

Survival of the Busiest: Online Graduate Course Choices as an Early At-Risk Indicator

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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%) students 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.**

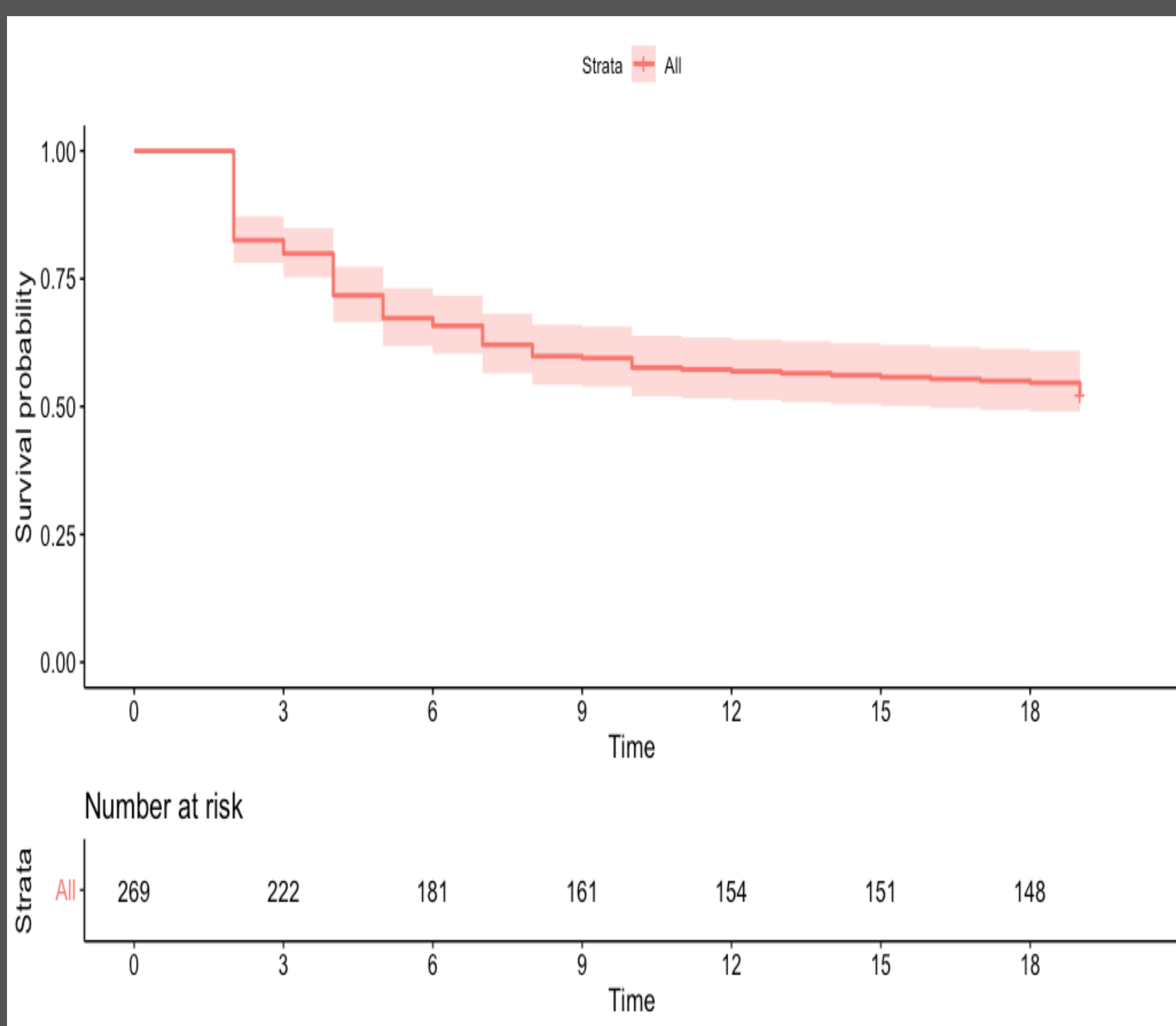
IMPLICATIONS

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.

