

# 15-Minute Task Lifts African-Americans' Grades



PROBLEM AREA:

EDUCATION

## **Problem**

Students of color lag behind their European-American counterparts at every level of education.

## **Solution**

Writing about a personal value for just 15 minutes at the beginning of the semester elevates African-Americans' grades, closing the gap between European-American and African-American students by 40 percent.

## **The Details**

At the beginning of the fall semester, social psychologist Geoffrey Cohen and his colleagues randomly assigned African-American and European-American seventh-graders to complete one of two 15-minute writing assignments. In the treatment condition, students named their most important value and explained why it was important to them. In the control condition, students named their least important value and explained why it might be important to someone else.

African-American students who wrote about their most treasured value had higher grade-point-averages at the end of the semester than did African-American students who wrote about their least important value. The intervention did not affect European-American students meaning that European-American students in the two conditions had the same GPAs.

## **Why This Works**

People like to feel good about themselves. A positive self-image is like a psychological immune system: it protects us from hardships. By helping students feel better about themselves, the self-affirming writing assignment shielded African-American students from negative stereotypes about their group, and helped them work to their potential.

## **When This Works Best**

Self-affirmation techniques work best when people feel their identities are under fire, such as when people feel others are viewing them through stereotypes.

## **The Original Study**

Cohen, G. L., Garcia, J., Apfel, N., & Master, A. (2006). Reducing the racial achievement gap: A social-psychological intervention. *Science*, 313(5791), 1307-1310.

## **Replications**

Cohen, G. L., Garcia, J., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Apfel, N., & Brzustoski, P. (2009). Recursive processes in self-affirmation: Intervening to close the minority achievement gap. *Science*, 324(5925), 400-403.

## **Credits**

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