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Minority Students Fare Better in Colleges When High-School Classmates Also Enroll, Researchers Say

Black and Hispanic college freshmen perform better academically if their entering class includes substantial numbers of other students from their high school, according to findings presented by researchers in Washington over the weekend at a conference of the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management.

The researchers — Marta Tienda, a professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University, and Jason M. Fletcher, an assistant professor of public health at Yale University — took data from the University of Texas at Austin and examined what happened to the achievement of minority students there after the flagship campus established a scholarship program aimed at increasing enrollments from low-income high schools that it had drawn few students from before.

The researchers were primarily interested in how college freshmen benefit from having substantial peer networks. Unable to research and map out the peer networks of each student at UT-Austin, they decided as a proxy to calculate the number, and racial and ethnic makeup, of students coming to the university from each high school.

One of the researchers' initial observations was how much race- and ethnicity-based variation existed in peer networks, largely as a result of the high level of segregation in Texas' public high schools. For example, the average white freshman entered UT-Austin alongside more than 30 students from his or her high-school class, 23 of whom were white, but the average black student entering the university did so alongside fewer than 20 students from his or her high school, only one of whom was black.

The researchers found that black students who watched just one additional black student from their high school enroll alongside them had first-semester grade-point averages that, on average, were 0.13 points higher than they would have been otherwise. Hispanic students experienced similar benefits from enrolling alongside Hispanic students from their own high school, and reaped some benefit from having a large network of fellow graduates of their high school of any race or ethnicity.

Ms. Tienda and Mr. Fletcher have not yet published their paper discussing their findings. Ms. Tienda says that in the five months since they wrote it, she and other researchers have looked at other colleges and universities and come up with similar results. —*Peter Schmidt*

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