce, so that expectations and experience are better aligned from the start.

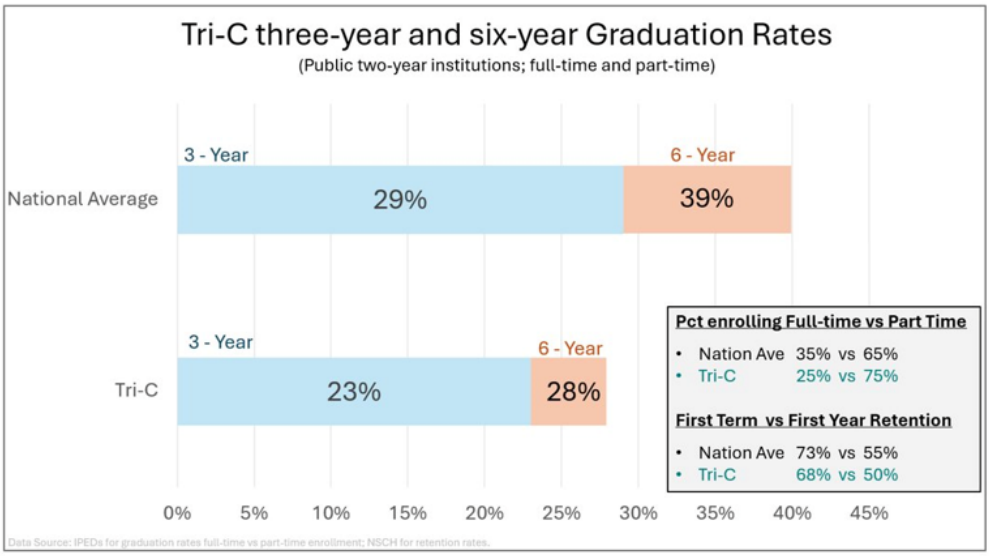

Figure 1. Tri-C three-year and six-year graduation rates versus national averages (public two-year institutions, full-time and part-time).

Tri-C's three-year graduation rate of 23% trails the national average of 29%, and the gap widens at the six-year mark (28% versus 39%). When considered alongside Tri-C's enrollment composition, 75% part-time compared to the national average of 65%, the gap becomes more interpretable. A majority part-time population tends to accumulate credits more slowly, extending time to completion and increasing the probability that life circumstances will intervene before a credential is earned.

One pattern in the data is worth particular attention. Tri-C's six-year graduation rate of 28% remains lower than the national three-year average of 29%. Nationally, giving students an additional three years adds 10 percentage points to the completion rate (from 29% to 39%). At Tri-C, the additional time adds only 5 points (from 23% to 28%). The extra time provides less benefit at Tri-C than it does at community colleges on average, suggesting that time alone does not address the underlying dynamics that shape completion at this institution.

Retention data follow a similar pattern. Tri-C's first-term retention rate of 68% and first-year retention rate of 50% both fall below national averages of 73% and 55%, respectively. The 18-percentage-point drop from first-term to first-year retention is notable. Students persist through an initial term, but something changes in the transition

to sustained enrollment. Understanding what drives that drop is central to the analysis that follows.

Credit Momentum and Completion

Tri-C's institutional research reveals a strong association between the pace of college-level credit accumulation and the likelihood of completing a degree or certificate. The analysis tracks first-time, degree-seeking students and measures earned credits in college-level courses only (excluding developmental education). This is an important distinction. The credit loads referenced throughout this section reflect courses that students passed, not simply attempted, and they exclude preparatory coursework that does not count toward a credential.

Among students in this cohort, those who earn 12 or more college-level credits in their first fall semester have a 19% completion likelihood. Students earning 6 to 11.9 credits have an 11% likelihood, and those earning fewer than 6 credits have a 3% likelihood.

What the data show next is especially worth noting. When students experience even a brief period of increased credit intensity, completion outcomes shift substantially.

