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Impact Study and Comparative Analysis of the YMCA's Black Achiever Program

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Jennifer Burnett

Jennifer Burnett is a May graduate of the Gatton College of Business and Economics at UK with a double major in Economics and Finance. She will be attending the Patterson School of Diplomacy and International Commerce as well as the Gatton MBA Program in the fall. Both her research position at UK's Center for Business and Economic Research and her management role at a local health food cooperative, *The Good Foods Market and Cafe*, have contributed to her interest in economics and public policy. She plans to pursue a career in the non-profit or government sector, with an emphasis on sustainable, responsible economic development.



Vladyslav Sushko

Vladyslav Sushko is a Foreign Language and International Economics Senior. Currently he works as an undergraduate research assistant at the University of Kentucky Center for Business and Economic Research. During the summer he will be working for the Lexington Mayor's Office of Economic Development. His future plans are to get a masters degree in economics and work in the economic development field.



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The project described in this paper began with a request from administrators of the YMCA's Black Achievers Program for help in assessing the effectiveness of their program. In the true spirit of service learning, three economics majors stepped forward to offer their assistance in providing an assessment that would call upon skills they have acquired while at UK and force them to learn new skills. The authors met extensively with program administrators to determine assessment needs and then designed a survey instrument for program participants. After gathering and processing data, they compared their data to information obtained from the Fayette County School System and skillfully conducted a thorough statistical analysis.

Services such as those offered by the Black Achievers Program are vital in Fayette County, where the racial achievement gap in the school system is quite pronounced. Studies that evaluate programs such as Black Achievers are crucial to furthering efforts that chip away at this gap. The empirical findings of this study and the recommendations made by the authors will provide guidance to enhance the current program, and they will be used as supporting evidence in grant proposals for program funding.

Impact Study and Comparative Analysis of the YMCA's Black Achiever Program

Abstract

In this study, multiple surveys were designed and administered to program participants in the Central Kentucky chapter of the YMCA Black Achievers Program. The purpose of this project was to collect data on the academic success of these students for comparison to that of students in their geographic area who did not take part in the program. The full project also collected data on individuals' responses regarding program effectiveness, level of satisfaction, etc., to help the administrators of the BAP continue to update and improve the program to better meet participants' needs. This research summary focuses only on the quantitative analysis in academic achievement. When compared to academic statistics for Fayette county schools, the respondents in our study were found to have superior performance to their peers. Students who took part in the BAP showed higher levels of academic success than non-BAP African American students in ACT scores and Advanced Placement enrollment. Overall, the Black Achievers Program was found to be a success in academic measures, and also in its overall focus on keeping young African Americans on the path to success in their careers.

“My work with the YMCA Black Achievers Program has been good for my soul. It brings joy to my heart to see our young people develop positive assets. I love to see that look in their eyes when they finally ‘get it.’ I’m thankful for all our volunteers who shed light on the road in hopes that our young people will see and follow the long hard road to success.”

Freddie Brown, program director

Introduction

A recent study performed by the National Center for Education Statistics illustrates the pervasive problem of educational achievement gaps between Caucasians and African Americans in secondary education. Although there has been progress in some areas, the report states that performance gaps have actually widened between blacks and whites ages 13-17 from 1988 to 1999. Possible explanations for this phenomenon include unobserved differences in family background as well as differences in peer groups, school resources, and classroom experiences. “Whatever the causes of black-white gaps in educational achievement, the perpetuation of a large portion of these gaps throughout elementary and secondary school leaves blacks at a relative disadvantage as they prepare for college and/or the labor market.” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001, p. 42) However, for African-American students who achieve at performance levels equal to their Caucasian counterparts early in school, the achievement gap is almost completely eliminated. When prior academic achievement is taken into account, African-Americans actually outperform Caucasians in terms of college attendance rates and college completion rates.

It is beyond the scope of this report to explain the causes of educational achievement gaps between Caucasians and African-Americans. However, through statistical analyses of surveys and other data, this report will outline the differences in important educational indicators between the participants in the Central Kentucky chapter of the YMCA’s Black Achiever Program and their peers.

Background

The program’s mission statement says: “The YMCA of Central Kentucky Black Achievers Program (BAP) is the catalyst that provides exposure to present and future educational/career opportunities, instills positive social values, ignites students’ thirst for knowledge, enables students to reach their full potential by creating opportunities for adults and the community to participate in their lives, and empowers families to assist students in reaching higher goals.”

The Black Achievers Program was started in 1971; the first Kentucky chapter was founded in 1985. Today, Kentucky has two chapters, one in

Louisville and one in Lexington; there are over 100 chapters nationwide.

The Central Kentucky BAP Chapter serves many Kentucky counties including Bourbon, Clark, Fayette, Franklin, Harrison, Jessamine, Madison, Montgomery, Scott, Woodford, Lincoln, and Marion. Funding for the program comes from fund raisers, donations, grants, etc. Member dues comprised only 4.3% of the \$156,653 budget for 2003. Staff includes one full-time and one part-time employee, plus 134 volunteers. The program is relatively inexpensive, with registration fees of only \$20 for 7th-11th graders and \$25 for seniors. College tours cost \$225. Fees are subject to waiver. The program meets on the 2nd and 4th Saturday of every month from 9 am – 12 pm. Each participant in the program belongs to one of 11 clusters, which cover a wide variety of interests from computers and communications to education and public service. Goals of the program include giving black students scholarship opportunities; preparation for future careers; development of life, leadership, and social skills; and educational advancement. In addition to regular cluster sessions, the program also offers special services such as Arts and Culture Workshops, College and Career Fairs, College Tours, Underground Railroad Tours, ACT preparation sessions, Mock Interviews, and Study Skills workshops.

