

Link between high schoolers' hopes, educational attainment

November 1 2010, By Steve Smith

Turns out the high school guidance counselor was right. Students who have high aspirations and put thought into their futures during their high school years tend to reach higher levels of educational attainment, according to a recent study.

And what's a significant factor in those goals and expectations taking shape in the first place? It matters if teens are involved in [extracurricular activities](#) -- whether it's football, fine arts or French club.

The research, by Sarah Beal and Lisa Crockett of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, surveyed hundreds of high school students about their educational and career goals and expectations while also examining the types of activities they took part in during high school. Then researchers studied how each activity, from extracurricular clubs and teams to part-time jobs to volunteering, was related to students' thoughts about their futures.

They found that students' educational plans and their occupational goals and expectations were related to and predicted the level of education they ultimately attained. Also, extracurricular activities were related to students' educational goals and career expectations -- and vice-versa.

That unique relationship, the study says, played a role in predicting how far teens eventually went with their educations.

"Adolescents' expectations about their occupational and [educational](#)

[attainment](#) as adults predict their eventual educational attainment, and these expectations seem to shape and be shaped by extracurricular activities -- which, in turn, contribute to young adult educational attainment," said Beal, a UNL graduate student in psychology and the study's lead author. "It may be the case that adolescents learn about their abilities and preferences through the extracurricular activities they engage in, resulting in changes to their expectations for the future."

The [longitudinal study](#), which tracked students from adolescence into adulthood, appeared in a recent edition of the journal *Developmental Psychology*. It showed that what adolescents think about their futures is relevant for their development through adulthood, and suggests that they can use their projections about the future to adapt their behavior in ways that promote achievement later in life.

"There is a longstanding notion that what adolescents do sets the stage for their adult lives," said Crockett, a professor of psychology. "Our results support this idea and indicate that what they think matters as well."

What appears to happen, Crockett said, is that teenagers' plans influence their behaviors, especially extracurricular activities, which in turn influence their educational attainment.

"When you consider how important educational attainment is for adult life -- its relation to occupational attainment, financial security, health, and other aspects of well being -- it appears that the steps adolescents take have important implications for their future success," she said.

Also among the findings:

* While the analysis suggested that extracurricular activities contributed to the process of forming teens' career goals and aspirations, having a

part-time job during [high school](#) did not. It may be the case that adolescents simply consider after-school jobs as a way to earn spending money -- but not paths to their eventual careers.

* Volunteering also was not a predictor of teens' goals and expectations, suggesting that volunteer experiences do not necessarily shape their career and educational goals.

* The study made a clear distinction between teens' career aspirations (what job they hope to do some day) and their career expectations (what job they expect to do some day). While nearly eight in 10 teens reported aspirations and expectations that required similar levels of skills and training, two in 10 reported expectations and aspirations that implied different skill categories.

* Unsurprisingly, destructive behaviors such as substance use and delinquency predicted lower educational attainment over time.

"It appears that ideas about one's future and behaviors influence each other over time," Crockett said. "Related questions are how ideas about one's future take shape initially and what things influence the kinds of long term plans and aspirations teenagers develop."

Other research indicates that factors such as gender, socioeconomic status and abilities are important, she said, "but we know very little about how children begin to formulate their ideas and how these ideas change over adolescence in response to their experiences and their increasing knowledge of their skills, interests and the opportunities available to them. This remains an important question for future research."

Provided by University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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