

New study says university dropout rates tied to preparedness, not laziness

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According to new research from The University of Western Ontario, approximately 40 per cent of students who drop out of university do so because of what they learn about their own academic ability, based primarily on the grades they receive after arriving on campus.

And that's far too late for a wake-up call, says Todd Stinebrickner, a Western economics professor, who serves as a Faculty Fellow at the CIBC Centre for Human Capital & Productivity. Stinebrickner co-wrote the study, "Learning About [Academic Ability](#) and the College Drop-Out Decision" with his father Ralph Stinebrickner, a professor emeritus at Berea College in Kentucky. Todd Stinebrickner explains on average, [students](#) enter university overly optimistic about their likely performance, predicting they will obtain far higher grades than what they actually obtain in the first semester.

As a result, many students learn over the course of their studies that university is not a good match for them academically, and they choose to drop out. More importantly, Stinebrickner says these results have very little to do with incoming students working hard enough.

Based on findings from a long-term panel study surveying students from low income families, Stinebrickner says new policies must be put in place that target individuals at much younger ages to better prepare them for a quality post-secondary education, especially for those who choose to study math or science.

"We find that students enter university as open to majoring in math or science as to any other major group, but that a large number of students move away from math and science after realizing that their grade performance will be substantially lower than expected," says Stinebrickner, "Changes in beliefs about grade performance arise because students realize their ability in math or science is lower than expected rather than because they are not willing to put substantial effort into their studies."

Stinebrickner warns these findings cast considerable doubt on policies aimed at encouraging more incoming university students to major in [math](#) and science because while many try, few succeed. Instead, Stinebrickner says, efforts must shift from encouragement and recruitment to better preparing high school students fundamentally in these subjects.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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