



College Students are Dropping Classes: How Often and Why

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BACKGROUND

Every business has the same headache—keeping its customers. But to universities and colleges, the headache is a persistent migraine. It's the nature of the beast; colleges work hard to recruit customers (students) knowing they'll graduate and take their tuition with them ... and that's the best-case scenario. Millions of students drop out of college before having completed a full course load—a substantial loss in tuition to colleges (as well as a personal loss of opportunities for the students). CollegeAtlas.org paints a bleak picture: "56% of college students who started at a 4-year college drop out by year six of their college career."

Another vexing problem for colleges is less understood—the large number of students who stay enrolled but more than occasionally withdraw from a class. This behavior can mean an immediate loss of tuition dollars for colleges and it can predict a later full withdrawal of the student from the college.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

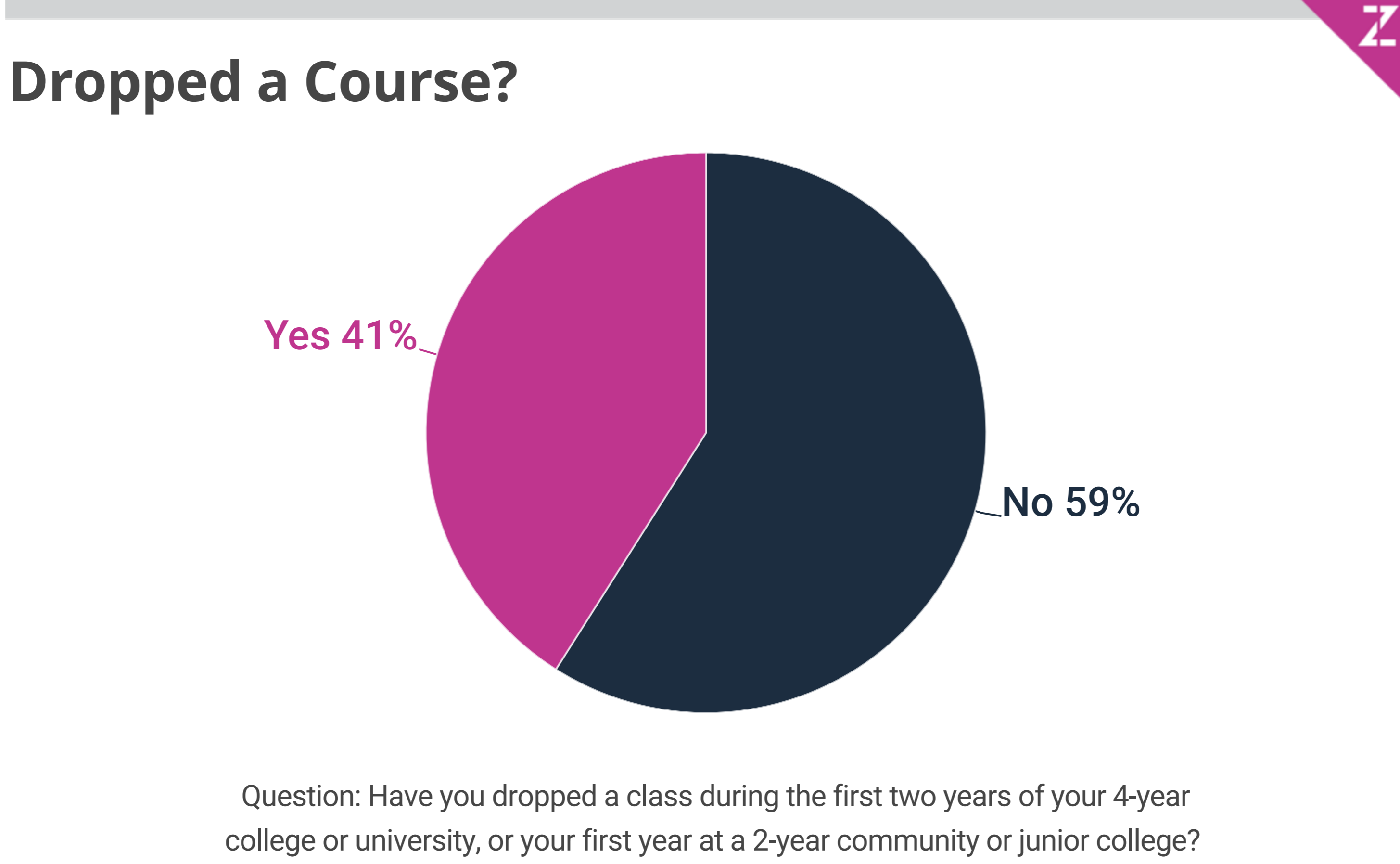
- Current freshmen and sophomores at 4-year colleges and universities
- Students in their first year at a 2-year community or junior college

