

How Do **Grades** and **Class Type** Affect **Course** **Withdrawal?**

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BACKGROUND

In a previous study, the Zion & Zion Research Team found that class withdrawal is a substantial revenue and management issue for colleges, with over 40% of students dropping classes. This represents significant lost revenue for colleges. It also puts students at risk of not graduating on time (or not graduating at all). And it prevents colleges from filling those seats with new tuition-paying students.

In this report we dig even deeper to help colleges understand the reasons for class withdrawal. We also highlight measures colleges can take to improve drop rates.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To better understand the reasons for student class withdrawals and other important education-related topics, Zion & Zion conducted a nationwide survey of 1,200 college students in two groups:

- Current freshmen and sophomores at 4-year colleges and universities
- Students in their first year at a 2-year community or junior college

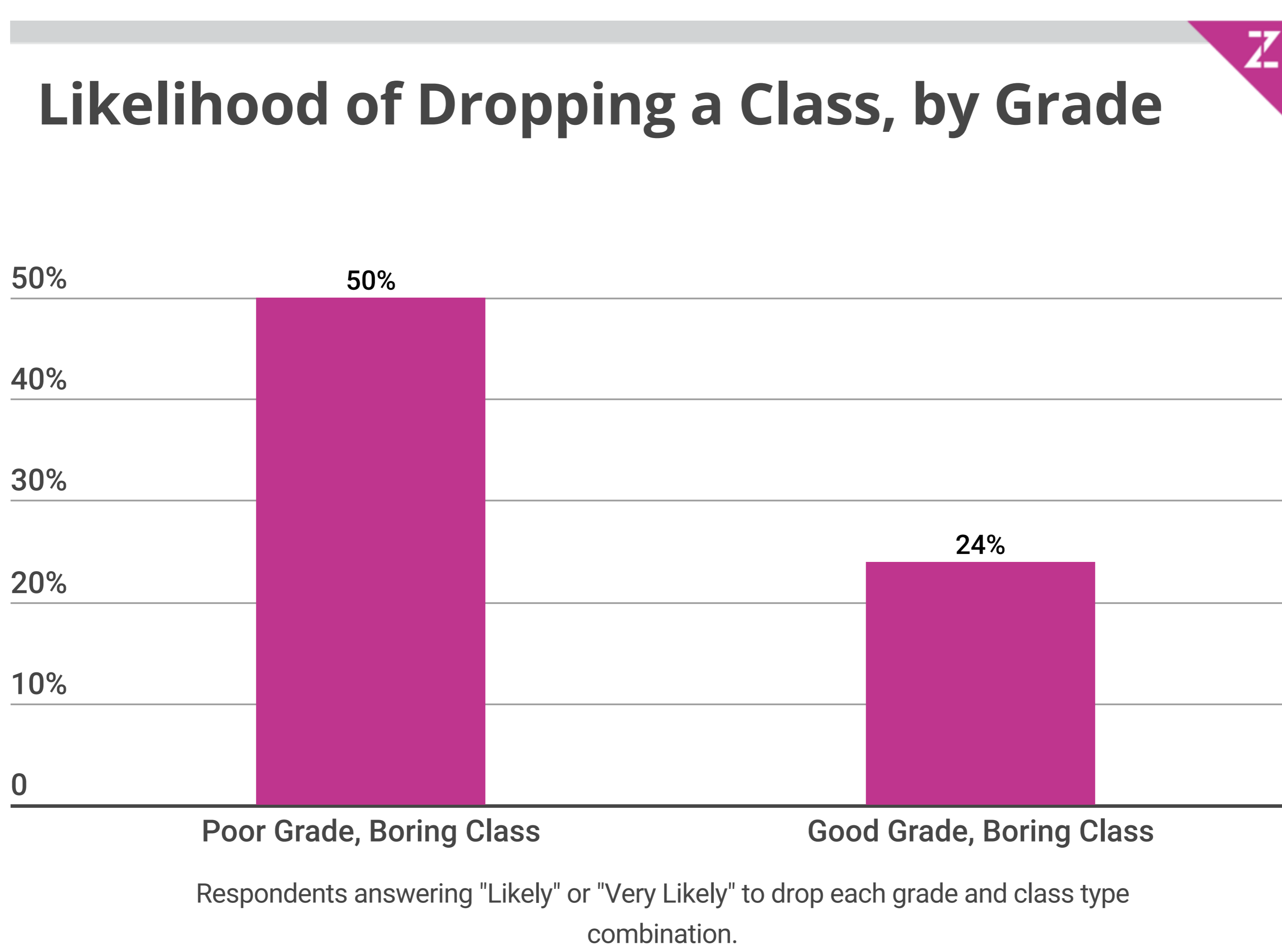
Our research team found that class type, student interest and grades are key drivers of course withdrawal.