> A part-time student who earns 6 to 11.9 college-level credits and then earns 12 or more in a subsequent semester sees their completion likelihood rise from 11% to 42%, a difference of 31 percentage points. A student starting below 6 earned credits for two semesters who then completes a full-time semester of college-level coursework sees completion likelihood rise from 3% to 27%.

Because the data measure earned college-level credits, these scenarios describe students who not only enrolled at higher intensity but succeeded academically in that enrollment. The students captured in the higher-completion rows of the table below are those who attempted more courses and passed them. This means the momentum effect is intertwined with course success. The data do not simply show that taking more classes helps; they show that successfully completing more college-level classes is associated with dramatically higher completion rates. This has implications for how institutions support credit intensification, since the goal is not just higher enrollment but the academic conditions that allow students to succeed at higher loads.

The pattern holds across multiple semesters. Students who sustain two consecutive semesters of moderate part-time enrollment (6 to 11.9 earned credits) and then succeed in a full-time semester reach a 53% completion likelihood. The cumulative effect of sustained, successful credit accumulation appears to be more closely associated with completion than enrollment status in any single term.

Credit Momentum Scenarios at Tri-C

Starting Earned Credits (college-level)	Subsequent Pattern	Completion Likelihood
12+ credits (FT)	Stays FT next semester	**48%**
12+ credits (FT)	Drops to 6–11.9	**31%**
6–11.9 credits (PT)	Moves to FT for one semester	**42%**
6–11.9 credits (PT)	Stays at 6–11.9	**21%**
< 6 credits (PT)	Stays at < 6 credits	**4%**
6–11.9 for 2 semesters	Then moves to FT	**53%**
< 6 for 2 semesters	Then moves to FT	**27%**

Table 2. Credit momentum scenarios and completion likelihood at Tri-C. All values reflect earned college-level credits (not attempted, not developmental education).

Three patterns in the data are worth highlighting. First, simply returning for subsequent semesters, regardless of credit load, is associated with meaningfully higher completion likelihood. Second, experiencing even a single semester in which a student successfully earns full-time credits is associated with a substantial increase in completion, even among students who began at the lowest credit loads. Third, increasing earned credit load from one semester to the next, even without reaching full-time status, is associated with a notable increase in completion likelihood.

> Preliminary finding. If Tri-C could increase by 10 percent the number of first-semester part-time students who enroll full-time and succeed in one of their next two semesters, the data suggest this could add 6 to 10 percentage points to the institution's completion rate.

The Limits of Enrollment Categories

The distinction between full-time and part-time enrollment is administratively practical, but when examined against Tri-C's data, its limitations become apparent. Student enrollment intensity shifts frequently in response to forces colleges neither control nor always observe, including changes in work hours, health disruptions, childcare breakdowns, transportation challenges, financial volatility, and the cumulative fatigue of competing demands. Students move between full-time and part-time not as a declaration of intent but as a pragmatic adjustment to circumstance.

When enrollment status is treated as a fixed characteristic, a dichotomy can emerge in which full-time and part-time students appear as separate populations with distinct trajectories, even though they are often the same students at different points in their academic journey. At Tri-C, where 95% of students enroll part-time at some point, this binary does not describe two populations so much as two moments in the experience of nearly every student.

A related limitation arises from the breadth of the part-time category itself. Under prevailing definitions, students enrolled in nine or ten credits are grouped with those enrolled in a single course. Tri-C's data show the practical consequence. At baseline, student earning 6 to 11.9 college-level credits has an 11% completion likelihood; a student earning fewer than 6 has a 3% likelihood. Both are classified as "part-time." When these students are treated as a single group, the resulting strategies and resource allocations are necessarily generalized. Advising messages lose specificity, interventions address an averaged-out risk profile, and the distinct dynamics within the part-time category remain largely invisible.

> At Tri-C, where three-quarters of students are classified as part-time in any given semester, the breadth of this category means that undifferentiated strategies apply to the institution's largest student segment, the segment where more precise understanding of enrollment behavior would be most consequential.