We explored the prevalence and motives of students dropping college courses early in their academic career. We found that a substantial number of students have dropped courses at the beginning of their college career and that the reasons for dropping courses vary by gender and ethnicity.

THE COURSE-DROPPING EPIDEMIC

Here's the big number: 41% of students drop a class while they are a freshman or sophomore at a 4-year college or university, or in their first year at a 2-year community or junior college—see Figure 1.

Figure 1



By any measure, 41% is significant. But what's the harm? Dropping a class isn't a big deal, is it? Actually, it is. Here's why.

- Public/state universities and colleges not only lose tuition when a student drops a class, they may also suffer decreased governmental funding.
- Depending on how many credits a student is carrying, dropping a class may result in he or she losing (or paying back) financial aid.
- If dropping a class becomes habitual, a student can be in danger of not graduating on time. Even worse, it could lead to complete college withdrawal.
- As graduation rates fall, colleges suffer. No matter if they are public or private, the graduation rates of colleges and universities are widely available, which is something many students take into consideration when deciding where to go. For example, [The Chronicle of Higher Education publishes schools' graduate rates](#). Sub-par graduation rates can hurt college recruitment. Who wants to go to a school where graduating isn't a sure thing?

Course dropping is of such great concern that some states are taking action. Texas has mandated that public colleges and universities limit undergraduates to dropping no more than six classes prior to graduation. The legislation is designed to help students graduate on time and increase enrollment. It's also aimed at students who purposely register for too many classes so they can later drop ones that are too difficult or inconvenient.

