



Evidence in Action

A K20 Center Research Brief

When “Journalism Kids” Do Better: A Reassessment of Secondary and Postsecondary Achievement and Activities

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Introduction

Scholarly literature has long asserted that students involved in high school journalism outperform their peers academically. However, more recent research cautions that this could be due to pre-existing academic strengths among journalism students. This study addresses that concern by isolating the effect of journalism participation on academic achievement while statistically controlling for confounding variables such as socioeconomic status, gender, English self-efficacy, and prior GPA.

Framing their work through Self-Determination Theory and Holland’s Career Theory, the authors argue that journalism education promotes intrinsic motivation and alignment between students’ interests and future careers—factors that lead to sustained academic success. The study aims to reassess whether journalism-specific engagement in high school yields distinct academic benefits in standardized test performance, college major selection, and college-level academic success.

Methodology

Research Design:

A multilevel regression analysis was used to explore the relationships between journalism participation in high school and later academic outcomes, while controlling for numerous background variables.

Sample:

The study analyzed data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002), which followed a nationally representative cohort of 15,360 U.S. 10th-grade students from 750 schools over a decade.

Data Analysis:

- The study assessed outcomes such as ACT/SAT English scores, college major selection, and college GPA.
- Key variables included journalism course credits, extracurricular journalism participation, and “journalism specialization” (high school journalism plus a journalism-related college major).



- The researchers used mixed-effects regression models with multiple imputation to handle missing data and control for over a dozen demographic, academic, and institutional variables.

Results

Key findings include:

- **Higher English Test Scores:** Students who took more journalism classes or participated in extracurricular journalism scored higher on SAT Verbal, ACT English, and ACT Reading—even when controlling for prior English GPA and self-efficacy.
- **Specialization in Language-Related Fields:** Journalism students were more likely to major in journalism, communication, or English. This likelihood increased with the number of journalism courses taken.
- **Higher College English GPA:** Students who specialized in journalism earned a significantly higher GPA in college English courses (3.19 vs. 2.70).
- **No Impact on College Enrollment Rates:** Journalism participation did not increase the likelihood of attending college or attending a 4-year institution.
- **No Differences in Graduation Time or GPA in Other Fields:** There were no statistically significant gains in graduation speed or GPA in journalism and communication classes.

These results affirm that high school journalism fosters domain-specific academic benefits related to language arts and self-motivated learning, without necessarily affecting general college enrollment or broader academic success.

Application into Practice

To replicate the positive outcomes from this study, schools can consider the following:

1. **Offer Journalism as a For-Credit Course:** Treat journalism as a legitimate academic subject rather than solely an extracurricular activity. Include it in the language arts course catalog to attract and challenge high-performing students.
2. **Foster Experiential Learning:** Emphasize the real-world, student-led nature of journalism production to boost student autonomy, engagement, and intrinsic motivation—key factors in long-term academic success.
3. **Support Extracurricular Journalism:** Maintain strong school newspapers and yearbooks, even if journalism classes aren't feasible. These activities still lead to measurable gains in standardized English performance.
4. **Train Educators in Journalism Pedagogy:** Equip advisers with professional development in journalism education, emphasizing both writing mechanics and collaborative, student-driven work.



5. **Track Outcomes:** Use school data systems to monitor GPA, standardized test scores, and postsecondary pathways of journalism students to advocate for sustained funding and program growth.

Work Cited

Bobkowski, P. S., & Cavanah, S. B. (2019). When “Journalism Kids” Do Better: A Reassessment of Secondary and Postsecondary Achievement and Activities. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 74(4), 438–451. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077695819841186>