

Aspirations of High School Seniors: A Los Angeles Study

A team of researchers (Chang, et al) completed a longitudinal study to investigate ethnic, gender, and generational similarities and differences in the life goals among graduating high-school seniors in Los Angeles. The team wanted to see if inequities in educational and occupational attainment across ethnic groups were reflected in the current lives of students. The team made the following points, among others:

- “Our results suggest that a multi-ethnic, multi-generational sample of graduating high school seniors differ very little from each other in their future plans.” [p. 330]
- “A large majority of the participants had goals related to their future occupation and education...“The majority of participants (79.2%) reported a long-term occupational goal.” [pp. 327-328]
- The study looked at eight categories of educational/occupational aspirations. Of those, non-White students rated economic success, creative goals, and spiritual goals as significantly more important to their future life satisfaction than did Whites.
- “Three-way ANOVAs with ethnicity, gender, and generational status on each goal category’s overall priority revealed no significant ethnic group differences or interactions. However, gender differences in the overall priority of educational goals were significant...Females prioritized their educational goals higher than males.” [p. 327]
- “However, it is noteworthy that adolescents of all groups, on average, aspired to attend a four-year college.” [p. 328]
- “There were significant ethnic differences in adolescents’ expectations to actually finish college...in line with previous research...Latino students in this study reported relatively lower long-term educational expectations...which may be due to socioeconomic status...” [p. 330]
- Our results suggest that a multi-ethnic, multi-generational [based on the student’s and parent’s birthplace] sample of graduating high school seniors differ very little from each other in future plans. [p. 330]

This study has relevance for the community colleges because it shows that these students (regardless of race, gender, or generation) report high interest in postsecondary education. The study underscores why high schools and colleges need to produce jointly a seamless educational path for all of these students. Additionally, we see that high schools and colleges need to inform all students on how to continue their education to reach career goals (which may involve vocational training).

The findings came from a longitudinal study of 932 ethnically diverse high school seniors who graduated in 2002. The study looked at six ethnic groups: White, African, Mexican, Other Latino, Filipino, and East/Southeast Asian Americans. The findings are limited to those students who graduate so readers will need to consider how they generalize to other students.

The authors, Esther S. Chang, Chuansheng Chen, Ellen Greenberger, David Dooley, and Jutta Heckhausen, are all from the University of California, Irvine. You can find their study, “What Do They Want in Life?: The Life Goals of a Multi-Ethnic, Multi-Generational Sample of High School Seniors,” in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Volume 35, No. 3, June 2006, pages 321-332.

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