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CONTACT:

Roland G. Fryer, Jr. (617) 495-9592

MINORITY STUDENTS WHO EXCEL ACADEMICALLY PAY PRICE FOR “ACTING WHITE”

*Study finds few social costs of achievement in private schools but high ones in
integrated public schools*

STANFORD—High-achieving minority students in racially integrated public schools are less popular among their ethnic peers and more isolated than similar white students, according to a new study by Harvard economist Roland G. Fryer, Jr. published in the winter 2005 issue of Hoover Institution’s *Education Next*.

The social stigma among minorities who excel -- labeled “acting white” -- is “a vexing reality within a subset of American schools,” Fryer writes. “Whatever its cause, it is most prevalent in racially integrated public schools. It’s less of a problem in the private sector and in predominantly black public schools.”

For black and Hispanic students who attend private school, Fryer found no evidence of a trade-off between popularity and achievement. Similarly, in predominantly black schools, there was no evidence that getting good grades adversely affected students’ popularity. In integrated public schools, however, the price for those who strive to succeed is high.

At low GPAs, there is little difference among ethnic groups in the relationship between grades and popularity, but when a student achieves a 2.5 GPA (an even mix of Bs and Cs), clear differences start to emerge. Beyond this level, Hispanic students in particular lose popularity at an alarming rate. As GPAs climb above 3.5, the experience of black and white students diverges: black students tend to have fewer and fewer friends while white students find themselves moving to the top of the popularity pyramid. For Hispanic students at the highest levels of achievement, it is even more discouraging. A Hispanic student with a 4.0 GPA is the least popular of all Hispanic students, and Hispanic-white differences are the most extreme.

For his research, Fryer used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Adhealth), which provide information on the friendship patterns of a nationally representative sample of more than 90,000 students, from 175 schools in 80 communities, who entered grades 7 through 12 in the 1994 school year. The Adhealth data freed Fryer from relying on self-reported indicators of popularity that had been used in previous studies. Students in the Adhealth study were asked to list up to five of their closest male and female friends. Fryer counted how often each student’s name appeared on peers’ lists. The more frequently a peer was listed by others, the more weight was assigned to showing up on his or her list.

Although minority students were not penalized for “acting white” in private schools, Fryer did find that high-achieving white students were not as popular as their lower-achieving peers. The most popular white students in private schools had a GPA of roughly 2.0 (a C average). These findings may help explain why most studies of academic achievement find little or no benefit from attending a private school for white students, but quite large benefits for African Americans.

In explaining his results, Fryer notes that groups with lower achievement levels are at risk of losing their potentially more successful members to the outside world. Peer group pressures help ensure the loyalty of these potentially successful members, who are forced to weigh community ties against academic success.

“In an achievement-based society, there can be a trade-off between doing well and rejection by your peers when you come from a traditionally low-achieving group,” Fryer points out.

Read more about the costs of “Acting White” in the new issue of *Education Next* online at www.EducationNext.org.

Roland G. Fryer Jr. is assistant professor of economics at Harvard University and a faculty research fellow at the National Bureau of Economic Research.

[Education Next](http://www.EducationNext.org) is a scholarly journal published by the Hoover Institution that is committed to looking at hard facts about school reform. Other sponsoring institutions are the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Caleb Offley (518) 573-9175
Hoover Institution
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-6010
www.hoover.org

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