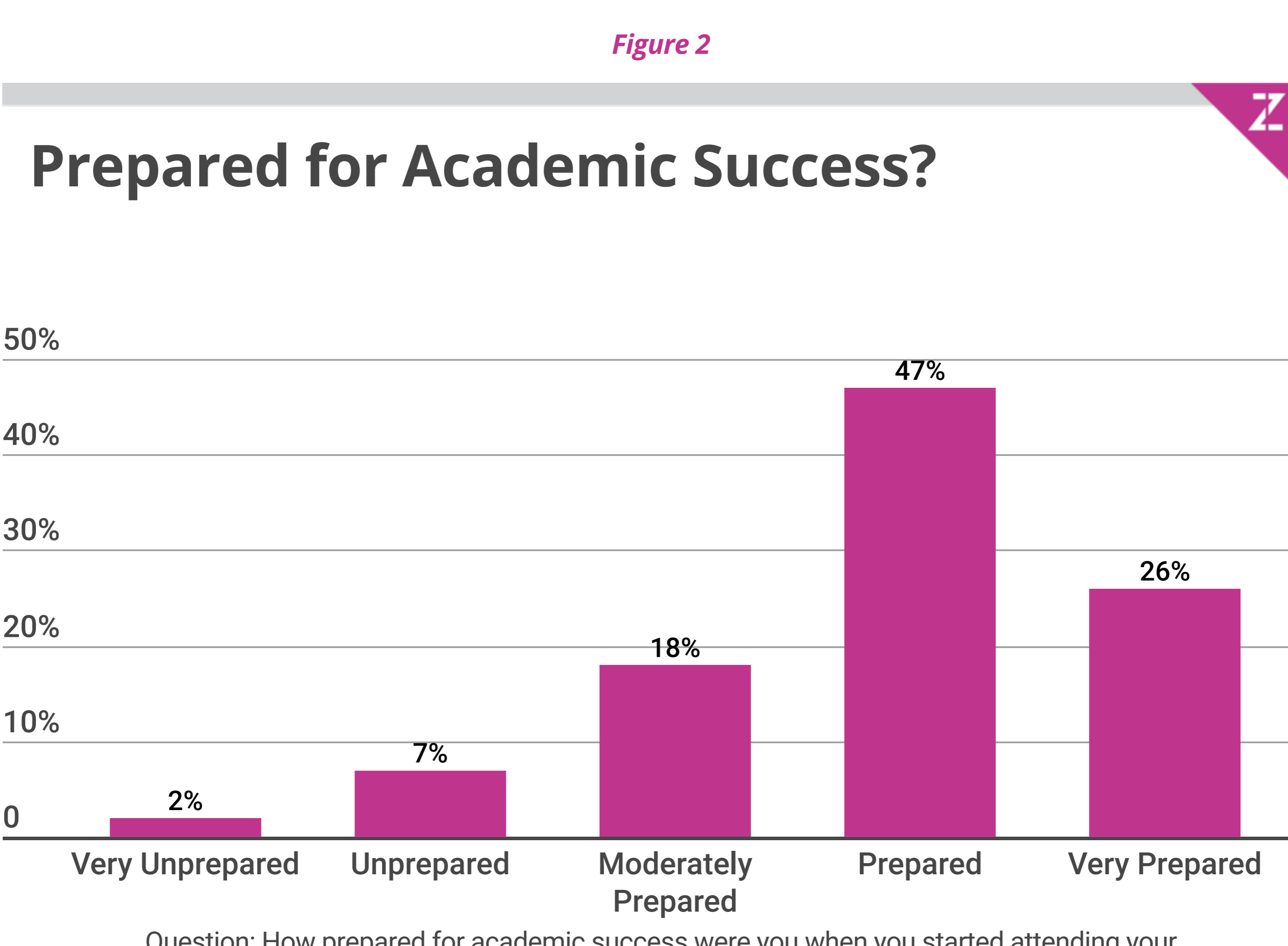
Students at the University of Northern Iowa who drop a class before 60% of the semester has passed are required to return unearned federal student aid in the same proportion. As an example, the school warns students, "If a student completes 30 percent of the semester, then 30 percent of the federal aid received may be retained and the other 70 percent of federal aid received must be returned."

This Zion & Zion market research study focuses on the reasons students dropped classes and how academically prepared they were before entering college.

