

Self-affirmation plays role in minority students' college success

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Credit: Wikipedia

Having minority middle school students write a series of self-affirmation exercises focusing on core values improved the odds that the students would pursue college tracks in school, according to Stanford scholars.

The study, which recently appeared in the *Proceedings of the National*

Academy of Sciences, found that after completing the self-affirmation exercises, Latino students were more likely to enter a [college](#) readiness track than a remedial one near the transition to [high school](#) and African American students were more likely to enroll in college seven to nine years later.

"Once students feel affirmed, a whole series of forces in the environment exist to help propel them forward: teachers noticing their potential more, giving them more challenging work, directing them to advanced courses," said J. Parker Goyer, the study's lead author and post-doctoral scholar at Stanford. "The effects can be powerful, but the [intervention](#) itself plays a subtle role as an initiator of this larger process."

The role of interventions

Previous work has found that social-psychological interventions, such as self-affirmation, can improve academic performance in vulnerable groups. They tend to have the biggest effect when people face a looming stressor, such as an upcoming exam, or find themselves at a more broadly stressful transition, as many early adolescents do.

These interventions can also help minority students cope with the threat of negative stereotypes in school. Previous work by Stanford faculty has shown that such stress over being seen or treated as intellectually limited, the paper states, "may drain cognitive resources that could otherwise be expended on learning." This stress can lead to lower grades, which breed more stress, setting off a cycle that can be difficult to escape.

However, those same researchers have found that self-affirmation can slow or stop this negative cycle. Middle school students who carry out self-affirmation exercises earn higher GPAs through [middle school](#) and are less likely to be placed in remedial courses. What has not been

known until now is how long these effects can last and whether they can also affect school performance beyond GPA, such as taking college track courses or attending college.

Goyer said the team's recent work illustrates how interventions can trigger powerful long-term effects. She also said that the students who begin to perform better are poised to take advantage of resources and opportunities their schools already provide, including supportive teachers, advanced courses and college preparation electives.

The power of affirmation as a facilitator

The study focused on two groups of [middle school students](#) – Latinos living in the Mountain West and African Americans living in the Northeast. The African American students completed writing exercises in the seventh grade while the Latino students were given the exercises in the sixth, seventh or eighth grades.

Students assigned to the intervention chose two to three [core values](#) that were personally important such as relationships, creativity or humor, and wrote a few sentences about why they were important. The exercises took place during stressful times over the course of a single year in middle school, including at the beginning of the school year and right before exams. Students in the control group did a neutral writing assignment.

The researchers then tracked the students (African Americans through college enrollment and Latinos through high school enrollment), using official school records. For Latinos, long-term follow-ups revealed that they took more challenging courses, such as a college readiness elective. They were also less likely to be placed in remediation. African Americans were more likely to enroll in college seven to nine years later, including in relatively more selective colleges.

Institutional and psychological tracks

The researchers think that a primary reason the intervention succeeded is because it was given in middle school, which is the first time [student](#) performance determines educational tracks.

"If you get a D+ instead of a C-, you can get put in the remedial track, and once you're there it gets harder and harder to get out," Goyer said. "As students progress through middle school and into high school, ascending to paths they failed to enter earlier can become increasingly difficult."

The tracks can also be psychological. Teachers may see students who happen to perform well early on as having more potential, and give more encouragement and attention to such students.

"The tracks we don't see—the way we are categorized in the minds of others—can affect us too," said Geoffrey Cohen, the study's senior author and a professor of education and psychology at Stanford.

Although the writing exercises helped student performance, the authors caution that applying similar interventions in every [school](#) is imprudent. This intervention was specifically designed for students feeling under threat because of stereotypes; how they would fare at schools with varying levels of infrastructure and resources is unknown. They said academic success depends on much more than just affirmation, including attentive teachers and access to advanced courses.

"The intervention is more of a starting point," Goyer said.

More information: Self-affirmation facilitates minority middle schoolers' progress along college trajectories, *PNAS* 2017 ; published ahead of print June 19, 2017, [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1617923114](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1617923114)

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