From Retention to Momentum

Retention – whether a student returns from one term to the next— has long occupied a central place in how colleges measure success. It is a meaningful indicator. But when retention is measured without reference to credit accumulation and forward movement, it can present an incomplete picture. Many students, particularly those enrolled part-time, re-enroll term after term while accumulating credits at a pace that makes completion increasingly distant. In these cases, the institution records continuity while the student may experience diminishing returns on their investment of time and effort.

Tri-C's data reflect this pattern. The 18-percentage-point drop from first-term retention (68%) to first-year retention (50%) suggests that something beyond simple re-enrollment is at work. The graduation rate data reinforce the point. The additional three years between the three-year and six-year measurement windows produce only a 5-percentage-point gain at Tri-C, compared to 10 points nationally. Continued enrollment without attention to pace does not appear to produce proportional gains in completion.

Rather than asking whether a student returned, momentum framework asks whether a student's accumulated effort is translating into progress toward completion at a pace that

keeps the credential within practical reach. The credit momentum data presented earlier suggest this distinction is consequential. The pace and continuity of successful college-level credit accumulation appear to be more closely associated with completion than enrollment status or persistence alone.

Momentum is sometimes discussed as though it were a personal quality that students either possess or lack. Tri-C's data suggest a different interpretation. Momentum appears to emerge from the interaction between student effort and institutional conditions. The substantial increases in completion likelihood associated with even one semester of successfully intensified enrollment do not appear to reflect a sudden change in student motivation. They are more consistent with the interpretation that institutional conditions briefly aligned with a student's capacity in a way that produced visible, tangible progress, and that this visible progress reinforced continued engagement.

From the student's perspective, the difference between retention and momentum is often felt before it is measured. When effort is invested but milestones remain distant, the perceived value of continued enrollment can diminish. When effort produces visible progress (completed courses, accumulated credits, a credential moving closer into view) engagement tends to be self-sustaining. The momentum framework draws attention to this dynamic and to the institutional conditions that shape it.

What Momentum Requires

The strong association between temporary credit intensification and completion invites careful interpretation. One natural reading is that part-time students should simply be encouraged to take more courses. However, this reading warrants caution.

Because the momentum data track earned credits rather than attempted credits, the completion gains described in Table 2 reflect students who not only enrolled at higher intensity but passed their courses. Encouraging students to attempt more credits without ensuring they have the conditions to succeed could produce a very different outcome. A heavier course load that results in failures or withdrawals would not generate the momentum described in the data; it would generate accumulated frustration and wasted financial aid.

Increasing enrollment intensity also increases cognitive load, compresses time available for study and reflection, and magnifies the consequences of even minor disruptions. For students already managing work, caregiving, and financial pressures, a heavier course load without corresponding support can convert manageable difficulty into cascading setbacks. The momentum data are better understood as evidence that when conditions align favorably, even temporary increases in credit intensity are associated with meaningfully better outcomes.

This interpretation is reinforced by examining how institutional structures interact with the realities of part-time students' lives. Many college systems were designed around assumptions of stability that do not hold for much of the student population, including fixed schedules, rigid pacing, limited options for recovery, and delayed feedback cycles. When a student's available time contracts due to a shift change, a family obligation, or a financial disruption, a predictable sequence can follow. Reduced preparation time leads to lower comprehension, missed assignments accumulate penalties, and communication with instructors becomes more difficult. By the time the situation is formally identified through an Early Alert or advising flag, the path to recovery may already appear impractical.

In this context, withdrawal may represent a considered response to a situation that has become unworkable rather than an absence of motivation. A momentum framework draws attention to the structural dynamics that precede withdrawal, inviting examination of how institutional design either supports recovery or allows ordinary life stress to compound into academic disengagement.

For part-time students, momentum depends on the alignment of multiple institutional elements, including credit load, course sequencing, scheduling flexibility, instructional pacing, and support services. The conditions that shape momentum are largely determined by institutional decisions. Course availability, withdrawal deadlines, grading practices, advising caseloads, and academic recovery structures all influence whether increased effort leads to sustained progress or accelerated exhaustion. The question the data raise is not whether students should do more, but what conditions make doing more successfully viable.

