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The current average cost of university tuition outside Quebec, including mandatory ancillary fees, is about \$6,000.

Noel Chenier/New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal/The Associated Press

University

Mid-term interventions reduce university drop-out rates

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As tens of thousands of Canadian university students hit the books for mid-term exams, schools are looking ahead to keep those who are sinking from dropping out.

All it takes is a few bad grades to crush some students — particularly freshmen — and derail their university education, some experts say.

“Once people do badly, they don’t want to be in school anymore,” said Todd Stinebrickner, a professor at the University of Western Ontario who has studied the reasons university students choose to pack it all in.

“When people do badly ... school is not very enjoyable, maybe it’s more stressful.”

His research suggests about 40 per cent of students who drop out of university do so because they’re not performing as well as they expected.

That’s largely because they’re not prepared for the heavier workload and independent study time, he said.

“That sort of says, well, things have to be a little bit different at earlier stages [of education],” he says. “Whether it’s more effort in high school or whether it’s changes in the quality of schools at earlier ages, that’s sort of an open question.”

Most students stick it out past the first year — in Ontario, the province with the most universities, retention rates remain between 80 and 90 per cent for the majority of schools.

But educators aren’t taking any chances.

Many have an arsenal of programs aimed at so-called “Christmas graduates,” those who simply drop off the roster after winter break, as well as students who fall through the cracks in later years, said Richard Wiggers, director of research on student services for the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

Some reach out to students and their families before the fall semester starts in an effort to ease the transition from high school. Others hold “University 101” courses that show freshmen how to handle stress and manage their time.

At the University of Ottawa, administrators stage interventions for first-year students whose mid-term marks fall below par in key courses, said Murray Sang, who heads the Student Academic Success Service.

“They do a triage to find out what’s going on, why is this student at risk,” Mr. Sang said. Faculty advisors then steer students towards support programs, be it peer tutoring, counselling or financial aid, he said.

It’s crucial to step in before students flunk any classes, Mr. Sang said.

After that, “it’s a bigger hole to dig out of,” he said. “It’s difficult to keep a student motivated, it’s difficult to climb back up.”

The reasons for calling it quits can range from homesickness to depression and learning disabilities to money troubles.

Matt Loppie was tempted to throw in the towel nine years ago during his third year of computer science at Dalhousie University in Halifax.

“The program got a lot more difficult suddenly and my grades suffered,” said Mr. Loppie, 28, who now lives in Toronto.

“It was pretty discouraging. I just felt like, what’s the point?” he said.

Still, Mr. Loppie stuck it out, dropping several classes before his sinking marks could affect his overall average. Repeating the courses meant pushing back graduation by a year, he said.

Dropping out doesn’t always stain school transcripts. Each university sets a deadline for students looking to abandon classes without penalty, Mr. Sang said. Those who bail early enough may even get their

tuition refunded.

But wait too late and it's the same as failing, he said.

For some, leaving a certain program or school doesn't mean they're giving up on education, said Mr. Wiggers.

"There are times when going and realizing the fit isn't right for you and deciding that maybe you're going to finish the courses you've already started but then switch elsewhere ... is actually a better decision."

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