

Study identifies risks for quitting college

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College students who consider dropping out are particularly sensitive to a handful of critical events including depression and loss of financial aid, according to a study led by Michigan State University scholars.

Surprisingly, however, other events such as a death in the family and students' failure to get their intended major did not have a significant influence on their intention to drop out, said Tim Pleskac, MSU assistant professor of psychology and lead researcher on the project.

By identifying which risks prompt [students](#) to consider quitting, the research could help in the effort to combat college withdrawal, Pleskac said. More than 40 percent of students in the United States fail to get a bachelor's degree within six years at the college where they began, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

"Prior to this work, little was known about what factors in a student's [everyday life](#) prompt them to think about withdrawing from college," Pleskac said. "We now have a method to measure what events are 'shocking' students and prompting them to think about quitting."

"From an institutional perspective," he added, "we are now better suited to think about what students we should target in terms of counseling or other assistance to help them work through these issues."

The study, funded by the College Board, will appear in an upcoming issue of the research journal *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.

In the study, Pleskac and colleagues developed a [mathematical model](#) that describes how students decide to quit. They used the model to analyze surveys from 1,158 freshmen at 10 U.S. colleges and universities. The surveys listed 21 critical events (or "shocks") and asked students whether these events had happened to them during the previous semester; the students were later asked whether they planned to withdraw.

The critical event with the most influence was depression. Students also were sensitive to being recruited by an employer or another institution; losing financial aid or experiencing a large increase in tuition or living costs; unexpected bad grade; and roommate conflicts.

They were less sensitive to critical events such as death in the family; significant injury; inability to enter their intended major; becoming addicted to a substance; coming into a large sum of money; losing a job needed to pay tuition; and becoming engaged or married.

Previous research had studied the role critical events play in employee turnover decisions. However, this was the first study to examine the phenomenon with college withdrawal, the researchers said.

"Traditionally the problems of employee turnover and [college](#) student attrition have been viewed from different lenses," said Jessica Keeney, a project researcher and doctoral student in psychology at MSU. "But we see a lot of similarities in how employees and students decide to quit. A 'shocking' event, such as a clash with a co-worker or roommate, could be the final factor that pushes someone to leave."

Provided by Michigan State University

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