THE GRADE FACTOR

As previous Zion & Zion research has shown, poor grades play a significant role in determining if a student withdraws from a course, with 19% of students saying they dropped a class because of an unsatisfactory grade. In addition, 17% of students said they dropped due to not understanding the material, which is likely related to poor grades (or anticipated poor grades). Together, that's a meaningful 36%, which doesn't include any of the 21% who said they dropped a class because they didn't "like the course." There are probably some students with disappointing grades in there, as well.

To begin, we asked students how likely they were to drop a boring class depending on if they were getting a good grade vs. a poor grade (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

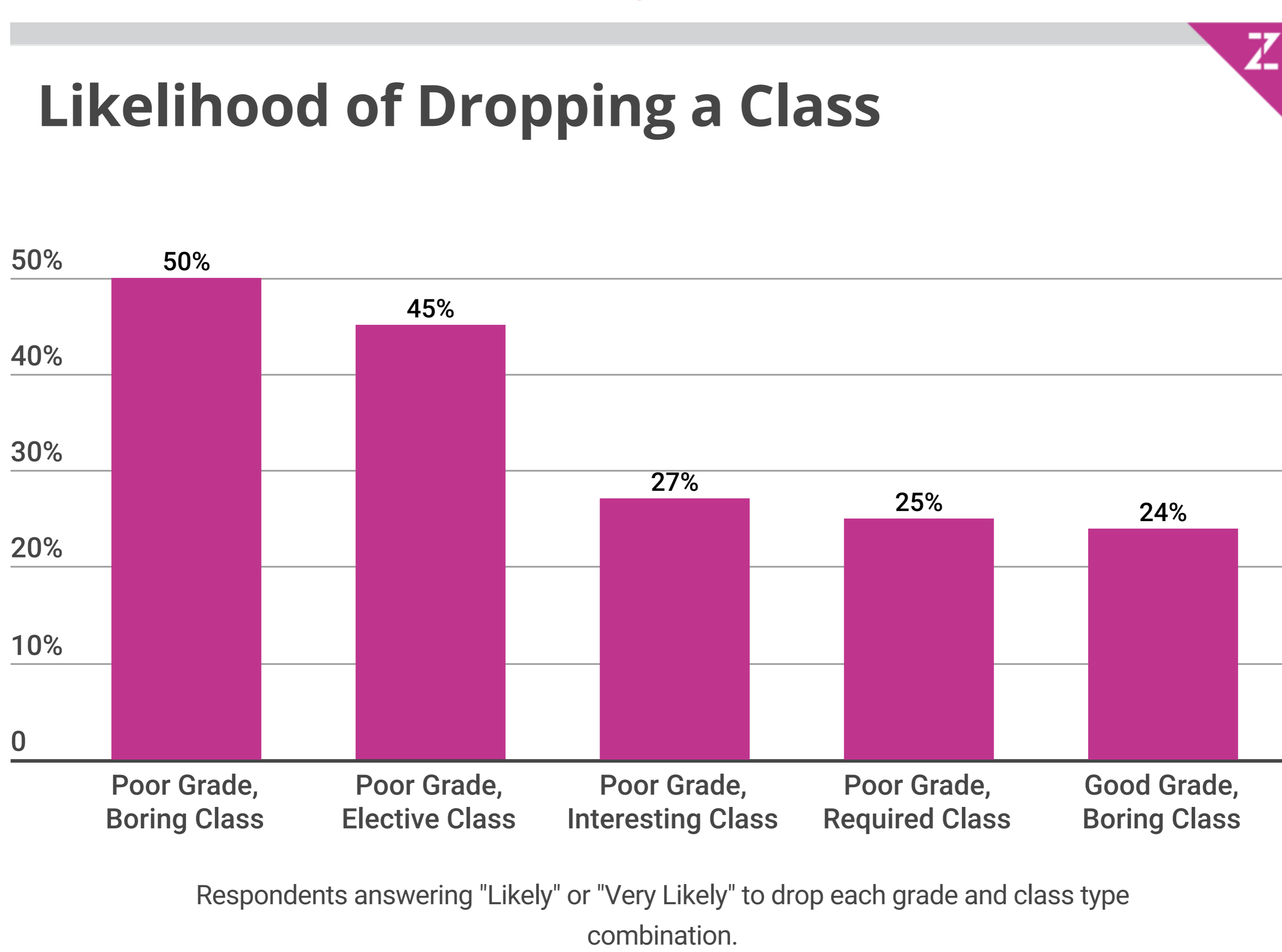


Controlling for student interest in the class reveals how important grade is as a factor. Students getting a poor grade in a boring class are twice as likely to drop the class as students getting a good grade.

COURSE CORRECTION

No student sets out to purposely get a poor grade in a course. But when it does happen—for whatever reason—we suspected that the type of class might increase or decrease the probability of the student dropping the course. For example, while we expected that students would drop an elective class more readily than one required for graduation, we wanted to not only confirm this, but to see to what extent the effect would hold (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

