

Minority Journalism Kids Do Better Academically

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A recent study of nearly 5,400 college-aged minority students shows that those who were on the staff of a high school newspaper or yearbook outperformed non-journalism minority students in 12 of 15 major academic comparisons.

The study, sponsored by the Newspaper Association of America Foundation, used data gathered in ACT pre-college standardized tests, high school grades and results of collegiate performance for the analysis. Of the 5,369 minority students in the study, 993 (18.5%) of them had served on the staff of a high school newspaper or yearbook.

Minority students for purposes of this study, and using categories assigned by ACT, include: African American/Black (non-Hispanic); American Indian, Alaska Native; Mexican American/Chicano; Asian American, Pacific Islander; Puerto Rican, Cuban, Other Hispanic Origin; and Multiracial.

Results

Minority students with high school newspaper or yearbook staff had higher overall grade point averages in their first year of college (2.56 compared with non-journalism students' 2.52), but the difference was not significant ($p < .21$).

Students with high school journalism backgrounds had significantly higher collegiate first English course grades (often English Composition or some other writing course) than did non-journalism first-year college students (2.80 compared with 2.70; $p < .02$).

When it comes to ACT Composite Score differences, minority journalism students score just a bit higher in this category than their non-journalism counterparts (19.58 compared with 19.54), but this difference is not significant ($p < .77$).

Regarding the other major components of the ACT exam, minority students with high school journalism backgrounds scored significantly higher in two of the areas, scored significantly lower in one of the areas, and were lower in another area. In both ACT English (19.80 vs. 19.46; $p < .04$) and ACT Reading (19.93 vs. 19.44, $p < .01$) the minority students with high school journalism staff experiences scored significantly better than non-journalism minority students.

However, minority journalism students were significantly lower in the ACT Mathematics portion of the exam (18.68 compared with 19.16, $p < .001$), and they scored lower in the ACT Science component (19.40 compared with 19.61, $p < .11$).

In terms of high school grades, minority journalism students had significantly better grades in six of seven areas of academic comparison. In the other, they got the same grades as their non-journalism counterparts (Mathematics, where both groups averaged 3.03).

Minority high school journalism students with newspaper or yearbook staff experience earned significantly better grades than their non-journalism counterparts in English (3.23 vs. 3.14, $p < .001$), Social Studies (3.47 vs. 3.36, $p < .001$), Science (3.25 vs. 3.16, $p < .001$), Foreign Language (3.36 vs. 3.26, $p < .001$), and Art (3.82 vs. 3.78, $p < .04$).

In the overall high school grade point average, minority journalism students also had significantly higher grades (3.23 vs. 3.14, $p < .001$).

For those minority students for whom we had records, the ones with high school journalism backgrounds who had gone on to sophomore year of college outperformed the non-journalism students on the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP) Writing (Essay) Test Score with 74th percentile scores compared with 61st percentile scores ($p < .01$) for the non-journalism minority students.

Regarding out-of-class accomplishments and interest inventory, which are gathered as part of the ACT Examination, we found the following areas to be significantly higher for minority student journalists as compared with non-journalism minority students (significant at the $p < .05$ level and beyond):

- Almost 54 percent (compared with 47 percent) were enrolled in Advanced Placement or English Honors high school language arts classes;
- Almost 9 percent of minority journalism students claim they are headed toward journalism/mass communication majors in college. That's about two-and-a-half times more than minority students who did not have newspaper or yearbook experience in high school.

Other areas in which journalism minority students were significantly more involved in various high school activities than non-journalism minority students: vocal music, student government, debate, departmental clubs (science, math, and the like), dramatics/theater, religious organizations, racial or ethnic organizations, varsity athletics, political organizations, radio-TV, social clubs, special interest groups (ski and sailing clubs, drill teams, and the like), and school or community service organizations.

Assumptions of the Study

Similar studies involving ACT data looking at all racial groups have been done in the mid-1980s (JEA Commission) and in 2008 (Dvorak and Choi). Similar positive results are noted between those studies and the current one involving minority students only. Before those studies were done, certain assumptions were drawn based on research and experiences of many high school journalism educators. The same ones have been applied to this study:

* “Publications experience, often accompanied by a credit course in journalism, fulfills several elements considered crucial in the language arts program – in many cases more completely, more richly and more understandably for students than many traditional English composition courses and other English writing courses.

