

of Education released a report (available at <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/choice/pcsp-final/finalreport.pdf>) comparing schools rather than students. The results: In all five states studied, charter schools were less likely than

conventional public schools to meet state proficiency standards. Even after adjusting for differences in the composition of the student body and other factors, charter schools in two states came up short.

Dependency Isn't Dead

“Economic Success among TANF Participants: How We Measure It Matters” by Maria Cancian and Daniel R. Meyer, in *Focus* (Summer 2004), Institute for Research on Poverty, Univ. of Wisconsin, 1180 Observatory Dr., Madison, Wis. 53706.

The federal welfare reform of 1996 produced a dramatic nationwide decline in caseloads and a chorus of self-congratulatory hurrahs in Washington. Cancian and Meyer, however, aren't cheering.

They focus on Wisconsin Works, a much-admired program that was launched the year after the federal reform returned control over the welfare system to the states. Wisconsin Works requires most recipients to work or take part in work-related training, but it also provides fairly generous benefits (up to \$673 per month), child care, and health insurance. Based on their study of more than 2,200 randomly selected mothers who entered the program during its first year, the authors, who are both professors of social work at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, say that the program by some measures did a good job of helping the women avoid poverty. Counting earnings and a variety of government benefits, three-fourths of the women had incomes above the poverty line.

But the real boast of Wisconsin Works

and similar programs is that they reduce *dependency*, and that claim looks much exaggerated. The federal government counts as independent all those who receive less than half their total annual income from their state welfare program, food stamps, and Supplemental Security Income, the federal program for low-income people who are aged, blind, or disabled. By that definition, 70 percent of the women in the Wisconsin Works study achieved independence.

But that standard is too loose, the authors say. If independence is instead defined as receiving less than \$1,000 in benefits from the three programs, only 26 percent of the women qualified. (The chief reason: Many continued to receive food stamps.) And an even more deflating picture emerges when the focus is restricted to the crucial subcategory of long-term welfare recipients, those who were on the welfare rolls for more than 18 months before entering the program. Only 17 percent of them achieved independence.

Free Blacks in Colonial America

“Freedom in the Archives: Free African Americans in Colonial America” by Paul Heinegg and Henry B. Hoff, in *Common-place* (Oct. 2004), www.common-place.org, sponsored by the American Antiquarian Society and the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History.

The traditional history of free blacks in early America may need significant revision in light of records Heinegg has found during nearly two decades of sifting through state archives in Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, and Delaware. Most of the free African-American families who traced their origins to Virginia and Maryland didn't descend from enslaved black women and their

owners, as is commonly supposed, but “from white servant women who had children by slaves or free African Americans.”

In Virginia, for example, more than 200 free African-American families descended from white women. When Africans were first brought to 17th-century Virginia, they entered a society that held white indentured servants in such contempt “that masters were not pun-

ished for beating them to death,” write Heinegg and Hoff, a retired engineer and the editor of the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, respectively. Africans and white servants shared a similar lot, joining households where they worked, ate, slept, got drunk, and ran away together. Some slaves were freed, and a number of the men married white servant women. “By the mid-17th century,” the authors write, “some free African Americans were beginning to be assimilated into colonial Virginia society. Many were the result of mixed-race marriages.”

As slaves grew in number in Virginia and increasingly replaced white servants, racial attitudes changed. The colonial legislature “passed a series of laws between 1670 and 1723 designating slavery as the appropriate condition for people of African descent.” It outlawed

interracial marriage, required that any illegitimate mixed-race children of white mothers be bound out as servants for 30 years, and restricted the manumission of slaves. Yet “white servant women continued to bear children by African American fathers . . . well into the 18th century.” Indeed, such births appear to have been “the primary source of the increase in the free African American population in Virginia for this period.”

Because so many free African Americans had light skin, it was assumed that they descended from white slave owners who took advantage of their female slaves. But the evidence gathered by the authors does not bear this out: “Only three of the approximately 570 [free black] families in Virginia and the Carolinas were proven to descend from a white slave owner.”

PRESS & MEDIA

Journalism's Second Draft

“Whose Turf Is the Past?” by Andie Tucher, in *Columbia Journalism Review* (Sept.–Oct. 2004), Journalism Bldg., 2950 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10027.

High-minded journalists used to boast that they were writing the first, rough draft of history, but lately they seem to be essaying finished drafts as well. Take, for example, the thick, well-received volumes by Anne Applebaum, David Maraniss, and Robert Caro. Works by academic historians such as Joseph Ellis and Robert Dallek also show up on best-seller lists, notes Tucher, a historian and former journalist who teaches at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism. Do any consequential differences still separate the two breeds?

“Historians try to pose a really interesting problem or contribute to the debate in a field,” observes journalist Nicholas Lemann, author of *The Promised Land* (1991) and other works, and now the dean of Columbia’s journalism school. “But it’s striking how little professional historians know about how to tell a popular story. They think ‘popular’ means ‘picking a good topic.’”

Yet journalistic storytelling has a “stylized quality, which can be a disadvantage as well as an advantage,” says Robert Darnton, a historian at Princeton University. “By that I mean a

tendency to look for a lead instead of an argument, to hype things, overuse colorful quotes, and exaggerate the importance of personal quirks.”

As Tucher notes, “People have always used stories—carefully told or not—to make sense of the world, to explain its big mysteries (‘Why are there bad guys?’) and its small ones (‘Why did he kill her?’). Journalists and the public together construct stories to order the chaotic buzz of breaking events into a satisfying narrative that reconfirms what’s both important and familiar in the world.”

That can lead to oversimplification, according to Mary Marshall Clark, director of Columbia’s Oral History Office. Many reporters covering 9/11 naturally tended to fit that day’s tragic events into “a highly nationalistic frame” of tragedy and heroism. But the academic interviewees she dispatched into New York City’s streets after the attack recorded other things, such as the self-doubts of firefighters who were portrayed as heroes. Journalists may be writing a first draft of history, but apparently some modern historians are writing the second draft of journalism.