

**THE AMERICAN FRESHMAN:
NATIONAL NORMS FOR FALL 2004**

This is the thirty-ninth annual report of national normative data on the characteristics of students attending American colleges and universities as first-time, full-time freshmen. This series, initiated in Fall 1966, is a project of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), a continuing longitudinal study of the American higher education system housed at the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. During the past 39 years the CIRP has generated an array of normative, substantive, and methodological research about a wide range of issues in American higher education. Recent publications provide a summary of the long-term trends generated by these data (see Astin, Oseguera, Sax, & Korn, 2002; Sax, 2003). The survey instrument (see Appendix B) is revised annually to reflect the changing concerns of the academic community and of others who use the information.

The data reported here are weighted to provide a normative profile of the American freshman population for use by individuals engaged in policy analysis, human resource planning, campus administration, educational research, and guidance and counseling. The data are also useful to the general community of current and future college students, their parents, and college faculty.

A major purpose of the CIRP is to provide initial input information for longitudinal research. HERI annually conducts two additional surveys that enable institutions to follow up on their Freshman Survey respondents: Your First College Year (YFCY), which surveys students at the end of the first year of college, and the College Student Survey (CSS), which surveys students at any year in college. Longitudinal follow-up studies of CIRP students have been used in major studies of retention (Astin & Oseguera, 2002), community service and citizenship (Astin & Sax, 1998; Sax, 2004; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000), institutional transformation (Astin, Keup, & Lindholm, 2001), first-year adjustment (Keup & Stolzenberg, 2004), the science pipeline (Sax, 1994, 2001), diversity in higher education (Astin, 1982; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002), and large-scale studies of student development (Astin, 1977, 1993).

The normative data presented here are reported separately for men and for women and for 26 different institutional groupings. The major stratifying factors are institutional race (predominantly black versus predominantly white), control (public, private–nonsectarian, Roman Catholic, Other Religious), type (university or four–year college), and the “selectivity level” of the institution. (A complete discussion of the CIRP survey methodology, stratification scheme, and weighting procedures is presented in Appendix A.)

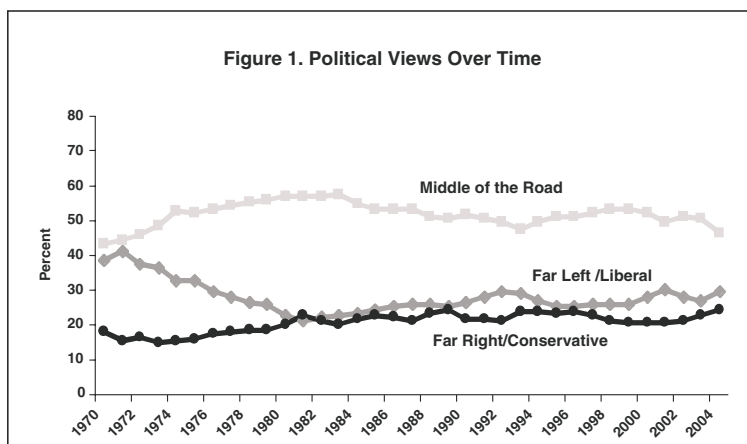
AN OVERVIEW OF THE 2004 FRESHMAN NORMS

The 2004 freshman norms are based on the weighted responses of 289,452 students at 440 of the nation’s baccalaureate colleges and universities. These data have been statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.3 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year colleges and universities as freshmen in 2004. The sections that follow summarize the 2004 results as well as major trends in the survey since Fall 1966.

POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS MORE POLARIZED; SUPPORT FOR MILITARY SPENDING DECLINES

Students entering college have become increasingly polarized in their political orientations, as a record number of students label themselves as politically “far left” (3.4 percent) and “far right” (2.2 percent). Although these percentages are small, they reflect a significant increase over time in the proportion of students who define themselves at the political extremes. Identification as either “liberal” (26.1 percent) or “conservative” (21.9 percent) is also up from last year. While “middle-of-the-road” remains the most popular political category at 46.4 percent, this figure has reached its lowest point in over thirty years, and marks a nearly four-percentage point drop since last year, when 50.3 percent of students considered themselves to be politically moderate. The change between 2003 and 2004 in students’ political orientation—concurrent with the 2004 presidential election year—reflects the largest one-year shift in this item’s thirty-five year history on the survey (see Figure 1).

