

Dropouts weren't prepared in first place, study finds

February 15 2013, by Paul Mayne

While some folks may look at university/college dropouts as simply lazy slackers, a Western study boils the bailout down to simple ability.

A study by Economics professor Todd Stinebrickner, a faculty fellow in the department's CIBC Centre in Human Capital and Productivity, estimated 40 per cent of dropouts can be attributed to what students learn about their grade performance after entering college. Simply stated, they are not as well suited for postsecondary life as they initially thought.

Stinebrickner conducted the study with his father, Ralph, a professor emeritus at Kentucky's Berea College (where the research was conducted).

The Berea Panel Study, which surveys students from low-income families (as often as 12 times each year), provides unequaled depth and detail about factors likely to influence post-secondary decisions. The findings reveal the most fundamental of all factors – learning about one's own [academic ability](#) – plays a crucial role in deciding to dropout or what major to pursue.

One reason they studied Berea College was its strong focus on kids from low-income families. The institution is the least expensive private college in the United States when calculating the costs of tuition and fees, according to the U.S. Department of Education. At Berea, every student receives a four-year tuition scholarship and works at least 10

hours per week in a campus job to pay board, room and other expenses.

"So direct cost was not a factor (for these students), but still we saw half the students not finishing. So the question then is why not?"

Stinebrickner said.

While previous studies have shown the 'before and after' factor, Stinebrickner was more interested in what was happening 'during' their schooling and what was most fundamental among a student's decisions to drop out or remain in school until graduation.

"A large part is contributed to the academic or grade performance being worse than they expected; they just weren't prepared," he said. There are ways students adjusted, such as switching their major, added Stinebrickner, in particular those in science and math.

On average, students enter school overly optimistic about their likely performance, predicting upon entry they will obtain a grade point average (GPA) of 3.22, significantly higher than their actual first semester GPA of 2.88. Subsequently, students become more realistic about their ability and performance, revising their predicted GPA downward on average.

"Many students learn over the course of their studies that college is not a good match for them academically, and they choose to drop out," Stinebrickner said. "Are they leaving because they might fail in the future? When people do badly, they don't want to stick around, even if they didn't get kicked out. Perhaps the financial return of staying in school has gone down a lot, and secondly, school simply becomes unenjoyable."

In terms of policy conclusions, changes to universities/college classes in marginal ways to assist students who are not prepared are unlikely,

Stinebrickner said. He suggested taking a few steps back and asking why are people not prepared. There's probably an argument for more serious curriculum in high school, as well as more room for information given to, in particular, high school students, but also at the elementary level.

So is it just a matter of students not studying hard enough? Not quite.

While an earlier study by the Stinebrickners showed study effort is important for college grade performance, students also tend to overestimate their grades given their level of study effort – or miscalculating their academic 'ability' – which implies many are unknowingly underprepared for a typical postsecondary classroom.

"People show up thinking it's going to be easier than it really is," he said. "It could be if I knew two years before that science at university is going to be much harder than science in high school, perhaps I can change my behaviour then."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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