Predicting working learner attrition from an online Master's level STEM program:

Students who enrolled in lighter course loads at the beginning of the program were at higher risk of attrition.

**BACKGROUND**

Despite the growing popularity of online graduate education as an upskilling option for working adults, little is known about what leads working adults to withdraw from such programs. Evidence from in-person high school and college samples suggests that students who initially enroll in heavy course loads are at higher risk of withdrawing because they experience higher learning demands. But little is known about whether these findings extend to adult, online learners. We study the attrition rate over time of a well-known online master’s program and explore the role of demographic, psychosocial, and behavioral risk factors in predicting program attrition.

**METHOD**

Three data sources were integrated:
1. Student course enrollment behavior
2. Independent student ratings of course difficulty (combined to yield course load index)
3. Student demographic characteristics and educational background

**RESULTS**

1. 128 of the 269 students (47.58%) did not graduate from the program.
2. 59.4% of the students who left the program left after one to three semesters.
3. Findings from a Cox proportional-hazards model analysis indicates that students who took lower average course loads were more likely to leave the program earlier.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Early course enrollment behavior may be a useful, non-obtrusive way to identify at-risk working learners. Further research is needed to understand the determinants of this behavioral pattern; for example, time management issues or low academic self-efficacy.