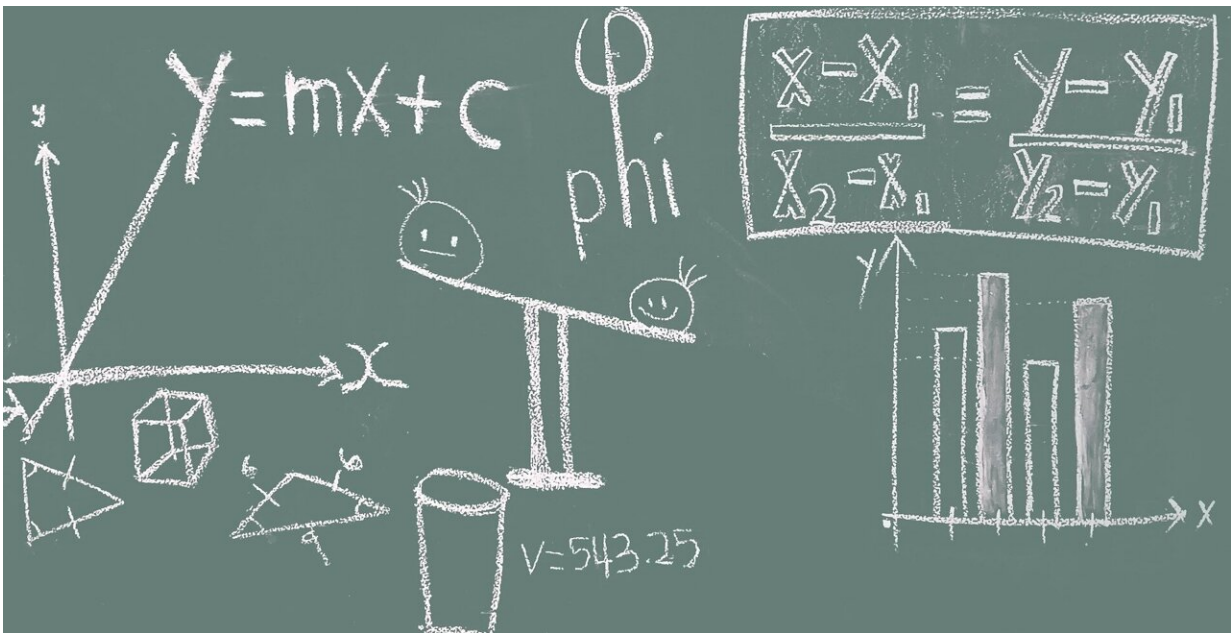


Why putting off college math can be a good idea

July 10 2023, by Forrest Lane



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Putting off college math could improve the likelihood that students remain in college. But that may only be true as long as students don't procrastinate more than one year. This is what colleagues and I found in a [study published in 2023](#) of 1,119 students at a public university for whom no remedial coursework was required during their first year.

Enrolling in a [math](#) course during the first semester of [college](#) resulted in

students being four times more likely to drop out. Although delayed enrollment in a math course had benefits in the first year, its advantages vanished by the end of the second year. In our study, almost 40% of students who postponed the course beyond a year did not attempt it at all and failed to obtain a degree within six years.

Why it matters

Nearly 1.7 million students who recently graduated from [high school](#) will [immediately enroll in college](#). Math is a requirement for most degrees, but students aren't always ready to do college-level math. By putting off college math for a year, it gives students time to adjust to college and prepare for more challenging coursework.

Approximately [40% of four-year college students](#) must first take a remedial math course. This can [extend the time it takes to graduate](#) and increase the likelihood of dropping out. Our study did not apply to students who need remedial math.

For students who do not require remedial courses, some delay can be beneficial, but students' past experiences in math can lead to avoidance of math courses. Many students experience [math anxiety](#). Procrastination can be an [avoidance strategy](#) for managing fears about math. The fear of math for students may be a more significant barrier than their performance.

It is estimated that [at least 17%](#) of the population will likely experience high levels of math anxiety. Math anxiety can lead to a [drop in math performance](#). It can also lead to avoiding majors and [career paths](#) involving math.

Our study fills the void in research on the effects of how soon students take college-level math courses. It also supports prior evidence that

students benefit from a [mix of coursework](#) that is challenging yet not overwhelming as they transition to college.

What still isn't known

We believe colleges need to better promote student confidence in math by examining how [student success courses](#) can reduce math anxiety. Student success courses provide students with study skills, note-taking skills, [goal setting](#), time management and stress management, as well as career and financial decision making to support the transition to college. Although student success courses are a [proven practice](#) that help students stick with college, rarely do these courses address students' fear of math.

Students are at the greatest risk of [dropping out](#) of college during their first year. [Advisors](#) play a crucial role in providing students with resources for success. This includes recommendations on what courses to take and when to take them. More research is also needed about how advisors can effectively communicate the impact of when math is taken by [students](#).

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