

Stanford psychologists design 60-minute exercise that raises GPAs of minority students

March 17 2011

Along with the excitement and anticipation that come with heading off to college, freshmen often find questions of belonging lurking in the background: Am I going to make friends? Are people going to respect me? Will I fit in?

Those concerns are trickier for black students and others who are often stereotyped or outnumbered on college campuses. They have good reason to wonder whether they will belong – worries that can result in lower grades and a sense of alienation.

But when black freshmen participated in an hour-long exercise designed by Stanford psychologists to show that everyone – no matter what their race or ethnicity – has a tough time adjusting to college right away, their grades went up and the minority achievement gap shrank by 52 percent. And years later, those students said they were happier and healthier than some of their black peers who didn't take part in the exercise.

"We all experience small slights and criticisms in coming to a new school" said Greg Walton, an assistant professor of psychology whose findings are slated for publication in the March 18 edition of *Science*.

"Being a member of a minority group can make those events have a larger meaning," Walton said. "When your group is in the minority, being rejected by a classmate or having a teacher say something negative

to you could seem like proof that you don't belong, and maybe evidence that your group doesn't belong either. That feeling could lead you to work less hard and ultimately do less well."

Walton's paper, co-authored by psychology and education Professor Geoffrey Cohen, reports that the grade point averages of black students who participated in the exercise went up by almost a third of a grade between their sophomore and senior years.

And 22 percent of those students landed in the top 25 percent of their graduating class, while only about 5 percent of black students who didn't participate in the exercise did that well. At the same time, half of the black test subjects who didn't take part in the exercise were in the bottom 25 percent of their class. Only 33 percent of black students who went through the exercise did that poorly.

Walton and Cohen split about 90 second-semester freshmen at a top American university into "treatment" and "control" groups. About half of the students in each group were black; the others were white.

All the test subjects – who were unaware of the full purpose of the exercise – were told the researchers were trying to understand students' college experiences.

Those in the treatment group read surveys and essays written by upperclassmen of different races and ethnicities describing the difficulties they had fitting in during their first year at school. The subjects in the control group read about experiences unrelated to a sense of belonging.

The upperclassmen had reported feeling intimidated by professors, being snubbed by new friends and ignored in their quest for help early in their college careers. But they all emphasized that, with time, their confidence

grew, they made good friends and they developed strong relationships with professors.

"Everybody feels they are different freshman year from everybody else, when really in at least some ways we are all pretty similar," one older student – a black woman – was quoted as saying. "Since I realized that, my experience . . . has been almost 100 percent positive."

The test subjects in the treatment group were then asked to write essays about why they thought the older college students' experiences changed. The researchers asked them to illustrate their essays with stories of their own lives, and then rewrite their essays into speeches that would be videotaped and could be shown to future students. The point was to have the test subjects internalize and personalize the idea that adjustments are tough for everyone.

"We didn't want them to think of difficulties as unique to them or specific to their racial group," Walton said of the black test subjects. "We wanted them to realize that some of those bad things that happen are just part of the transition that everyone goes through when they go off to college."

The researchers tracked their test subjects during their sophomore, junior and senior years. While they found the social-belonging exercise had virtually no impact on white students, it had a significant impact on black students.

Along with improved GPAs by their senior year, the black students who were in the treatment group reported a greater sense of belonging compared to their peers in the control group. They also said they were happier and were less likely to spontaneously think about negative racial stereotypes. And they seemed healthier: 28 percent said they visited a doctor recently, as compared to 60 percent in the control group.

Despite the impressive outcomes, Walton and Cohen say the social-belonging [exercise](#) isn't a quick fix to closing the academic race gap – a problem fed by a host of issues tied to diversity, socioeconomics and public policy. But their research shows how addressing feelings of belonging can improve student performance. And similar exercises may succeed in addressing concerns about belonging among other groups, like first-generation college [students](#), immigrants and new employees.

"This intervention alone is not the answer, but we know more about what types of things help," Cohen said. "The intervention is like turning on a light switch. It seems miraculous when the lights go on, but it all hinges on the infrastructure that's already in place."

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Stanford psychologists design 60-minute exercise that raises GPAs of minority students (2011, March 17) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-03-stanford-psychologists-minute-gpas-minority.html>

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