Concurrent with the polarization of students’ political orientation is the continued growth in

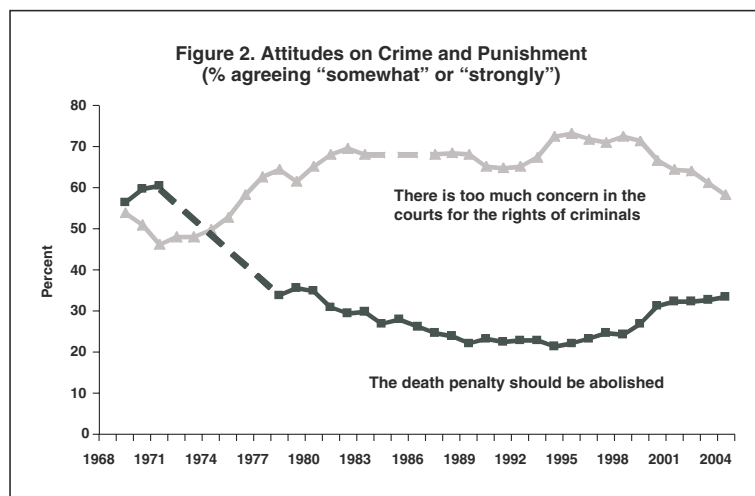


students’ interest in politics. The percent of students who feel that “keeping up to date with political affairs” is a very important or essential life goal rose for the fourth consecutive year to 34.3 percent. This marks a substantial increase from the item’s record low of 28.1 percent

reported among freshmen in 2000 and the highest level of political interest since 1994. Similarly, the percent of freshmen who frequently “discussed politics” increased from 22.5 percent in 2003 to 25.5 percent in 2004, marking the highest point reached since 1992, the year that President Clinton was first elected to office. These indicators of political engagement are far lower than the peaks reached in the late 1960s, when 60.3 percent of the 1966 freshmen valued keeping up with politics and one-third of the 1968 freshmen discussed politics on a frequent basis. Nonetheless, these recent shifts are noteworthy given their reversal of the long-term trend toward political disengagement.

This year’s survey also reveals a number of shifts in attitudes related to the role of federal and state governments. First, although the percent of students who currently advocate increased military spending is double the rate reported in 1992 (17.4 percent), it is down ten percentage points from a high of 45.0 percent in 2002, the immediate aftermath of September 11th. Currently 35.4 percent of students believe that “Federal military spending should be increased.” This is a sizable decline in support among freshmen in just two years. In addition, there is declining support for the death penalty and a growing sense that the legal system is not doing enough to protect the rights of criminals. Specifically, the belief that “The death penalty should be abolished” reached 33.2 percent, its highest point since 1980, and agreement that “There is too much concern in the courts for the rights of criminals”

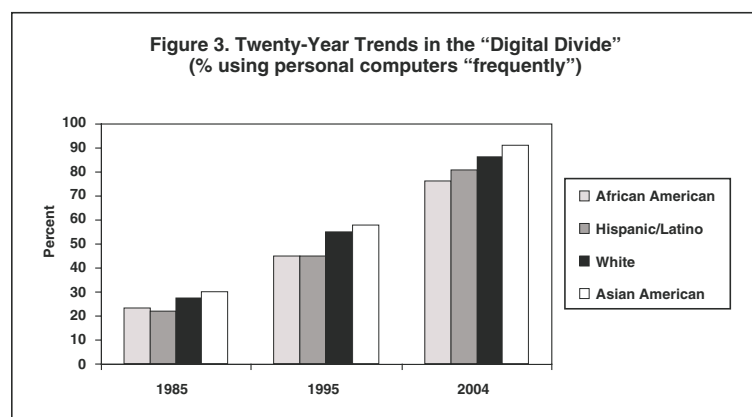
fell to 58.1 percent, its lowest point since 1976 (see Figure 2). This may reflect the widely-publicized moratorium placed on the death penalty in states like New York, clemency for death row inmates in Illinois, and a call for moratorium from the American Bar Association (ABA, 2003).