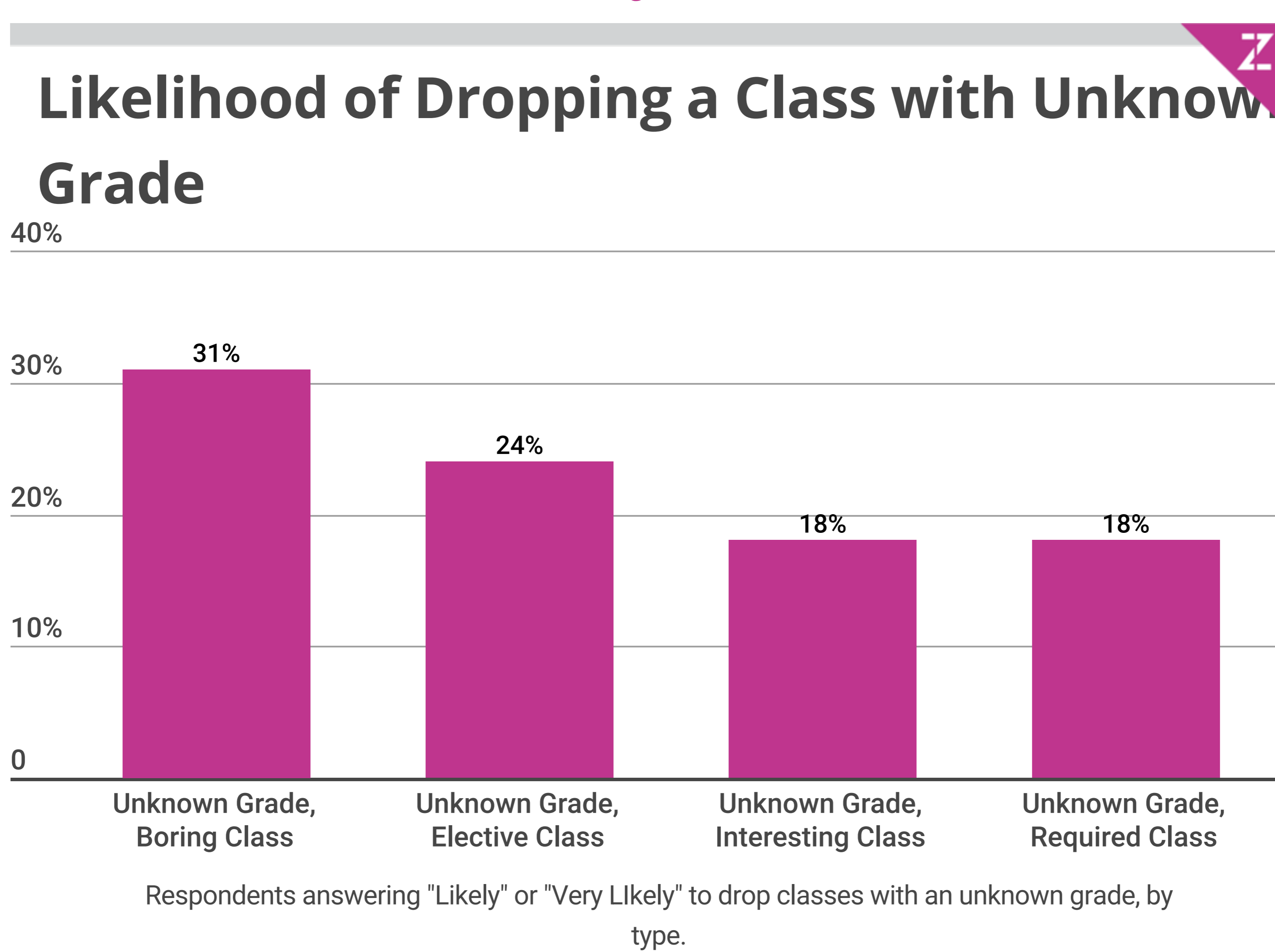


The data suggests a strong effect on course dropping by students with poor grades based on what type of course (elective vs. required) the student is taking. An even bigger difference in likelihood of course withdrawal is driven by whether a class is interesting or boring.

It makes sense that a student would stay in a required class when receiving a poor grade vs. in an elective class (45% to 25%). After all, students need required classes to graduate. This suggests that students are likely to "power through" a required class when receiving a poor grade. Students will also stay in an interesting class when getting a poor grade to nearly the same degree as when getting a good grade in a boring class.

Most colleges have published "drop dates" beyond which a class can't be dropped. As a result, a student might be faced with dropping a class without knowing their current grade. We therefore wanted to understand how a student's likelihood of dropping classes would be affected if they don't know their grade (see Figure 3).

