

Expectations, Race and College Success

IHE insidehighered.com /news/2017/10/24/study-finds-high-school-teachers-have-differing-expectations-black-and-white

Near the beginning of a new study on racial attitudes and college attainment, the authors note the story of Desiree Martinez, who attended a high school in a low-income part of Los Angeles and longed to enroll at the University of California, Los Angeles. She confided her ambitions to a teacher. The teacher frowned and said, "I don't know why counselors push students into these schools they're not ready for ... Students only get their hearts broken when they don't get into those schools, and the students that do get in come back as dropouts."

Martinez, crushed, told another teacher, who encouraged her, and said she should not let people like the first teacher "hold you back."

The discouraging teacher was white. The encouraging teacher was Latino.

The new study suggests that what Martinez experienced is a reality for many students -- and may in fact result in some minority students never meeting their potential to succeed in college.

The study is being released today in the journal *Education Next*. The study is based on data from a longitudinal database of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics. These data are from the tracking of 6,000 students who were in 10th grade in 2002. The study also features data on the students' academic ability, socioeconomic status and the expectations of two teachers they had in 10th grade on whether they would graduate from college.

The study found that high school teachers expect 58 percent of white high school students, but just 37 percent of black high school students, to go on to obtain a four-year college degree (and then perhaps a graduate education).

Given that many black children grow up in low-income neighborhoods and attend schools that lack resources, the gap in expectations would not by itself indicate a racial gap in the fairness of teacher perceptions of students.

But the database used for analysis has the views of two teachers for every student, and demographic data on the teachers as well as the students. And here the researchers focused on gaps in the expectations of black and white teachers of the same black and white students.

When teachers of different races evaluated the same black student, white teachers were nine percentage points less likely than their black colleagues to expect that student to earn a college degree. This gap was more pronounced for black male students than for black female students.

Then the study compared teachers' expectations to reality to see if the white teachers were more realistic. They weren't. The study found that all teachers are a bit on the optimistic side regarding students' chances of later success. But the gap between optimism and reality is far greater for white teachers and white students than for other teachers and black students, meaning white teachers' high expectations of white students could be giving them an edge.

Finally, the study looked at whether teacher expectations matter. And the study found that they do. White or black, students with similar preparation are more likely to graduate from college if their high school teachers believe that they will. This is why teacher expectations, and any racial bias, matter so much, the authors say.

The authors are Seth Gershenson, associate professor of public policy at American University, and Nicholas Papageorge, assistant professor of economics at Johns Hopkins University.

"In sum, our analysis suggests that teacher expectations do not merely forecast student outcomes, but that they also

influence outcomes by becoming self-fulfilling prophecies," the authors write. "Moreover, we find that the nature of white teachers' expectations places black students at a disadvantage. For a student with a given objective probability of college completion, white teachers are less optimistic when the student in question is black."

The authors suggest that their findings show the importance both of increasing the number of nonwhite schoolteachers and also of educating all teachers about bias and the importance of high expectations.

As for Martinez, whom the authors discuss at the beginning of their paper, she made it to UCLA and succeeded there. Her story is known because she wrote [an open letter](#) about it to one of her high school teachers. The letter was called, "Dear High School Teacher Who Tried to Discourage Me From Applying to UCLA, I'm a Bruin Now!"