Time is a core unit of human capital. With only 24 hours in a day, the way people choose to spend their time is an indication of what they value and the constraints under which they operate.

In the higher education context, time-to-degree is a key element of higher education analysis, particularly at a time of constrained resources and a growing emphasis on completion. It is generally thought, and is often true, that a shorter time-to-degree implies a more efficient or “better” higher education experience. However, this is not always the case, especially when we factor the needs and patterns of nontraditional students (who are now the norm in American higher education) into the equation.

An example of outdated concepts and nomenclature can be found in the Student Right to Know completion rate calculation—150% of the “normal time” to complete a program. The operative reality at community colleges is that 2 years is not the time it takes most students to complete an associate degree. For example, when “normal time” is reframed from 2 to 4 years, Student Right to Know graduation rates double, and completion rates—inclusive of community college graduates and transfers—become greater than 45%.

In this brief, I examine considerations of time as they relate to investments by students and institutions. I conclude with perspectives of efficiency, as expressed by the role time has and should play in policymaking.

Low-income students value a college education. Analyses of data from the American Time Use Survey suggest that students aged 18 to 24 in the lowest income bracket enrolled full time spend 24 to 36 more minutes a day doing homework or research, on average, than students in any other income group. Students in the higher income brackets spend comparatively more time engaged in leisure and sports activities.

There is more to the “working while enrolled” dynamic than this, however. Working while enrolled may be a way to address the skills gaps employers often bemoan, given that they frequently cite gaps in “soft skills” such as professionalism, work ethic, teamwork, and collaboration skills. It may also be the best financial option, when compared to other options and budgetary demands.

Community colleges consider the influence of time on student success. Ways they are doing this include, but are not limited to, offering courses at times when students need them (even midnight courses), reframing instruction to ensure students are active as opposed to passive participants in their learning, employing more-precise diagnostic testing combined with modularized learning, providing and encouraging participation in structured programs of study, offering courses online, and accelerating learning opportunities. It is also important to note, however, that we cannot apply these approaches to every program or course. In some cases, courses will require rehearsal, studio time, writing and rewriting drafts of papers, clinical placements, or conducting experiments between class sessions. As such, institutional actors need the autonomy and flexibility to implement whatever innovations they deem appropriate in consultation with the community they serve and relying upon available evidence.

Time-related policies dominated the kinds of changes enacted to bend the cost curve of the Pell Grant program in 2011. Already the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on the Budget, has proposed a new round of changes to the Pell Grant program, one of which would eliminate less-than-half-time students from eligibility. Yet given the nature of reductions based already on time and a fuller understanding of the appreciation for and constraints on time by students, future alterations to federal student grant aid should focus on directing the support to students who need it the most—low-income students—rather than to comparatively wealthier students with more time to spare.

Low-income students may not have the same time to engage in college as do those from more-affluent families, but we must afford these students the same opportunities and assign them the same value. Low-income students, and the institutions that choose to serve them, value the time they have available, however limited it may be.