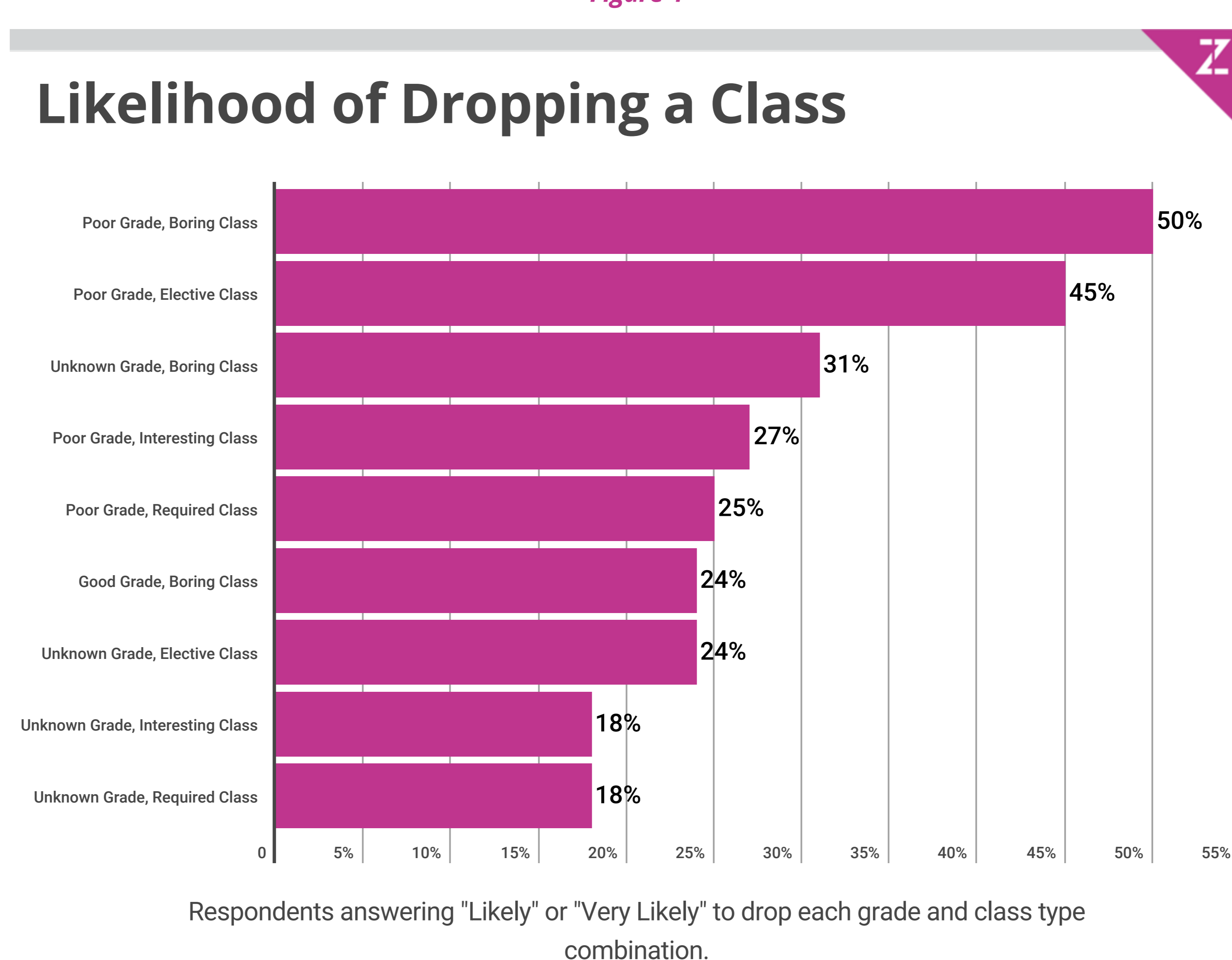
Figure 3



It can be challenging for a student to know whether they should drop a course without an understanding of how they're doing prior to the withdrawal deadline. This results in them sticking with interesting or required classes, but they're much more likely to ditch boring or elective courses.

Looking at all the data—both known and unknown grades—helps paint a clear picture (see Figure 4).

Figure 4



Seeing all the data in one chart highlights the relationship between a poor grade and the likelihood of withdrawing from a course. Even if a student may ultimately end up with a poor grade, if they don't have that information prior to a drop deadline, they are likely to stick with that class. To underscore this, students with an unknown grade in an interesting or required class are less likely to drop than those with a good grade in a boring class.

PUTTING THE DATA TO WORK

The implications of our findings for managing college courses are four-fold. First, unless strict systems like the one in Texas that limits students to dropping no more than six courses during their college career are put in place, or unless the penalties for withdrawing from a class are significant, well understood and enforced, there will likely always be a substantial number of students who drop courses due to poor grades or lack of interest.

Second, one element that colleges can affect is to take steps to make courses as interesting as possible. Doing so could significantly reduce the frequency of students dropping a course, whether they are receiving a poor grade or are even aware of their grade. This is a tall order, of course. Long-tenured professors and the difficulty of policing/auditing classes will certainly make this challenging. Still, with the enrollment pool at a generational low and the number of higher education institutions at an all-time high, schools cannot ignore the opportunity presented by trying to spruce up their programs.

Third, colleges may be able to reduce the course drop rate by increasing the number of required classes, i.e., reducing the proportion of credit hours that are electives. This goes counter to the trend in many schools to offer a wider range of choices, but the effect on drop rates and thus revenue cannot be ignored.

Fourth, our research points to one other solution which might be somewhat more controversial. Colleges might consider alternative testing systems prior to the drop deadline to not only encourage students, but to improve students' ability to deal with escalating course difficulty as the term progresses. To be clear, we are not suggesting that students be misled in any way, but instead that they are increasingly acclimated over time using an escalating difficulty approach. The effectiveness of such a strategy remains to be proven, but our research suggests that it is worth considering.