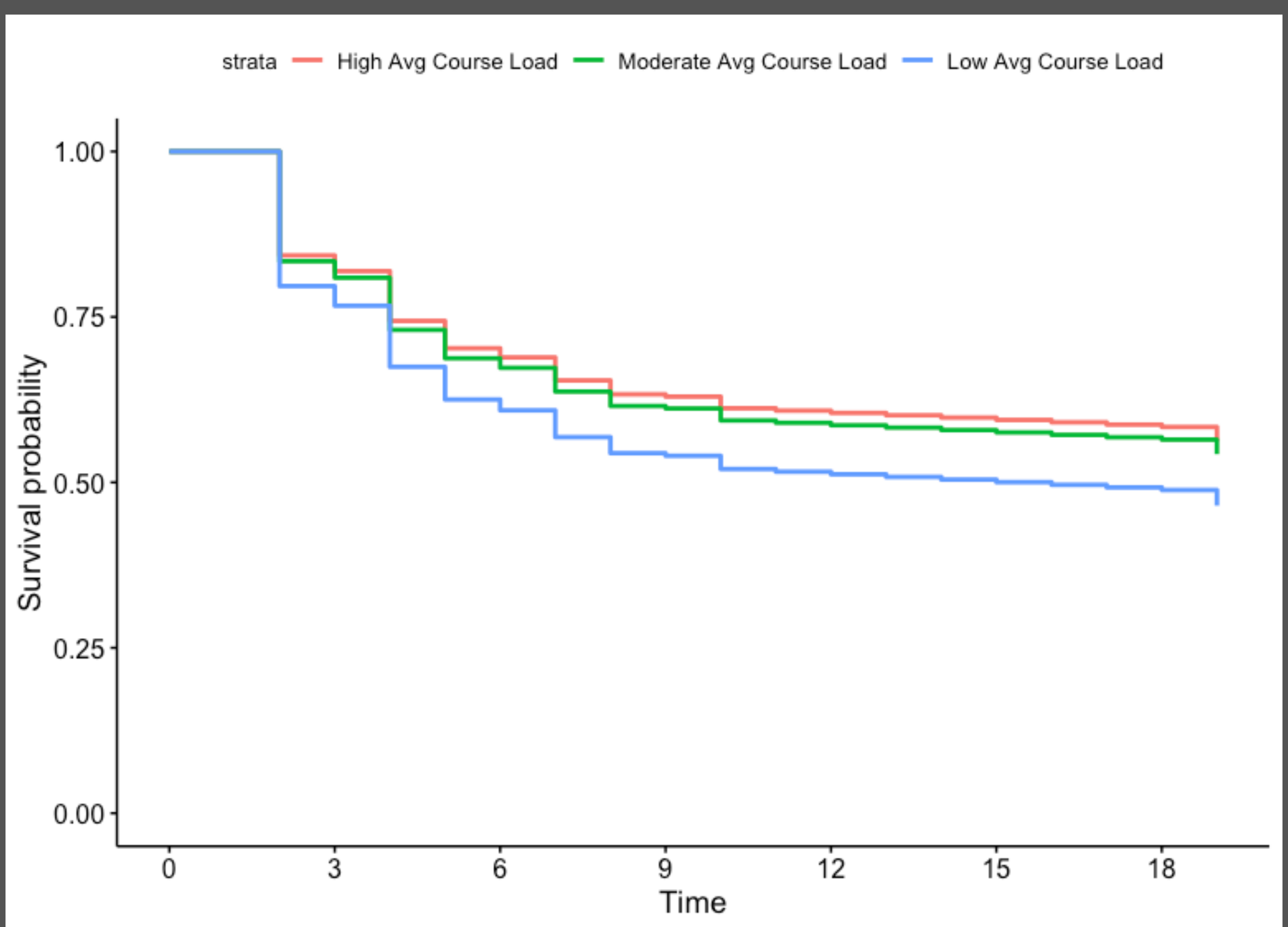
Predicting working learner attrition from an online Master's level STEM program:

