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Universities tossing at-risk undergrads an academic lifebuoy

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Sami Majdalany, a fourth-year Carleton University student, found his first-year classes overwhelming until he was shown strategies for time management. (Dave Chan/The Globe and Mail)

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As more than one million Canadian undergraduate university students await their marks from first semester, some are hoping for a holiday miracle that will save their tanking grades.

Bad first-semester grades are a strong motivator for first-year students to pack their bags and ditch university.

Around 45 per cent of students who drop out in their first year do so in panic after getting low grades, said Todd Stinebrickner, an economics professor at the University of Western Ontario who has studied the various reasons undergraduate students choose to leave. Prof. Stinebrickner and his co-researcher studied students at the liberal arts Berea College in Kentucky.

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“There is a fairly big gap between university and high school, and students have to be prepared to deal with that,” he said. “And when you perform poorly, that also impacts how much you like your university and how much stress you’re dealing with. When you look at all those factors together, it’s clear how bad grades can derail their university education.”

To stop the flight of these so-called Christmas graduates who drop off the roster around the holiday season, some universities screen students using their fall midterm marks and provide help that attempts to focus on the deeper issues behind poor grades.

At Carleton’s Science Student Success Centre, first-year science students who get a 60 per cent or lower on their midterms are immediately sent an e-mail to make an appointment with a upper-year mentor.

Since they launched the program in 2008, the centre found that students who accepted help had a much higher chance of passing the course, with 70 per cent passing, compared to 65 per cent of students who didn’t participate.

Given its success rate, Carleton is expanding the service next month to all undergraduate students and will enroll at-risk students into a voluntary nine-week ‘Bounce Back’ program.

“It’s not tutoring help at all,” said Sue Bertram, the assistant dean of recruitment and retention and director of the science student centre. “For many of them, it’s their first time away from home, or they’re trying to hold down a part-time job.”

Guelph has a similar program, which gives five students with the most improved grades a reward of \$1,000 tuition credit each. In their most recent cohort, students who participated saw their grades improve by more than five per cent compared to the one-per-cent improvement for students who chose not to participate.

Other universities are also focusing their efforts on student well-being. The University of British Columbia, for example, recognizes that stress can affect academic performance and offers wellness programs that help students with depression, mental health and suicide prevention. When professors need to cancel a class, the University of Calgary’s student success centre steps in to use that class time to run sessions on writing exam essays, time management and taking good notes in lectures.

Sami Majdalany, a fourth-year biology student at Carleton understands those challenges. He was an A student and valedictorian in high school, but found his first-year classes too overwhelming and was only able to scrape by with Cs and Ds.

“It was so discouraging and sad, because I really wanted to go to medical school and I knew my grades weren’t good enough,” he said. “I just was unorganized with all my weekly different lab assignments and I didn’t prioritize the assignments that actually weighed more.”

When the science student success centre called him in, Mr. Majdalany was shown strategies for time management. Since then, his grades have bounced back and he is consistently getting As. Now, he is a mentor for the program. “I see so many students who want to drop out around this time of the year and take a break for a semester. But maybe all they need is that little help.”

A recent survey by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario found that 70 per cent of students feel well-prepared academically for university and 81 per cent for college.

“Most institutions recognize that first year is the most difficult and they focus their attention on these new students,” said Richard Wiggers, director of research at the council. “The question is, do you reach out to all the students early or do you reach out when you know which students need your help? Most institutions do both, but the thinking is: the earlier, the better.”

That’s why several universities, such as University of Toronto, Saskatchewan and Prince Edward Island, are also experimenting with first-year seminars that allow students to connect with their professors in small group settings. Guelph, a pioneer, began offering these first-year programs in 2004. Budget crunches forced the university to shut down the program in 2009, but it was revived in 2011, said the university’s provost, Maureen Mancuso.

The university hopes that every student will be able to take at least one seminar course in his or her first-year.

“We’re, in effect, recreating a simulation of the classroom they would have had in high school that was more intimate, and I think that helps with the transition,” Dr. Mancuso said. “It was never intended to be a remedial program in that we’re getting the students prepared for university... for us, it’s more about making sure they have a positive undergraduate experience.”

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