

Friendship without race barriers

October 1 2010

A study in the October issue of the *Journal of Labor Economics* suggests that racial harmony on college campuses could start with dorm room assignments.

Using data gathered from [students](#) at Berea College in Kentucky, the study finds that randomly assigned roommates of different races are just as likely to become friends as randomly assigned roommates of the same race. Further, [white students](#) who are assigned a black roommate their freshman year tend to have more black friends later in their college careers than do white students assigned white roommates, according to the study.

“[W]e find evidence in support of the notion that white students are, on average, as compatible with [black students](#) as they are with white students,” write the study’s authors, Braz Camargo from Sao Paulo School of Economic and the University of Western Ontario, Ralph Stinebrickner of Berea College, and Todd Stinebrickner of the University of Western Ontario. The results also suggest that assigning interracial roommates may be an effective policy lever to combat racial sorting on college campuses, the authors say.

The researchers used data from surveys of freshmen entering Berea in 2000 and 2001. Shortly after arriving on campus, students were asked to list their four best friends at college. The names were then matched to the school’s student database, which includes information on each student’s race. The survey was repeated several times each year over the students’ first three years of college.

Analysis of the data shows that by the middle of their freshman years, interracial roommates were just as likely to list each other as friends as same-race roommates. What's more, the results suggest that interracial roommates tend to remain friends in their second and third years at as least as high a rate as same-race roommates.

Having a black roommate also has a significant influence on a white student's propensity to make other black friends. White students in the sample had, on average, 15.9 percent black friends in their third year if they were assigned a black roommate as freshmen. In contrast, white students assigned white roommates had only 5.4 percent black friends.

"Thus, our results show that policy [increasing the number of interracial roommate pairs] can have a substantial influence on interracial friendship interactions," the researchers write.

More information: Braz Camargo, Ralph Stinebrickner, and Todd Stinebrickner, "Interracial Friendships in College." *Journal of Labor Economics* 28:4 (October 2010).

Provided by University of Chicago

Citation: Friendship without race barriers (2010, October 1) retrieved 18 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-10-friendship-barriers.html>

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