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

Kaplan-Meier Survival Curve



Survival Curves by Average Course Load



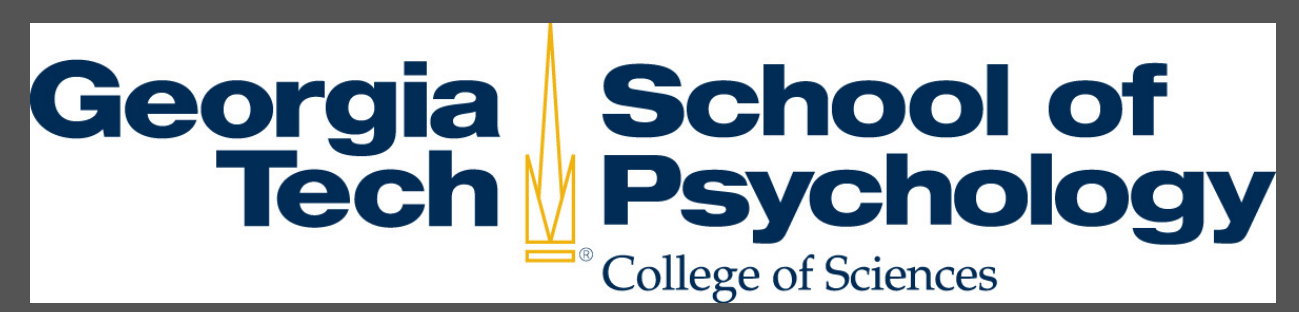
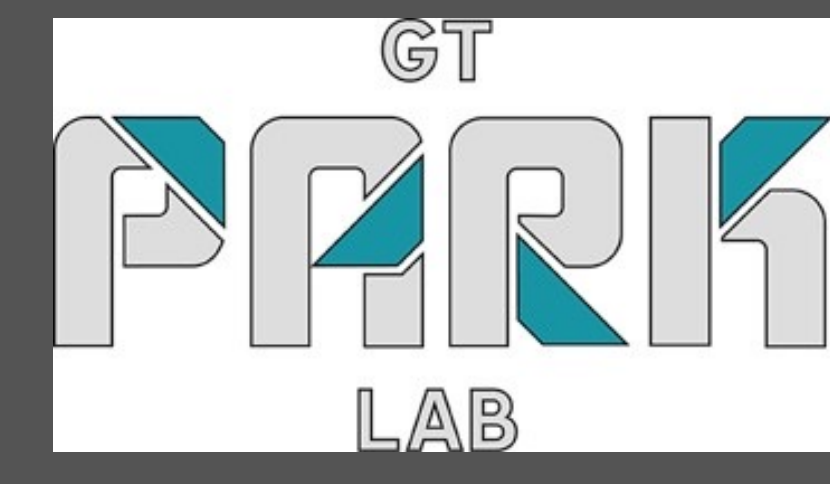
Sample Demographic & Educational Background

Demographic Characteristics					
	Age	Gender		Ethnicity	
Mean	36.58	Male	246, 91.45%	White	194, 72.12%
SD	10.34	Female	23, 8.55%	Asian	41, 15.24%
Range	23-65			Black/Hisp	18, 6.69%
				Other	2, 0.74%
				Mixed	14, 5.20%
Educational Background					
	Undergraduate GPA		Undergraduate Major		
Mean	3.55		CS/IT		170, 63.20%
SD	0.23		Non-CS/IT		99, 36.80%
Range	2.48-4.00				

Cox Proportional-Hazards Model

	b	Hazard Ratio
Age	0.101	1.010
Gender		
Male		
Female	0.326	1.385
Ethnicity		
Not BH		
BH	0.343	1.409
College GPA	-0.114	0.892
College Degree		
CS/IT		
Non-CS/IT	-0.257	0.774
Avg. Course load	-0.653**	0.521**

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