

Failed college dreams don't spell depression, study finds

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High school seniors, take note: A wise person once said, "It is better to shoot for the stars and miss than aim at the gutter and hit it."

That's right on, says Florida State University Sociology Professor John R. Reynolds, who just completed a study to determine whether unrealized educational expectations are associated with depression among adults. Reynolds also is the director of the Pepper Institute on Aging and Public Policy at Florida State.

He and co-author Chardie L. Baird, an assistant professor of sociology at Kansas State University, found no long-term emotional costs of aiming high and falling short when it comes to educational aspirations, despite several social psychological theories that would seem to suggest otherwise. The researchers' conclusion: Society should not discourage unpromising students who have dreams of earning a college degree.

"We should not be in a hurry to dissuade these students from planning to go to college," Reynolds said. "In fact, the only way to guarantee negative [mental health](#) outcomes is not trying. Aiming high and failing is not consequential for mental health, while trying may lead to higher achievements and the mental and material benefits that go along with those achievements."

"Is There a Downside to Shooting for the Stars? Unrealized Educational Expectations and Symptoms of Depression," which was published in the [American Sociological Review](#), is the first large, national study to look at

the mental health consequences of failing to meet educational expectations.

"My previous research showed that teenagers are increasingly unrealistic about what they will be able to achieve," Reynolds said. "I wanted to see if there is anything wrong with that trend. Lots of theories predict that unmet goals will lead to frustration and anxiety. We were very surprised to find out that over-ambition is not a big concern, at least not from a mental health perspective."

Most young people in the United States expect to attend college, earn a four-year degree and work in a professional occupation. Yet the extent to which teenagers' achievement expectations are out of line with what they actually attain is also on the rise.

In a 2006 study, Reynolds and colleagues found that the gap between the percentage of high school seniors expecting to obtain bachelor's degrees and the percentage of [young adults](#) with a degree had doubled in the 25-year period between 1976 and 2000. In other words, increases in high school students' college expectations outpaced increases in young adults' achievements, a result they interpret as "ambition inflation."

Several social psychological theories suggest that's a problem, albeit for different reasons. Self-discrepancy theory says that a gap between a person's ideal self and his or her actual self is detrimental to mental health. Another, relative deprivation theory, claims that individuals experience mental distress when they are deprived of a reward or status to which they feel entitled. Social stress theory asserts that "non-events," such as not being married by a certain age or a promotion that never happens, are distressing.

Reynolds and Baird used two national studies of youth, the National Longitudinal Study and the Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health

(ADD Health), both of which track respondents over a period of time, to test whether unrealized expectations are associated with depression in adulthood. Using data from more than 4,300 respondents, they compared the count of symptoms of depression for those who did and did not achieve their earlier educational plans and found little difference.

Those with lower levels of education did have more depression, but the depression was associated with the lower attainment, not any gap between plans and attainment, Reynolds said. Previous research has established that more educated individuals report better mental and physical health.

The researchers theorize that many young adults who did not reach their educational goals develop a sort of "adaptive resilience" that buffers them from the kind of [depression](#) that could result from feelings of failure. A dramatic increase in older undergraduates in recent years also suggests that young people do not necessarily believe they must meet their educational goals while still in their 20s.

"It may be that young adults can successfully adapt to the unexpected, focusing on the positive aspects of their transition to adulthood rather than dwelling on plans that have fallen through or have been put on hold indefinitely," Reynolds said. "They might also deal with failed plans by extending the plans forward in time as achievements still to come. Young adults with college expectations may visualize having their entire lives to realize their educational plans."

More information: <http://asr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/full/75/1/151>

Provided by Florida State University

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