PREPARED FOR COLLEGE

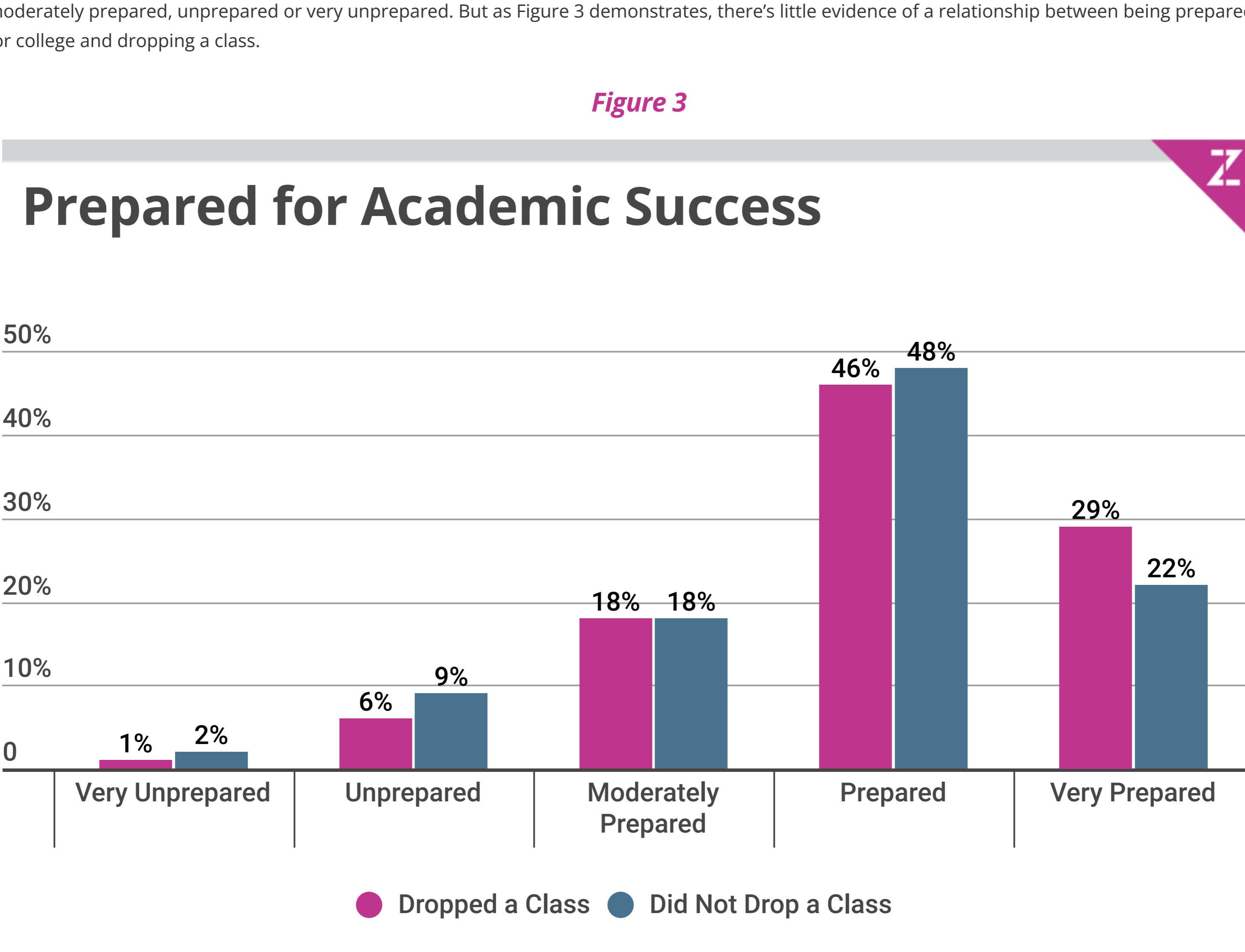
For the most part, students profess to be academically prepared for success prior to starting college (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



While 73% of students claim to have been prepared or very prepared for college, there is a disturbingly large chunk—27%—who admit to being only moderately prepared, unprepared or very unprepared. But as Figure 3 demonstrates, there's little evidence of a relationship between being prepared for college and dropping a class.