What the Data Point Toward

The convergence of Tri-C's enrollment patterns, credit momentum research, and graduation data identifies several areas where the momentum framework intersects with institutional strategy.

Differentiating Within Part-Time Enrollment

Tri-C's data show that students earning fewer than 6 college-level credits and those earning 6 to 11.9 have substantially different completion trajectories (3% versus 11% at baseline). Treating these as distinct populations in analytical and planning work would allow for more precise understanding of where momentum is building and where it is stalling.

Understanding the Conditions for Successful Credit Intensification

Because the momentum data reflect earned rather than attempted credits, the relevant question is not simply what encourages students to take more courses but what enables them to succeed at higher loads. This includes examining the roles of advising, financial

aid, scheduling, instructional design, and employer engagement in creating conditions where intensification produces the academic success that drives the completion gains the data describe.

Making the Path to Completion Visible

The gap between student expectations and enrollment arithmetic suggests an opportunity to make the relationship between credit load and time to completion more transparent from the point of enrollment. When students understand what their current enrollment intensity means for their trajectory, not as a discouragement but as a planning tool, they are better positioned to make informed decisions about how to invest their time and when to seek support for increasing their credit load.

Complementing Retention Metrics with Momentum Indicators

Adding momentum-oriented metrics, such as credit accumulation velocity, gateway course completion rates, and the proportion of students experiencing at least one semester of increased intensity, would provide a more complete picture of whether institutional efforts are producing forward movement toward completion. The graduation rate data suggest that time-based extensions alone do not close the gap. Metrics that track the rate of successful progress, not just the fact of enrollment, may be more informative.

Examining Systemic Alignment

The momentum data suggest that completion outcomes are shaped by the interaction of multiple institutional systems, including scheduling, advising, instruction, financial aid, and academic policy. Examining how these systems currently interact, and where they may be working at cross-purposes for part-time students, is a natural extension of the analysis presented here.

Seeing Part-Time Enrollment for What It Reveals

Part-time enrollment patterns at Tri-C serve as a lens through which broader questions of institutional design become visible. When enrollment categories are treated as fixed identities rather than fluid states, the resulting picture of student behavior can diverge from what students actually experience. When retention is measured without attention to credit accumulation, it is possible to record continuity where students may be experiencing stagnation. And when additional time produces diminishing returns on completion, as the graduation data suggest it does at Tri-C, the question shifts from how long students persist to how effectively their persistence converts into progress.

A clearer reading of the data suggests something both challenging and constructive. Part-time students are not peripheral to Tri-C's mission. They are the mission. Their enrollment

patterns reflect the economic realities, caregiving responsibilities, and competing demands that define adult life for much of the community the College serves.

At Tri-C, the evidence is now specific enough to inform strategy. The institution's data show that 95% of students enroll part-time at some point, that even a single semester of successfully earning full-time college-level credits is associated with substantially higher completion likelihood, and that a 10% increase in part-time-to-full-time transitions could correspond to meaningful gains in completion rates. The data also show that time alone, the additional years between the three-year and six-year windows, yields less benefit at Tri-C than at community colleges nationally, suggesting that the duration of enrollment matters less than what happens within it.

A momentum framework does not replace what Tri-C already measures. It offers a complementary perspective, one that shifts attention from whether students return to whether the conditions exist for their effort to translate into sustained, successful progress. The data suggest this is a distinction worth exploring.

> What part-time enrollment patterns reveal, when examined through a momentum lens, is not a deficit in student commitment but an opportunity to better understand how institutional conditions shape the pace and continuity of progress toward completion.

Sources

IPEDs for graduation rates and full-time vs. part-time enrollment; NSCH for retention rates; Tri-C Office of Institutional Research for credit momentum analysis, enrollment patterns, and the 60% rule governing full-time enrollment attrition; Community College Research Center (CCRC) for national enrollment pattern research. Credit momentum analysis based on first-time, degree-seeking students (excluding College Credit Plus and transient students). All credits referenced are earned college-level credits rather than attempted credits, and exclude developmental education coursework.