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News Releases

Ten Years On, High-School Social Skills Predict Better Earnings than Test Scores

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URBANA - Ten years after graduation, high-school students who had been rated as conscientious and cooperative by their teachers were earning more than classmates who had similar test scores but fewer social skills, said a new University of Illinois study.

The study's findings challenge the idea that racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic gaps in educational attainment and earnings can be narrowed solely by emphasizing cognitive skills, said Christy Lleras, a University of Illinois assistant professor of human and community development.

"It's important to note that good schools do more than teach reading, writing, and math. They socialize students and provide the kinds of learning opportunities that help them to become good citizens and to be successful in the labor market," she said.

"Unless we address the differences in school climates and curriculum that foster good work habits and other social skills, we're doing a huge disservice to low-income kids who may be entering the labor market right after high school, especially in our increasingly service-oriented economy," Lleras added.

She cited responses to employer surveys that stress the need for workers who can get along well with each other and get along well with the public.

The U of I study analyzed data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study, which followed a diverse group of 11,000 tenth graders for 10 years, tracking not only their scores on standard achievement tests but teacher appraisals of such qualities as the students' work habits, their ability to relate well to peers, and their participation in extracurricular activities, a proxy for the ability to interact well with both students and adults.

The teachers' assessments were then compared with the students' self-reported educational attainments and earnings 10 years after high-school graduation.

Even after controlling for students' achievement test scores, family socioeconomic status, and educational attainment, Lleras found that such social skills as

conscientiousness, cooperativeness, and motivation were as important as test scores for success in the workplace.

"You could argue that the reason these behaviors matter is that kids who display them are more likely to obtain a college degree and in turn have higher earnings. Certainly that is part of it, but even after I controlled for educational attainment, there were still significant effects," she said.

To measure conscientiousness, the researcher ranked teacher responses to such questions as: Does this student usually work hard for good grades? How often does the student complete homework assignments? How often is this student tardy to class?

To measure cooperativeness and sociability, she ranked teacher assessments of how well a student related to other students. Teachers were also asked to rank a student's motivation or passivity.

Participation in sports and school organizations also had strong effects on a student's future educational and occupational success.

For African American and Hispanic students only, participation in fine arts led to significantly better earnings compared to whites. This suggests that different activities teach kids different kinds of skills and learned behaviors, she said.

Lleras also emphasized the importance of improving school quality.

"Low-income and racial minority students continue to be concentrated in lower-quality schools with fewer opportunities for extracurricular participation, larger class sizes, and lower teacher quality, all factors that are correlated with poorer school-related attitudes and behavior," she said.

"If the few resources that low-performing schools have are used solely for testing and preparing students for tests, which is what many schools are doing to meet the requirements set forth in No Child Left Behind, these schools will continue to face challenges," she said.

"My findings show that the most successful students are those who have not only high achievement test scores but also the kinds of social skills and behaviors that are highly rewarded by employers in the workplace," she said.

The study appeared in the September issue of *Social Science Research*.

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