Figure 3

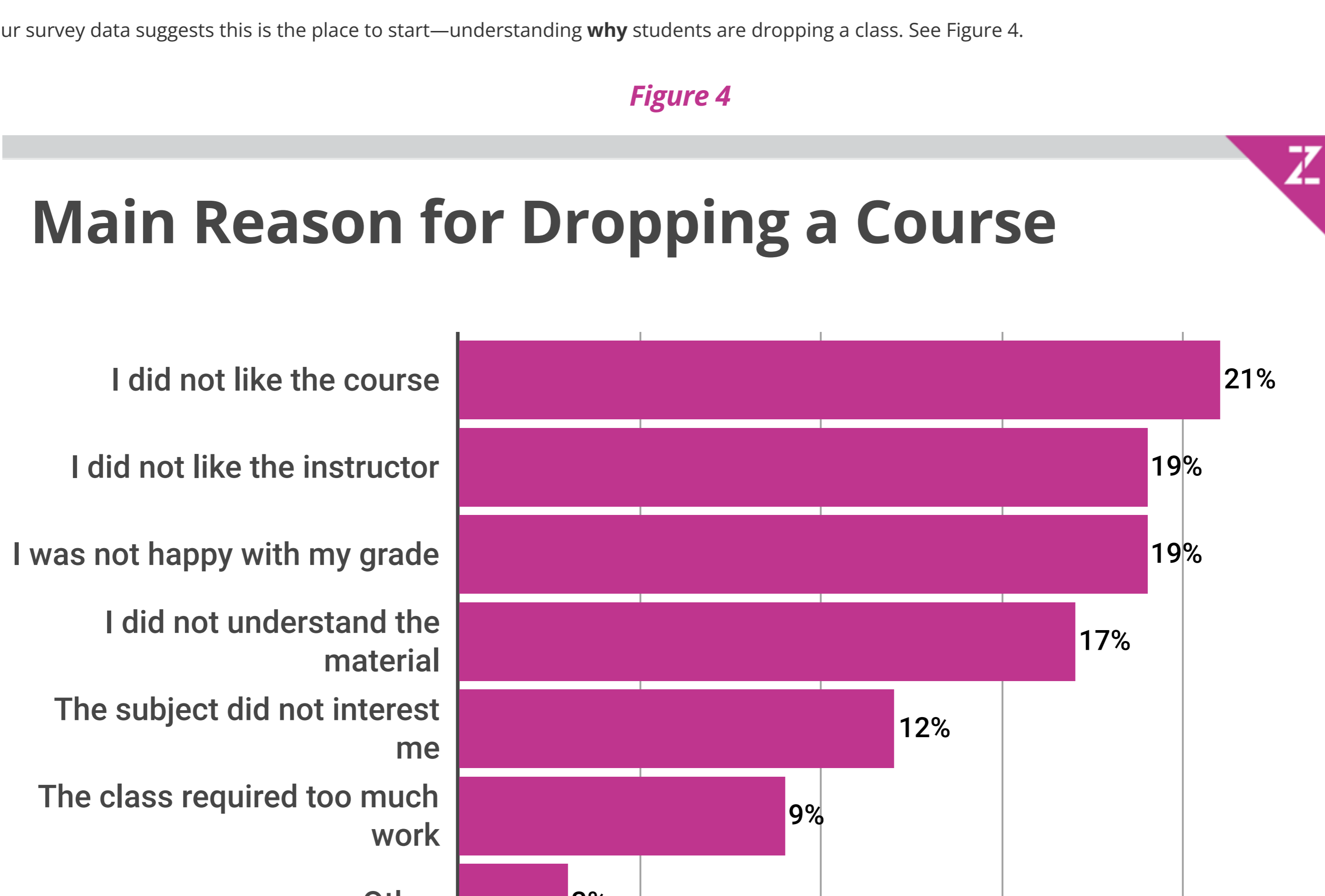


Those who have dropped a class are 7% more likely to be "very prepared" for academic success than those who did not. And there are 4% more students who did not drop a class who say they are "very unprepared" or "unprepared." While these results fall in the survey's margin of error, this is a head scratcher.

WHY DROP A CLASS?

Our survey data suggests this is the place to start—understanding **why** students are dropping a class. See Figure 4.

