

The Hidden Toll of Success for College Grads of Color

OVERVIEW

College graduates live healthier and longer lives as compared with those who do not go to college. However, not everyone benefits equally. Black and Latinx college graduates are more likely to suffer later in life from cardiometabolic diseases, including diabetes and heart disease and other diseases, than White graduates. IPR health psychologists **Edith Chen** and **Greg Miller** investigate the effects of what it means for young Black and Latinx people to achieve success. They analyze the education and health of nearly 11,000 students followed over 12 years from adolescence through early adulthood.

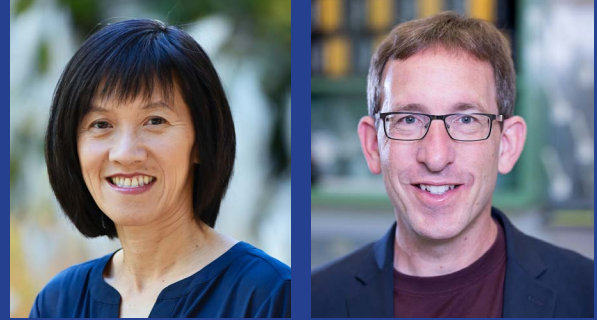
FINDINGS

Young people who make it through college have better mental health with lower levels of depression than their peers who do not attend college. This is true for Black, Latinx, and White college graduates, and for those who come from both advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.

But completing college might not erase other harmful effects of growing up in economic and

POLICY TAKEAWAYS

- Programs to increase Black and Latinx students' sense of belonging in school may provide one possible way to improve their health.
- As early as in middle school, schools' diversity messages can predict the health of students of color.
- Efforts to encourage upward mobility may need to include screenings for the potential physical health impacts of success, particularly among individuals of color.



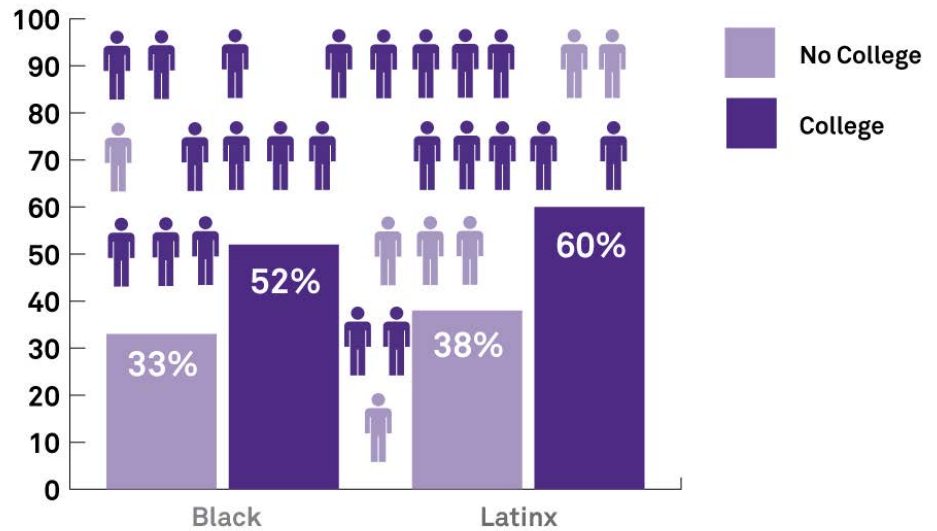
IPR health psychologists **Edith Chen** and **Greg Miller** study the health consequences of poverty and stress on children's and youth's health and the consequences of upward mobility for health.

social disadvantage for those from minority backgrounds. Black and Latinx college graduates who grow up in disadvantaged environments face higher levels of metabolic syndrome—a precursor of heart disease and diabetes—than those without a college degree. So, while college completion benefits mental health in disadvantaged Black and Latinx young adults, it does not benefit their physical health, and may even impair it. These findings suggest that upward mobility may come at a health cost to young people of color.

There are factors that may help promote physical health in students of color. When schools explicitly value diversity, Black and Hispanic students are healthier. Students of color who attend schools that acknowledge race and teach about different cultures and perspectives, as suggested by their schools' mission statements, show fewer signs of metabolic syndrome and other cardiometabolic risk factors, including insulin resistance and chronic inflammation. These patterns hold no matter the students' socioeconomic background or other school characteristics, such as student-teacher ratios or student test scores.

Paying the Price of Success

When looking at the health of nearly 11,000 Black and Latinx students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the researchers find those who completed college had higher levels of cardiometabolic risk, including more inflammation and cholesterol, than those who did not attend college.



Source: Gaydos, L., K. Schorpp, E. Chen, G. Miller, and K. Mullan. 2018. College completion predicts lower depression but higher metabolic syndrome among disadvantaged minorities in young adulthood. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115(1):109–14.

METHODOLOGY

Using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, Chen and Miller analyzed data in their 2018 study on nearly 11,000 adolescents, who were interviewed as seventh to twelfth graders in 1994–95 and who were assessed on mental health and biological markers in 2008–09 at 24–32 years old. The researchers also created a disadvantage score that combined 22 family, school, and neighborhood factors from the participants' adolescent years, like welfare receipt and crime rates. In their 2019 study, Chen and Miller examined the cardiometabolic health of 270 eighth graders who attended 120 different schools and each school's mission statement.

REFERENCES

- Gaydos, L., K. Schorpp, E. Chen, G. Miller, and K. Mullan. 2018. College completion predicts lower depression but higher metabolic syndrome among disadvantaged minorities in young adulthood. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* 115(1):109–14.
- Levine, C., H. Markus, M. Austin, E. Chen, and G. Miller. 2019. Students of color show health advantages when they attend schools that emphasize the value of diversity. *PNAS* 16(13):6013–18.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- For Black and Latinx youth from disadvantaged backgrounds, college completion leads to worse health than for those who did not complete college: 52% of Black and 60% of Latinx college graduates had metabolic syndrome indicators, like high blood pressure and cholesterol, while only 33% of Black and 38% of Latinx non-graduates did.
- Students of color attending schools with stated diversity values had better health. Compared to peers in schools without such stated values, they had 20% fewer signs of metabolic syndrome—a precursor of heart disease and diabetes—that encompasses risk factors like high blood pressure and high blood sugar. They also had less insulin resistance (-37%) and more inflammation (33%), risks for cardiometabolic diseases.



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