

Making a leap from high-ability high school to college of lesser academic status can be a real downer

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Making the transition from high school to college may be stressful—but it can be downright depressing for students who graduate from a school with peers of high academic ability and wind up at a college with students of lesser ability, according to a new study.

"Families talk a lot about wanting a [college](#) that's a 'good fit,'" said study co-author Matthew Andersson, Ph.D., assistant professor of sociology in Baylor University's College of Arts & Sciences. "Making a transition to a college of 'lesser' academic achievement—relative to that of one's [high school](#)—is what's known as 'undermatching.' While it can be hard to measure well, undermatching from high [school](#) to college is thought to be common due to family financial concerns such as preventing excessive [student](#) loans and post-graduation debt."

Students who undermatch from high school to college experience on average a 27-percent increase in symptoms of depression, according to lead author Noli Brazil, Ph.D., assistant professor of community and regional development at the University of California, Davis.

The study—"Mental Well-Being and Changes in Peer Ability from High School to College"—is published in the journal *Youth and Society*, an interdisciplinary scientific journal.

Brazil and Andersson controlled for a variety of student background

characteristics, such as GPA, academic achievement, college expectations, family socioeconomic status and household structure. This allowed them to respond to debates about whether individual or school factors are more important to predicting stress during the college transition. Their study focused on changes occurring at the school level, a focus which had been overlooked by earlier studies on college transitions and student well-being, Andersson said.

"When you think of it, a college transition is made of three parts: where you're coming from, where you end up and the difference between those things," he said. "The statistical models we use in this paper allow us to consider all three parts at once, so that we are able to determine for the first time the unique contributions that school ability transitions— not just particular schools—may make to student well-being during the college years."

Researchers analyzed data from 1,453 respondents in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and other federal agencies. Participants from about 100 representative high schools around America completed questionnaires while in high school and a few years later when they were enrolled in four-year colleges.

The study found that downward transitions are linked to depression symptoms during college at levels similar to background factors such as personal ability or family background, after adjusting for earlier depression levels.

Students were asked how often during the past week they "had the blues," enjoyed life, were bothered by things that usually don't bother them, lacked energy, had trouble concentrating and felt that others disliked them.

To measure self-esteem, they also were asked how much they agreed with the statements "you have many good qualities," "you have a lot to be proud of," "you like yourself just the way you are" and "you are doing things just about right."

Exactly why depression might accompany transferring from a lower to higher academic setting is not certain. Perhaps the students feel that they are not living up to their potential, or "the downward transition might trigger a sense of being a misfit. That might trigger having fewer friends or less of a sense of attachment to the college or university that one is attending," Andersson said.

Previous research has shown that higher-ability students in a lesser-academic setting have a better academic self-image—what researchers deemed the "big-fish—little-pond effect"—than a "small fish in a big pond" (a gifted student in a gifted group). But because that research had focused on specific schools rather than school transitions in general, movement to a lesser-ability school may be harmful for mental well-being in ways overlooked by earlier studies, researchers said.

In addition, some previous research has shown that when moving to a more rigorous academic environment, students' self-evaluations of their intelligence tends to suffer—even if they have high academic ability.

"You may feel more incompetent—even if you're a person of high ability yourself—because you're surrounded by shining stars," Andersson said. But, at the same time, students enrolled at competitive or elite colleges may bask in the company of capable peers, known as the "reflected-glory effect," he said. While feelings of incompetence and basking in glory could have opposing effects on well-being, the study found overall that attending a higher-ability college relative to high school did not have any significant links to depression or self-esteem, relative to no school ability change from high school to college.

The study has implications not only for students and their families but for counselors and social scientists.

"The recommendation for counselors would be to learn more about the high school and background a student is coming from instead of just present, college-focused factors or personal factors. It's about the school environment, not the individual," Andersson said. "Feeling overworked or having a hard time fitting in or making friends at college certainly matter to stress or depression, but those potential causes could be influenced by high-school background and especially by the difference across school backgrounds across the transition itself."

Researchers said that their study has some limitations because it does not contain information about other school factors that may affect students' well-being during a transition, such as changes in school cultures or institutional heritage or traditions, or changes in available extracurricular activities.

"Changes in academic environments matter, as well as the school environments themselves, and future research should incorporate those differences to gain greater insights into the transition to college and into well-being during early adulthood and beyond," Andersson said.

Provided by Baylor University

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