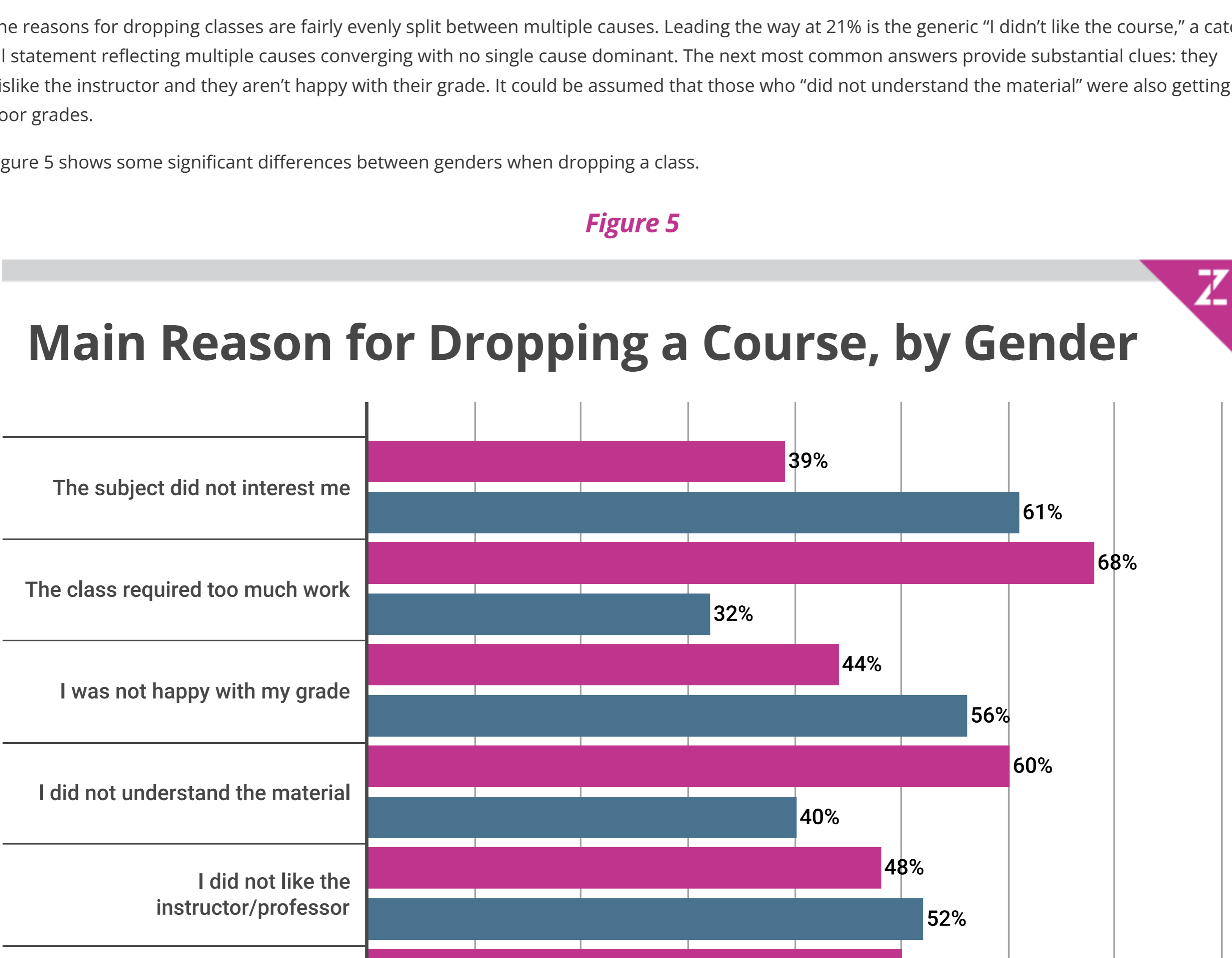
Figure 4



The reasons for dropping classes are fairly evenly split between multiple causes. Leading the way at 21% is the generic "I didn't like the course," a catch-all statement reflecting multiple causes converging with no single cause dominant. The next most common answer "I did not understand the course," they dislike the instructor and they aren't happy with their grade. It could be assumed that those who "did not understand the material" were also getting poor grades.

Figure 5 shows some significant differences between genders when dropping a class.

