

College education not always about what you have

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Students who have books and computers at home, who take extramural cultural classes, and whose parents give advice and take part in school activities are most likely to enroll for a four-year college degree. Also, more American black students – irrespective of their class or background – will set off on this education path than their white counterparts. So says David Merolla of Wayne State University and Omari Jackson of Colby-Sawyer College in the US, in Springer's journal *Race and Social Problems*. Merolla and Jackson studied class and race differences in college enrollment, and how it is influenced by the culturally enriching resources available to families.

Data of 8,116 participants from the Educational Longitudinal Study were analyzed. Surveys for this nationally representative study of the 2002 10th grade class in the US were done biennially until 2006. The results show that, after adjusting for differences in [family](#) background, [black students](#) at any class level are more likely than their white counterparts to attend a four-year university. Black middle-class [students](#) take the lead, followed by black middle-income, black low-income and white middle-class students.

Class disparity continues to influence overall enrollment between races. The researchers found that 37.5 percent of white students are from middle-class families, compared to 15.7 percent of blacks. Also, 40.7 percent of [white students](#) hail from middle-income backgrounds versus 30.8 percent of blacks. Most black students (53.6 percent) are from low-income backgrounds, compared to just 21.8 percent of whites.

Not surprisingly, middle-class families representing both races possess more cultural resources than others. In all, college enrollment is significantly higher for students from homes where newspapers, books or computers are available. It is also true for students who take extra music or art classes. The odds of college attendance increase with 11.7 percent if parents are involved in school activities and by 28 percent when students receive parental advice. High school students on an academic track are 2.7 times more likely to attend college.

White students tend to have more literacy resources and higher educational aspirations. They go on more day trips and vacations, their teachers rate them as hardworking and well behaved, and they are often on an academic track. Even though black students tend to possess fewer resources, they activate and use cultural resources better. Their families are more involved in school activities such as the Parent Teacher Association, and have more positive school contact. Black students also do extra exam preparations, actively seek information, and receive guidance from parents.

"Black students are less likely to come from middle-class families. However, those families who do have the material resources associated with middle-class status tend to invest in their children's education at similar or higher levels than their white counterparts," says Merolla.

"Policies should help families to obtain access to educational and cultural resources that would help ameliorate educational inequality and promote success for all students," adds Jackson.

More information: Merolla, D.M. & Jackson, O. (2014). Understanding Differences in College Enrollment: Race, Class and Cultural Capital, *Race and Social Problems*. [DOI: 10.1007/s12552-014-9124-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12552-014-9124-3)

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