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New Studies Show How Life's Tough Turns Can Derail Students

By Peter Schmidt

Dealing with tragedy and disruptive change is an inevitable part of life. But for young people, such experiences can have severe long-term consequences, hindering educational progress in ways that hurt their prospects of earning college degrees, new research suggests.

Three studies scheduled to be presented at the annual conference of the American Educational Research Association, which will start on Friday in New Orleans, attempt to quantify the effects of stressful life events on students' long-term educational success.

One of them examined students at selective colleges and concluded that it is surprisingly common for them to receive news that appears to diminish their prospects of graduating within four years, and that race and ethnicity play a role in determining both how likely students are to confront stressful events outside college and how well they stay on track academically when times get tough.

More than a third of white, black, and Hispanic students in the study had experienced at least one life event associated with stress in the course of a course of a single year, and more than a tenth had dealt with two or more, says a paper on the researchers' findings, "Life Happens (Outside of College)."

Black and Hispanic students were nearly twice as likely as students of Asian descent to have experienced at least one such event, and nearly three times as likely to have dealt with multiple life events such as parental divorce, a death in the family, or the victimization of a family member in a crime, the paper says.

A second study found that many students whose parents get divorced in high school end up with reduced college-going expectations, while a third study found that students appear to suffer academically and have less chance of earning college degrees if they transferred between high schools.

The authors of all three papers say their conclusions point to the need for colleges to do more to identify and assist students who are experiencing stressful events off campus.

"Currently, institutions often find out about students' 'outside' lives only if the student self-identifies as having had a noncollege life

event," write the authors of the paper on students at selective colleges. Many students, the paper says, never acknowledge to colleges that they are dealing with stressful developments off campus, or else speak up after it is too late to head off academic trouble—after being referred to psychological support services or during interviews with college personnel seeking to determine why they are dropping out.

College students often are hesitant "to disclose some of the more traumatic things that happen in life," says Bradley E. Cox, an assistant professor of higher education at Florida State University and an author of the paper.

He says having learned about how common are encounters with stressful life events among selective colleges' students—who presumably tend to come from more-privileged backgrounds than does the student population at large—"leads me to question how frequently it happens across the nation, and what institutions are doing to identify those students and to support those students in their time of need."

Thoughts of Home

Mr. Cox conducted the study with Robert D. Reason, an associate professor of education at Pennsylvania State University at University Park. Their paper observes that researchers of elementary and secondary education have closely examined the impact of major life events on children since the late 1970s—after it was discovered that race and class-based gaps in performance grew most in the summer, when schools generally were not playing a big role in students' lives—but that relatively little attention has been paid to how the academic progress of college students is affected by events beyond the control of their institutions.

Certainly, some previous research has shed light on how many college students deal with personal tragedy. In a 2008 article in the journal *New Directions for Student Services*, for example, David E. Balk, a professor of community health at Brooklyn College and the editor of several books on thanatology, reviewed studies of bereavement and mortality rates and concluded that at any one time, 22 to 30 percent of undergraduates are in the first 12 months of grieving over the death of a family member or friend.

Mr. Cox and Mr. Reason based their study on data, from nearly 2,600 students at 22 competitive-admissions colleges, gathered as part of the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen, which conducts wide-ranging interviews of students and tracks them over six years. By working with the National Student Clearinghouse database, the researchers involved with the longitudinal survey had been able to track graduation data for nearly all of their study's participants, enabling them to shed light on which factors influenced graduation rates.

The subset of students that Mr. Cox and Mr. Reason examined included about 700 identified as white, 700 as Asian, 600 as black, and 600 as Hispanic. The two researchers focused on data from the students' sophomore year of college, basing their assessment of stressful life events on how many students had responded yes when asked if they had experienced any of 14 family setbacks, such as a parent dying or losing a job, a brother or sister dropping out of school, an unwed sister becoming pregnant, or a member of the immediate family going on public assistance or becoming homeless.

The analysis found that, for each racial or ethnic group examined, graduation rates dropped off sharply with each additional stressful life event outside college. For example, among Hispanic males, those who had not experienced any of the specified life events had a predicted graduation rate of 69 percent. But the rate dropped to just under 64 percent for those who had experienced one life event, 58 percent for those who had experienced two, and just over 46 percent for those who had experienced four. Women and black and white respondents of both genders followed a similar pattern.

Although the researchers say limitations in their methodology prevented them from directly comparing their results for different races, it appeared that students identified as Asian experienced less-precipitous declines in their graduation rates as the number of life events they reported increased. The two scholars did not offer any explanation as to why Asian students might be more academically resilient.

The paper acknowledges that the study has several major limitations. Among them, in counting how many life events students had experienced, the researchers treated every event as equal, even though they ranged greatly in severity and included events such as a family member using (unspecified) illegal drugs or being the victim of a crime.

