

Educators should encourage college students to shoot for the stars: research

September 30 2010

Less academically promising students should not be discouraged from setting high educational goals, according to one Kansas State University professor's research.

Chardie Baird, K-State assistant professor of sociology, and John Reynolds, Florida State University professor of sociology, looked at the mental health consequences of shooting for the stars versus planning for the probable in their publication "Is There a Downside to Shooting for the Stars? Unrealized Educational Expectations and Symptoms of Depression."

Their research, published earlier this year in the *American Sociological Review*, recently won the best publication award for the mental health section of the American Sociological Association.

As educators themselves Baird and Reynolds were especially interested in studying college [students](#). Baird said recent research suggests that younger generations have ambitious educational plans.

Additionally, Baird said many social-psychological theories suggest that if people do not realize their plans, they're likely to be depressed. Baird and Reynolds wanted to see if the same would hold in the specific case of educational goals and outcomes.

"We were interested in the topic on a personal level because we want to provide the best advice to our students," Baird said. "We were also

interested because there has been a real push toward college for all, and we wanted to see what the consequences might be for pushing those with apparent limited academic potential toward higher degrees."

The researchers used the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, which are both nationally representative secondary data sources. Their research ended with positive results: Baird and Reynolds found that there is nothing wrong with encouraging students, even less academically promising students, from pursuing their higher education goals.

"The big story is that we shouldn't really discourage students from shooting for the stars," Baird said. "At least in terms of [mental health](#), there are no real consequences for trying and failing to meet educational plans."

The researchers coined the term "adaptive resilience," which means that people will adapt their reactions to prevent depression if they don't meet their educational plans. For instance, people may actively work to downplay negative feedback by focusing on the best-case scenario or the lessons learned on the way to a failure.

"Considering that there are material and psychological rewards for getting more education, there is just no reason to discourage students or your children from trying, even if it looks like they don't show academic potential," Baird said. "The worst thing that could happen to them if they fail is they will not suffer from depression. The best thing that could happen is that they will live healthier, happier lives like others with higher educational attainment."

Provided by Kansas State University

Citation: Educators should encourage college students to shoot for the stars: research (2010, September 30) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-09-college-students-stars.html>

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