



Simple Writing Assignment Improves Minority Student Grades

(Apr. 16, 2009) — In a follow-up to a 2006 study, a University of Colorado at Boulder researcher and his colleagues found that an in-class writing assignment designed to reinforce students' sense of identity and personal integrity increased the grade-point averages of African-American middle school students over a two-year period, and reduced the rate at which these students were held back or placed in remediation.

The results suggest that targeted psychological interventions on a wider scale could help narrow the racial achievement gap among U.S. students, one of the most pressing and persistent domestic issues in our country, according to Associate Professor Geoffrey Cohen of CU-Boulder's psychology department and his fellow principal investigators Julio Garcia and Valerie Purdie-Vaughns of Columbia University.

The follow-up study appears in the April 16 issue of the journal *Science*. Nancy Apfel and Patricia Brzustoski of Yale University were co-authors on the study.

"In our original study we uncovered evidence that this self-affirming intervention improved the performance of African-Americans in a single academic term," Cohen said. "Now we have evidence that its effects persist over the two years of children's tenure in middle school."

The study also suggests that "intervening" early in students' middle school years can have long-lasting benefits by undermining a recurring cycle of increasingly poor performance in school.

Over the two years of the 2006-08 study, the grade-point average of African-Americans was, on average, raised by .24 grade points. Low-achieving African Americans benefited most from the intervention, with their GPAs increasing by an average of .41 points on a four-point scale. The assignment had no impact on white students' grades.

"Our intervention is based on the idea that ethnic minority students experience, on average, higher levels of stress in the classroom because they are concerned that if they perform poorly on a test or in a class this will confirm, in the eyes of others, the negative stereotype about their group's intelligence ability," Cohen said.

Past research has found that school settings in general are stressful to many students regardless of race. However, many African-American students may experience chronic stress in school stemming from negative stereotypes portraying them as less intelligent than their peers, according to Cohen. This in turn leads to decreased academic performance.

The study involved three experiments in which seventh graders from middle-class and lower middle-class families were given a series of structured writing assignments throughout the year. They were

asked to choose one or two values that were important to them and then write about why they cherished the values. A control group was asked to write about values that others might hold or other neutral topics. A total of 416 students participated, divided in roughly equal numbers by race.

"This exercise, called a self-affirmation, allows a student to reaffirm that he or she is a good and competent person," Cohen said. "This helps reduce stress by allowing the student to think about all the things that matter to them, for example their family or their religion. It makes the possibility of failure less dire."

The study also suggests that how students perform during the school year is strongly correlated to how they perform during the first few weeks of that year. If a student starts off the year feeling more stress due to negative stereotypes, and then performs poorly during the first few weeks of school, this can establish a downward cycle of increasing stress and poor performance that is hard to break, said Cohen.

"Our study shows that early intervention seems to interrupt this downward trend in academic performance," he said.

Cohen and his co-authors also measured the students' sense of success at the beginning of the school year and again at the end. They found that for low-performing African-American students there is a drop in their sense of adequacy in school over the course of the school year, but for students who participated in the exercise, and for white students, their sense of success remained constant over time.

"This suggests that early failure can have a disproportionate effect on the negatively stereotyped group," Cohen said. "The first few weeks of middle school can have a negative effect on a child's self-concept that seems surprisingly persistent. We found that if you can buffer people against this you can potentially have long-term benefits."

Cohen said he plans to continue studying similar psychological interventions on other groups of students to see if similar positive results can be generated and to zero in on the mechanisms underlying these effects.

"In a society where economic success depends heavily on scholastic achievement, even a slight narrowing of the achievement gap would be consequential," Cohen said. "This is especially true for low-achieving students, given the societal, institutional and personal costs of academic failure."