* “Publications experience offers relevance, built-in objectives, a transactional experience, application of various liberal arts theories learned in other disciplines and opportunities for high level decision-making. It brings to life the need for the study of English grammar, usage, spelling, style and syntax.

* “Publications experience, rather than a co-curricular activity sometimes regarded as a costly frill by administrators, should be viewed as one of the truly important school activities in the preparation of students for college. Within the same framework, publications experience should be considered as an integral and important component of the language arts programs of schools – contrary to connotations by some national and state excellence in education commissions that such activity is not part of the ‘back to basics’ movement often advocated in their reports.” (*Critical Deadline*, 1987)

Other Background

We theorized before doing this study that minority students with high school journalism backgrounds would outperform their non-journalism counterparts in several of the same academic measures as the overall population studied earlier (Dvorak and Choi, 2008).

Past research provides a picture of high school journalism that portrays strong correlations between publications students and excellence in both high school and college grades, ACT scores and collegiate performance in the classroom. In some other studies, positive causal relationships were found between groups of students who were subjected to journalistic treatments compared with those in control groups.

In a 2008 ACT study of students from all racial backgrounds, a strong positive relationship exists among students who worked on their high school newspapers or yearbooks and the 17 major areas of academic comparison examined in a similar study of a general population of high school students who took the ACT pre-college test as high schoolers. Nine of the areas involved high school and collegiate grades while eight of the areas involved scores on standardized tests taken either in high school or college. The journalism students had statistically significant higher scores in 14 of the 17 comparisons. They also scored higher in one of the standardized test areas – CAAP Critical Thinking – but not significantly so statistically. In only two areas of comparison – ACT Mathematics and ACT Science assessments – did the students with high school publications

experience score statistically significantly lower than non-publications students (Dvorak and Choi, 2008).

Minority achievement in high school and its impact on students' futures is a topic that has been discussed and researched by those in a variety of disciplines: anthropology, psychology, sociology and educational pedagogy. Some have studied the difference school funding makes, others the family and home environment, still others the oppositional culture theory concerning peer group ridicule and a fear of being accused of "acting white" (Fordham and Ogbu 201). Researchers have also studied what might counteract these forces that can cause low achievement. Now, with African Americans, Hispanics and American Indians accounting for more than one-third of the children in K-12 classrooms, concern about the achievement gap is growing (Johnston and Viadero 2).

For the purposes of this article, the researchers looked first at research directly related to minority students in high school journalism, then at the most often-cited theory related to education and race, and finally at what research is beginning to show can help close that achievement gap. Most of the research, however, has been about African Americans with only minimal studies dealing with Hispanic, Asian American, Native American or other minorities.

With research spanning four decades, John U. Ogbu, a professor of anthropology at University of California at Berkeley, was instrumental in formulating often-cited approaches to minority achievement. Ogbu asks the important question in a 1987 essay, "Variability in Minority School Performance: A Problem in Search of an Explanation": "Why do some minorities successfully cross cultural boundaries and/or opportunity

barriers and do well in school? Why do some other minorities not succeed...?” (Ogbu 317)

He notes lowered expectations from teachers and psychological and social pressures against “acting white” as two important issues (Ogbu 330). This “oppositional culture theory,” described in an article he wrote with anthropologist Signithia Fordham in 1986, is designed to explain low minority achievement is a reaction to peer criticism. From a study of eight students in a Washington, D.C., high school, they maintain students don’t want their friends to refer to them as “acting white,” and applying themselves academically would be one way to do that (Fordham and Ogbu).

John B. Diamond, assistant professor and principal contributor to the Harvard Achievement Gap Initiative, disagrees with Ogbu. He says Ogbu’s study “spawned a small research industry” in an effort to pinpoint the extent to which African American peer groups devalue educational achievement and ridicule their peers for “acting white” (Diamond 3).

Diamond argues there is little support for Ogbu’s theory and that, in fact, research shows black students and families appreciate and value education. He indicates studies by Ron Ferguson at Harvard show “African American students are more likely than whites to report that their friends think it is ‘very important’ to ‘study hard and get good grades’” (Diamond 9).

