

A strategy that narrows academic achievement gap by 63 percent

February 14 2014

Americans don't like to talk about social class. But new research from Northwestern and Stanford universities suggests that, at least in college and university settings, they should do just that.

An upcoming article in *Psychological Science* describes a novel one-hour intervention that closed by 63 percent the persistent academic [achievement gap](#) between first-generation college [students](#) and continuing-generation students. (Continuing-generation students are defined as those with at least one parent with a four-year college degree.)

The key to the one-time intervention's success was raising students' awareness of the ways that social class shapes the college experience, according to Northwestern psychologist Nicole Stephens.

"First-generation students earn lower grades, are at greater risk of dropping out and feel a greater sense of 'not belonging' when they transition to college, yet programs designed to help them usually leave out discussions of students' social class backgrounds," says Stephens, associate professor in Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management.

In "Closing the Social-Class Achievement Gap," lead author Stephens and co-authors MarYam Hamedani and Mesmin Destin outline the intervention they devised to help first-generation students successfully transition to college. Hamedani is associate director of Stanford University's Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity. Destin is assistant professor in Northwestern's School of Education and

Social Policy and in its Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences.

The "difference-education intervention," which took place at the beginning of the academic year, deliberately but subtly included discussions of the ways that students' different social class backgrounds impacted their college experience. Researchers compared it to the "standard intervention" which, in contrast, avoided reference to social class.

In both interventions, third- and fourth-year undergraduates from a wide variety of family backgrounds related personal stories about their own college adjustment to a group of incoming freshmen, some first-generation, some not.

In the difference-education intervention, student panelists discussed obstacles to and strategies for college success that they linked to their different social class backgrounds. In the "standard intervention," they discussed the same issues without talking about their family backgrounds.

A panelist in the difference-education intervention said: "Because my parents didn't go to college, they weren't always able to provide me the advice I needed. So it was sometimes hard to figure out what classes to take and what I wanted to do in the future. But there are other people who can provide that advice, and I learned that I needed to rely on my adviser more than other students."

A panelist in the standard intervention also talked about the difficulty of choosing classes and of the need to rely on professors, mentors and other campus resources but did not mention her social class background.

The effort to embrace instead of erase discussions of social class difference had significant long-term consequences. The difference-

education intervention not only closed the social-class [academic achievement gap](#) by 63 percent but also improved first-generation students' psychological adjustment to college.

At the end of the academic year, they reported better outcomes on psychological well-being, social fit, perspective taking and appreciation of diversity than their peers in the standard intervention. They also had higher grade point averages and reported an increased tendency to take advantage of campus resources, including meeting with professors outside of class and getting extra tutoring.

"Students whose parents have earned a degree come to college with lots of know-how and cultural capital that helps them navigate college's often unspoken rules," Stephens says. "Talking about [social class](#) gives first-generation students a framework to understand how their own backgrounds matter in college, what unique obstacles they may face and see that people like them can be successful."

All this should be good news to President Barack Obama and college and university presidents who have been discussing how to get more capable low-income students successfully through [college](#).

"Our findings put some of the responsibility back on colleges and universities and ask them to rethink the kinds of programs and messages they develop in their efforts to create an inclusive environment for first-generation students," adds Stephens.

The researchers also found benefits from the difference-education [intervention](#) for continuing-generation students. "They, too, scored higher on measures for well-being, engagement and social fit," said Stephens. "That's more icing on the cake."

Provided by Northwestern University

Citation: A strategy that narrows academic achievement gap by 63 percent (2014, February 14)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2014-02-strategy-narrows-academic-gap-percent.html>

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