The study did not examine the impact of bad things happening directly to students, or the consequences of students' own activities outside college. And, given the selective nature of the colleges the students attended, the results cannot be extrapolated for the general college population.

The researchers also were unable to pin down how often students experienced life events without their colleges' knowledge, although Mr. Cox says he conducted a separate analysis examining how often students reported talking with someone at the college about life events and found differences among racial and ethnic groups in terms of students' willingness to discuss such issues.

Professors are [known to joke](#) about how grandparents appear most at risk at dying at the beginning of semesters, when students are most likely to want to miss class. Mr. Cox says his study's findings suggest that many students withhold information about real family

tragedies, precluding any attempts to accommodate them at a tough time.

"Certainly," he says, "I think faculty members have traditionally taken a skeptical view of anything that could be taken as an excuse, particularly when that so-called excuse is something difficult to verify and is not related to the institution."

Students who witness a shooting on the campus, he notes, are likely to receive far more in the way of help and accommodations from their college than students who witness a shooting in their home neighborhood.

The two researchers' paper suggests that colleges take steps to encourage students to report life events, and train faculty members to be more alert to signs that students are in distress.

Moved or Shaken

The study examining the impact of divorce and related family disruptions on students' college-going prospects was conducted by Brian P. An, an assistant professor of educational policy and leadership studies at the University of Iowa, and Kia N. Sorensen, a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. They based their analysis on data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, which tracked the long-term progress of students who were in eighth grade that year.

As part of that federal study, parents were asked each year their children were in high school if there had been a change in the family structure, in terms of whether the student lived with married, biological parents, a widow, or parents who were divorced, never married, remarried, or cohabiting. By checking in with the families periodically—rather than asking them their marital status just once—the study created a database that enabled researchers such as Mr. An and Ms. Sorensen to examine the impact of family disruptions on students' college expectations.

Previous efforts to measure the impact of family disruption on students had been confounded by the question of whether students were responding to the change in their parents' marital status itself or to differences in parent-child interactions associated with those disruptions. Parents who have undergone a divorce, for example, are likely to be less available to children to discuss schoolwork. Mr. An and Ms. Sorensen sought to statistically control for differences in parent-child interactions and found that parental divorce, in itself, appears to reduce a child's chances of going to college.

The third study, on the effect of high-school transfers on students' academic success, was conducted by Kristina L. Zeiser, a doctoral student in sociology and demography at Penn State, who based her analysis on data from the 1988 study.

She confronted a problem similar to the one that Mr. An and Ms.

Sorensen dealt with, in that researchers have had difficulty differentiating educational outcomes associated with high-school transfers from those that stem from traits associated with transfer students, such as being likelier to have a family that is low-income or nontraditional. Using methodology that sought to statistically control for the impact of student traits, she found that transferring, in itself, appeared to hurt students' academic performance and leave them at greater risk of dropping out of high school or never earning a bachelor's degree.

Ms. Zeiser says her study's results do not tell her why students who transfer from one school to another have worse educational outcomes. She hypothesizes that it may be because they are less likely to get involved in extracurricular activities or to forge relationships with people at their school who can advise them or write letters of recommendation on their behalf, or that they suffer academically as result of poor communication between their old and new schools.

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qv_library 6 hours ago

Does this mean that the rates of "student retention and success" might in fact be affected also by real-life factors such as job loss, stresses of single parenthood, domestic violence, under-employment, living on the economic edge of society, uncertainty about whether you have a roof over your head, being called up repeatedly for military "reserve" service, etc.? Wow! I'll have to take this kind of insight back to my community college where this never occurred to us.

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singfasola 6 hours ago

Thank you, qv_library. If any college is administrator is surprised by this study (which, IMHO, was a no-brainer), it's because that administrator has not understood the importance of student support systems that support the whole person. The online programs at my institution place their primary administrative focus on student support from acceptance through graduation, including continued contact with students who need to step out because of life events, and subsequently return. And they DO return, because they know our administrators and support services are there for them

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drj50 5 hours ago

I agree with other posts that this is no surprise. However, these results are worth having when critics of higher education seem consistently to conclude that colleges' graduation rates are solely a function of their

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teaching effectiveness and/or high school preparation. Even the faculty at my school seem to equate non-persistence with academic failure. In fact, at my school, more than half of students who don't return for their second year are in good academic standing. Life intrudes. And we need to help the public understand this.

5 people liked this. [Like](#) [Reply](#)



coachhillary 14 minutes ago

A study by Eric Bettinger and Rachel Baker at Stanford U. found that even a \$500 investment in coaching students particularly about issues they are facing outside of the classroom had significant impact on increasing rates of retention, with coached students 5.2% more likely to be enrolled than other students after six months.

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