Differences in Extracurricular Participation and Post-Secondary Enrollment of Racial Groups

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This research project explored the racial and ethnic differences within the relationship between adolescents’ participation in a variety of extracurricular activities and their enrollment in post-secondary institutions. Specifically, I examined the differences in enrollment rates among Asian, Black, Hispanic and White nonparticipants and participants in 8 extracurricular activities: intramural sports, interscholastic sports, band and/or chorus, musicals and/or plays, student government, honor society, newspaper and/or yearbook, service clubs, academic clubs, vocational clubs, and hobby clubs.

I began by conducting a literature review of previous research that dealt with the role that extracurriculars play in fostering and supplementing educational success. Participation in the extracurriculum is generally associated with several beneficial outcomes because participants gain a degree of cultural capital not available to nonparticipants: overall higher academic achievement and higher educational aspirations, networks which empower participants with access to resources, and developmental benefits consistent with those needed for high academic achievement developmental benefits such as work ethic, self-confidence, maturity, and leadership skills. But because participation in some of these activities requires specific skills, a certain caliber of academic performance or additional resources in the form of experience, money and/or time, there is a large degree of selection bias in who participates in the extracurriculum. Therefore, even though a variety of students may participate in an extracurricular activity, they may not all have equitable access to its benefits.

I gathered data from the Educational Longitudinal Study (ELS) and explored three main variables: the student’s race/ethnicity, extracurricular participation, and enrollment at a post-secondary institution. I analyzed multivariate data on how the independent variables – race and participation/nonparticipation – impacted the dependent variable – post-secondary enrollment. The data showed that for each activity, participants enroll in post-secondary institutions at higher rates than do nonparticipants, indicating that the cultural capital gained through extracurricular programs does in fact contribute to academic achievement and pursuit of higher education. However, within each extracurricular program, the race of the participant did play a role. Asian and White participants, on average, enrolled at rates greater than 85%, while Black and Hispanic participants in the same activities enrolled at rates less than 85%, often even below 80%. This indicates that extracurricular participation alone, cannot mediate disparities in higher education enrollment, and that other factors, such as socioeconomic status or school funding must be considered.

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