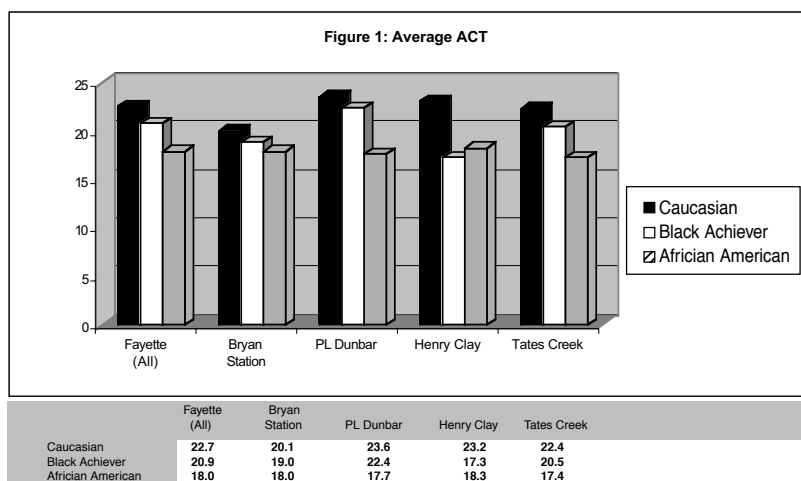
In our study, a survey was distributed to participants in the Black Achievers Program in January of 2004. The survey asked quantitative questions about indicators, such as GPA, ACT scores, AP class participation, and qualitative questions about factors such as the quality of the program and future scholastic intentions. The results of the survey were evaluated using various statistical programs and compared to the performance of other demographic groups in Fayette County. In this article, we discuss the comparative analyses of our primary quantitative findings.

ACT evaluation

Reported Black Achievers’ ACT scores were compared to Caucasian and African-American students in Fayette County, broken down by school. (Our comparison data was retrieved from the Fayette County Office of Data, Research, and Evaluation.) It is clear from Figure 1 that, with the exception of participants who attend Henry Clay High School, Caucasian students outperform African American students on the ACT, but Black Achievers perform better than African American students as a whole.

These scores were further evaluated on the basis of gaps between Black Achievers’ scores and the scores of African-Americans and Caucasians in Fayette County schools. This evaluation is illustrated in Figure

Figure 1.



2. Again, with the exception of Henry Clay High School, the gap between the performance of Black Achievers and Caucasians is smaller than the gap between the performance of African-American students as a whole and Caucasian students. This disparity in performance could be due, in part, to other factors not taken into account here. For example, many studies have found that ACT scores are correlated with income levels as well as race. The income levels of Black Achievers' families were not available and, therefore, were not included in the analysis.

Advanced Placement

The second quantitative element pertained to the enrollment rates of students in Advanced Placement coursework. In 2003, 17% of the Caucasian student population in Fayette County participated in at least one Advanced Placement course.

Only 5% of African-American students in Fayette County participated in Advanced Placement coursework in 2003. However, an impressive 30% of current Black Achievers were involved in AP courses. Figure 3 illustrates the differences in Advanced Placement enrollment rates among these three groups. Furthermore, Black Achievers were enrolled in 2.6 AP classes each, on average.

Just as with ACT performance, the higher AP enrollment rates of Black Achievers when compared to their peers may not be the result solely of participation in the program. This difference in enrollment could be due to a host of factors including socio-economic background and the amount of resources available to certain schools. It is also a possibility that those who are drawn to the Black Achievers program have already attained some degree of educational achievement in the past and, as such, the Black Achievers program has a higher concentration of highly motivated African-American students than the general population.

Conclusions

Based upon the comparisons of ACT scores and AP enrollment, the participants in the Black Achievers Program seem to outperform their peers in academic attainment. Furthermore, program participants made significant progress toward closing the Caucasian/African-American academic achievement gap. Therefore, program initiatives such as ACT preparation, study skill development, and career exploration may have a positive effect on participants' academic aptitudes. It should be noted, however, that the causality between the Black Achievers Program and the success of its participants is unclear at this point. This difficulty in determining causality is due, in part,

to the self-nominating nature of the BAP and the survey, the lack of a time series evaluation, and the limited amount of parental demographic data received. Further investigation into the relationship between the content of the program and the academic performance of Black Achievers is explored in the extended version of this paper, available in the on-line edition of the journal at www.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/fall2004. The full version includes analyses of the qualitative portion of the survey as well, addressing exogenous factors such as parental educational attainment.

Acknowledgements:

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Figure 2.

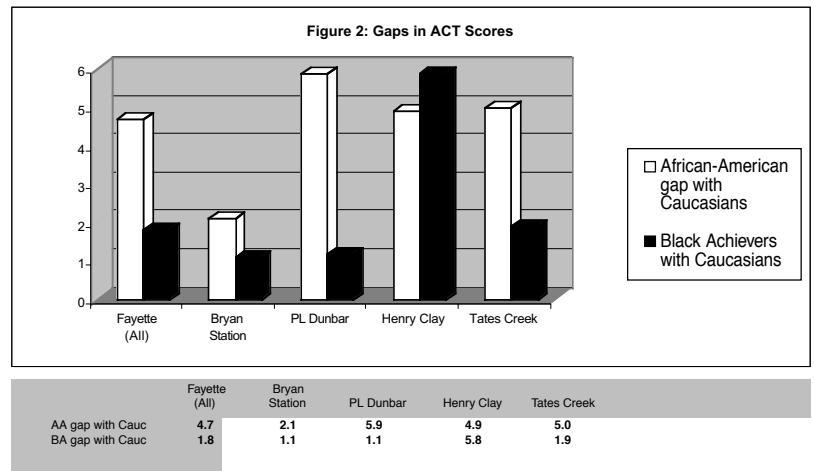


Figure 3.