COMPUTER EXPERIENCES REFLECT A PERSISTENT “DIGITAL DIVIDE”

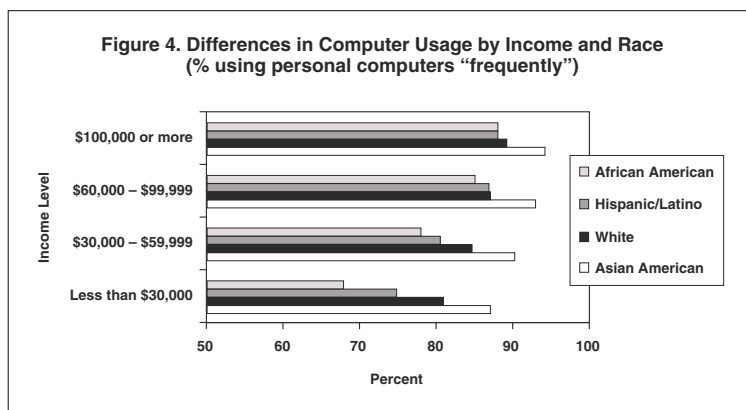
It goes without saying that freshmen today are more computer-savvy than college students in the past. Increased use of technology is evident in the national trends, as a record 85.7 percent of students used a personal computer on a frequent basis during the past year, compared to 27.3 percent in 1985, when this item was first introduced on the freshman survey. An issue of particular importance, however, is whether all entering college students have prior computing experience, regardless of gender, race or income.

Although gender differences in computer usage have disappeared over time, differences based on race have persisted. Currently a spread of fifteen percentage points exists in rates of frequent computer usage across racial/ethnic groups. As shown in Figure 3,



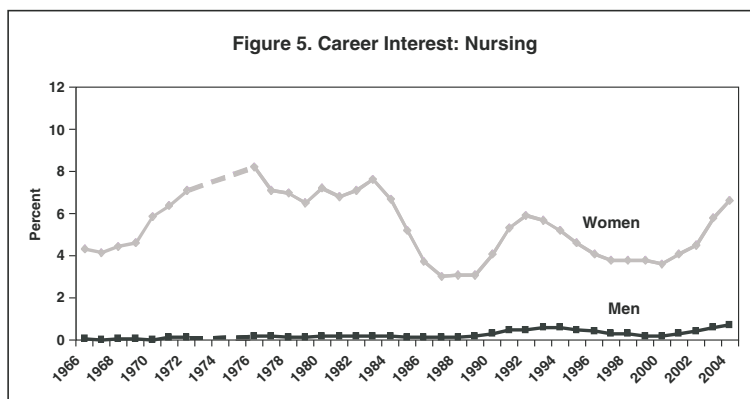
disparities in technological preparedness based on race have actually widened over time. Notably, Hispanic/Latino students have surpassed African American students in their levels of pre-college computing experience. Such differentials are often attributable to income variations across racial/ethnic groups. Indeed, as shown in Figure 4, differences in computer use are minimized among students from high-income families, but are exacerbated at lower income levels.

Overall, these results suggest that little or no progress has been made in bridging the “digital divide” since it gained national attention in the 1990s (Novak & Hoffman, 1998; U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999).



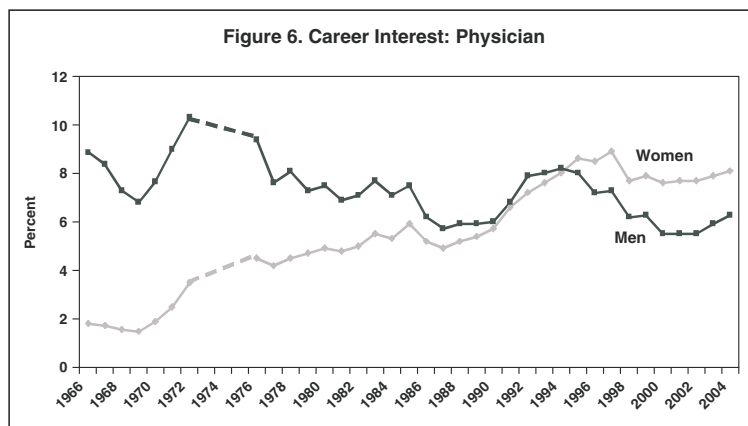
INCREASING STUDENT INTEREST IN BIOMEDICAL CAREERS AND MAJORS

Student interest in majoring in the general biological sciences, biochemistry or biophysics is at an all time high this year, with twice as many freshmen indicating an interest in these fields in comparison with students in the late 1980s. The number of students who indicate nursing as a probable career is also at a twenty-year high (3.9 percent). While women far outnumber men in this



career field (6.5 vs. 0.7 percent), there have been steady increases in nursing interest among both men and women over the last four years (see Figure 5). Freshman interest in other health careers such as pharmacy (2.4 percent) and dentistry (1.1 percent) also are at all-time

highs. Interest in medical careers has held fairly steady in recent years, with women continuing to outnumber men (7.0 vs. 5.1 percent), a gender difference first observed a decade ago (see Figure 6). These trends portend continued increases in the number of women preparing to apply to health-related professional schools in the future: Women now constitute slightly over half of all applicants to medical schools (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2004).