Educational researcher Theresa Perry also suggests moving beyond previous theories. After examining several approaches to explaining failure, she asks, “...what elements from these models can be used to move us, not toward another model for

explaining school failure, but toward a theory for African American school achievement?" (Perry 31).

She notes that these students need to have someone "affirm and validate them as intellectual beings and provide a reason for intellectual endeavor," not simply prepare them for the future jobs. "What happens when the child has no institutional experience that consistently provides an answer to that question, 'Literacy for what?'" (Perry 35) Thus Perry also takes a step towards describing what would help minority students succeed.

In "Blueprint for Action," another author includes three more factors to help minority students: high but realistic expectations, self-esteem building, and cooperative learning (Reglin 3). His strategies to set those expectations include: "(1) the use of activity-oriented learning with real problems, (2) the development of higher-level thinking skills to deal with problems and conditions in their lives; (3) acceptance of the students as they are, giving them the necessary experiences to help them become autonomous; and (4) elimination of the debilitating system of competition in the classroom and replacement of the system with one that is essentially cooperative in nature" (Reglin 3).

The authors believe that high school newspaper or yearbook staff experiences fulfill these four expectations, especially in light of the research presented earlier.

Reglin's explanation also indicates that building self-esteem is a plus. "When African American male students feel better about themselves, they do better in school" (Reglin 4). They also succeed in school when they participate in cooperative learning.

“Cooperative learning is helpful in learning academic content, developing cognitive skills, developing social skills, and enhancing character education” (Reglin 5). However, he cites Scott Willis’ research, which shows, in 1992 only about 10 percent of all teachers used cooperative learning. In newspaper and yearbook staff experiences, cooperative learning is a staple.

Once researchers went beyond theories to explain the minority “failure” and began focusing on minority success, they also analyzed elements that contributed to that success. The classroom environment and activities they describe are apparent in journalism courses and in student media production. Perry suggests schools must value minority students as intellectuals and show them the purpose of education beyond simply training for the job market, evident when they learn about civic engagement, the use of their voices in a democracy and any number of values journalism imparts.

Reglin, too, describes a typical student newspaper or yearbook environment when he indicates African American males succeed when they have activities that solve “real problems” through teamwork, not competition. In doing so, they also feel better about themselves. Thus, strategies that seem to help minority students achieve are the very strategies intrinsic in journalism classrooms and student media productions.

Discussion

In 15 major areas of high school and college academic comparison, minority students with high school journalism experience did better in 12 of them (10 significantly so). The 12 areas are freshman collegiate grade point average, first college English course

(often English Composition), ACT Composite score, ACT English score, ACT Reading score, overall high school grade point average, HS English grades, HS social studies grades, HS science grades, HS foreign language grades, HS art grades, and CAAP Writing (Essay) score.

The two areas in which the higher scores were not significant were the overall freshman college grade point average and the ACT Composite score.

Minority journalism students and non-journalism students had the same grades in high school mathematics, and they were significantly lower in both ACT Mathematics scores and in ACT Science scores.

An apparent anomaly exists when comparing minority journalism students' high school grades in math and science courses, which were either significantly higher or the same as non-journalism students' grades – even though the ACT tests in those areas were lower. However, this could be because minority journalism students didn't take as demanding final courses in those areas as did the non-journalism students, or it could be because they are high achievers and worked hard to overcome their natural deficiencies in math and science. By their own admission on the Student Profile section of the ACT exam, minority journalism students expressed a lack of math aptitude and a need for help in that area as they entered college.

While these overall positive results might be encouraging for those who attempt to justify school publications' place within the curriculum, they do not show causation. Other studies have done that. However, if nothing else, it can be concluded that high school newspaper or yearbook staff involvement is an excellent outlet for talented, active

and involved minority high school students. It also gives them a chance to apply their leadership abilities while also exercising their critical thinking and writing skills. Indeed, journalism activities have been shown to serve as excellent language arts outlets.

Based on this solid statistical evidence, it can be concluded that high school journalism staff experiences are definitive educational benefits in minority students' educational backgrounds that carry over into higher education and future life. The journalistic experiences provide intellectual, psychological and social benefits not often afforded minority students in other secondary school activities.

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