Figure 5

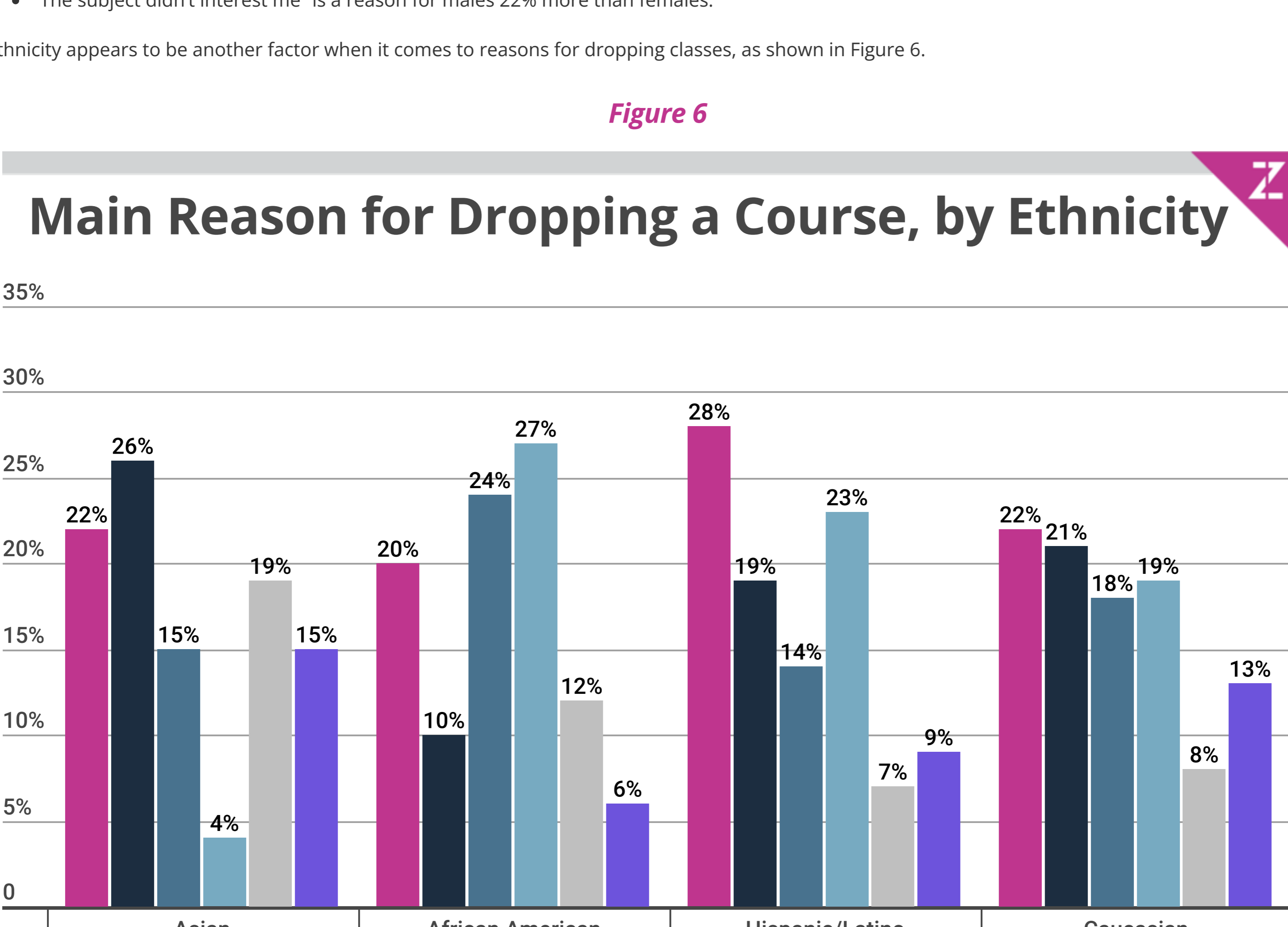


While both genders equally said they dropped a course because they didn't like it, there the similarities mostly end. The biggest gaps between male and female reasons for dropping are:

- Females drop classes because the course "required too much work" 36% more than males.
- Females also said they "did not understand the material" 20% more than males.
- "The subject didn't interest me" is a reason for males 22% more than females.

Ethnicity appears to be another factor when it comes to reasons for dropping classes, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6



Here, ethnicity and social mores come into play. Asian students hardly ever see a low grade as a reason to drop a class, while African American students disproportionately select not understanding the material as a reason for dropping a course. Asian respondents also chose "the class required too much work" significantly more than other ethnicities. These findings underscore the importance of understanding various demographics for course and curriculum design.

PUTTING THE DATA TO WORK

There are several implications of our findings for managing and marketing colleges. First, the reasons for dropping classes are varied. There is no single dominant cause that colleges can focus on to reduce the course drop rates. Second, the push for the adopting zoning, testing and course styles to a diverse student body is an important element in combating the course dropping epidemic—another Zion & Zion research study shows that course dropping increases when classes are perceived as being uninteresting and predicts high levels of course dropping when students receive poor grades. Conversely, students don't typically drop a course when they do not know how they are academically performing prior to a school's drop deadline. This suggests that colleges may want to consider alternative testing and grading systems prior to the drop deadline to not only encourage students, but to improve their ability to deal with escalating course difficulty as the course term progresses.

We also found that the reasons for dropping classes vary by ethnicity and gender.

A key finding of our research, however, is that student preparedness is not a driver of course dropping. So, while many colleges have ramped up instructional support around general student preparedness, our data suggests these efforts may have limited effectiveness on course dropping behavior and that resources invested in such programs may be used elsewhere, or at a minimum such programs and their impact should be reexamined on an institution-by-institution basis.