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Regional

Study: Students often perceived differently by race

In past columns, I have reported on more than one study that shows that expectations for “brilliance” for women in higher education were much higher than that for males. For example, when a research paper is co-authored by a male and a female the assumption by many is that the male did “the real work.”

Now comes a study showing that there is a similar bias when it comes to students – only this time the differences are based on race.

In a study published in “Economics and Education Review,” it was found that when evaluating the same black student, white teachers expect significantly less academic success than black teachers, particularly when it comes to black males.

According to the study, carried out by researchers at Johns Hopkins University, when a black teacher and a white teacher evaluated the same black student, the white teacher was about 30 percent less likely to predict that the student would complete a four-year college degree than was the black teacher. By the same token, white teachers were also almost 40 percent less likely to expect their black students to graduate high school.

According to one of the authors, Nicholas Papageorge, an economist at Johns Hopkins, “What we find is that white teachers and black teachers systematically disagree about the exact same student. One of them has to be wrong.”

But the problem pointed out by this article are not just a matter of bias (conscious or unconscious) but, more importantly, the effects that such attitudes have on the students themselves. The same study reports that low expectations could affect the performance of

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students, particularly disadvantaged ones who lack access to role models who could counteract a teacher’s low expectations.

Teachers may not disparage students directly, but students are very perceptive and can sense what the teacher thinks of them by the way others are treated in the same classroom.

One of the immediate effects of such perceptions is that students come to believe that the teacher is right, that they are indeed not smart enough and that there is no future for them in education. As a consequence, they may dismiss any hopes for advancement and, eventually, drop out of school.

The authors of the study analyzed data from the Educational Longitudinal Study. Begun in 2002, it is an ongoing study following 8,400 10th grade public school students and their interactions with teachers. That survey asked two different teachers, who each taught a particular student in either math or reading, to predict how far that student would go in school. With white students, the ratings from both teachers tended to be the same. But with black students, boys in particular, there were big differences. The white teachers had much lower expectations than black teachers about how far the black students would go in school.

Among the many results of this insightful work are that white and other non-black teachers were 12 percentage points more likely than black teachers to

predict black students wouldn’t finish high school, and that non-black teachers were 5 percent more likely to predict that their black male students wouldn’t graduate high school when compared to their black female students.

Another interesting fact the researchers found was that black female teachers were significantly more optimistic about the ability of black males to complete high school than were teachers of any other demographic group. They were 20 percent less likely than white teachers to predict that their students would not graduate from high school, and 30 percent less likely to say that when compared with black male teachers. White male teachers were 10 to 20 percent more likely to have low expectations for black female students.

There were also differences based on subjects of study. Math teachers were significantly more likely to have low expectations for female students. For black students, particularly black males, having a non-black teacher in a 10th grade subject made them much less likely to pursue that subject by enrolling in similar classes. This finding suggests that biased expectations by teachers have long-term effects on student outcomes.

This research, supported by the American Educational Research Association, has implications beyond high school. We can envision similar situations in college, the workplace, and even in the criminal justice system.

For years, a number of studies have shown that when it comes to hiring, names that may indicate the ethnicity of the applicant influence not only who will be hired, but also who will be interviewed for the job.

We all know that when it comes to selecting who is going to be the “face” of a corporation or an institution, appearances matter. We are also all aware of the fate that minorities have to confront when dealing with the criminal justice system. No matter how many laws have been passed to alleviate those issues, they still persist in our society.

Another of the study’s authors, Seth Gershenson, an assistant professor of public policy at American University in Washington, D.C., said, “While the evidence of systematic racial bias in teachers’ expectations uncovered in the current study are certainly troubling and provocative, they also raise a host of related, policy-relevant questions that our research team plans to address in the near future. For example, we are currently studying the impact of these biased expectations on students’ long-run outcomes such as educational attainment, labor market success, and interaction with the criminal justice system.”

It is time for us to analyze our attitudes toward people who are different from us, whose experiences and backgrounds also diverge from ours. It is not just a matter of social justice, but also about our own character and our ability to deal with others.

Despite constant accusations of “political correctness,” the fact of the matter is that we are failing at one the most important experiences we offer: education. And if we fail at that stage we are failing all of society.

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