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# Why Students Avoid Academic Help

*By Max Nisen*

Nearly everybody who went to secondary school remembers being peer-pressured into something—pranks, parties, or cutting class. It's a time when people tend to be most insecure and conscious of what others think of them. That spills over into decisions about the future: Some students make poor decisions about their education because they're worried about how their peers will perceive them.

Depending on the context, the rate at which students sign up for SAT prep can be dramatically different, according to a [new National Bureau of Economic Research working paper](#). Students indicated that they're willing to turn down a free course just because their classmates would find out, the findings suggest.

The researchers offered free access to an online SAT prep course (that normally costs \$200) to juniors at large Los Angeles high schools, making the sign-up list public within some classes, and private in others. The study was done in low-income, low-performing schools, making the decision potentially more significant, both economically and academically.

In non-honors classes, when the sign-ups were made public, participation dropped by 11 percent. The publicity had no visible effect on students in honors classes.

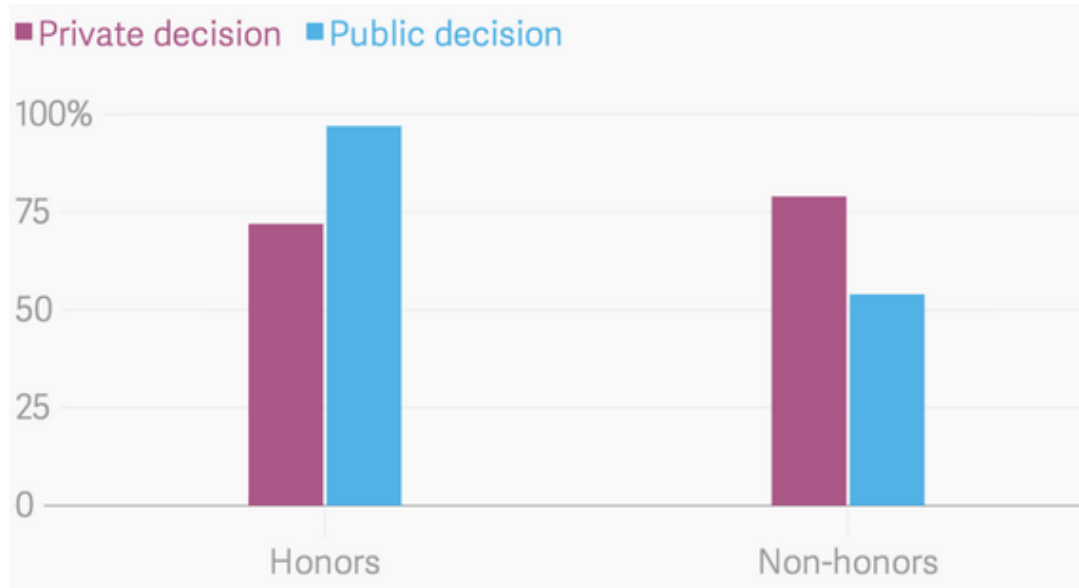
To net out the possibility that honors and non-honors students might have different characteristics or priorities, the authors limited part of the study to students who take two honors classes, so that the researchers would catch some of them in non-honors classes as well.

In that case, the students presented with the choice to sign up in the honors class were 25 percent more likely to do so if the decision was public. Those who were in a non-honors class were 25 percent less likely to sign up.

The overall public sign-up rate for these top students was 47 percent when they were in their honors class. The data suggests social pressure is dramatically different depending on the type of class. The graph below shows sign-up rates among students in two honors courses and demonstrates that the pupils' decisions to enroll were largely contingent on the kind of class they were in at the time of the

offer.

## Test Prep Sign-Up Rate for Kids in Two Honors Classes



Leonardo Bursztyn & Robert Jensen/National Bureau of Economic Research

The only difference between the "public" and "private" sign-up offers was a single letter (highlighted in bold below) in the course's announcement:

“Your decision to sign up for the course will be kept completely private from everyone, **except** the other students in the room.”

“Your decision to sign up for the course will be kept completely private from everyone, **including** the other students in the room.”

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It's about popularity: Visible effort can have negative social consequences in some cases. And the perception of popularity really matters. Students who say popularity is important are more likely to conform to the prevailing social pressure.

The authors of the test-prep paper did a [previous study](#) at a school that used a point system and leaderboard to gauge the achievement of low-performing students in computer-based courses. The top-three performers were publicized to the whole class. As a result, the students closest to ranking among the top three declined significantly in their academic performance.

It just goes to show how powerful social pressure is. This is just test prep, but throughout their careers students are faced with abundant opportunities to raise their hands, seek extra help, or participate publicly in classes. Over time, avoiding those experiences can have a significant effect.

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