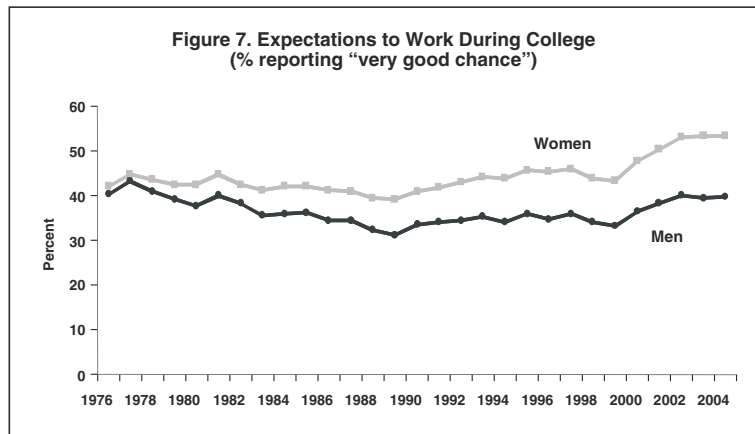


INCREASING EXPECTATIONS TO WORK DURING COLLEGE, ESPECIALLY AMONG WOMEN

Over three quarters (79.4 percent) of today's incoming college students report that there is at least some chance that they will get a job to help pay for college expenses. A record high 47.2 percent of the 2004 entering freshmen believe that there is a very good chance that they will work

during college, up from 47.0 percent in 2003 and a low of 35.3 percent in 1989. The gender gap in this expectation has widened over time, with 53.3 percent of women (vs. 39.6 percent of men) currently indicating that there is a very good chance that they will seek employment during college (see Figure 7).

Among these predominantly 17–19 year old full-time college students, the expectation to work full-time is low (6.3 percent). The 2004



figure, however, is at its highest since this question was first asked in 1982, when 3.0 percent of men and 2.7 percent of women anticipated securing full-time employment during college. Continuing a trend that began in 1988, comparatively more women than men in this year’s freshman cohort expect to work full-time (7.1 vs. 5.2 percent). In part, this change is reflective of the fact that over the past three decades, the greatest growth in college enrollments for women has occurred among those from low-income families (Lindholm, Astin, Choi, & Gutierrez-Zamano, 2002).

Not surprisingly, both men and women students from lower and middle-income families are comparatively more likely than their peers from higher income families to anticipate working while in school. Gender differences, however, are readily apparent across income levels, with women from every socioeconomic background notably more inclined than men from that same background to report that there is a very good chance they will work to help offset college costs (see Table 1).

Table 1. Expectation to Work While in College, by Family Income and Gender (percent reporting “very good chance”)

| Family Income | Men | Women | Difference |
|--------------------|------|-------|------------|
| \$100,000 or more | 28.1 | 37.5 | +9.4 |
| \$60,000–\$99,999 | 43.5 | 57.1 | +13.6 |
| \$30,000–\$59,999 | 49.2 | 63.1 | +13.9 |
| Less than \$30,000 | 47.8 | 62.3 | +14.5 |

In recent years, there has also been a steady increase in the percentage of students planning to rely on family resources and loans to cover their first-year educational expenses. This year, for example, 29.5 percent of incoming freshmen expect to receive over \$10,000 in family support, up from 28.9 percent last year and 25.6 percent in 2001, the first year this question was asked. The number of entering students planning to rely on at least \$3,000 in loans has also risen to 29.6 percent (from 27.8 percent last year and 24.1 percent in 2001). Among the 2004 incoming freshmen, 8.8 percent expect to borrow more than \$10,000 to cover first-year expenses, up from 7.8 percent last year and 5.6 percent in 2001. While just 13.0 percent of all students report “major” concerns about their ability to pay for college (down from a record high 19.1 percent in 1995), the current figure jumps to 22.7 percent among students whose families earn less than \$60,000 per year.

WOMEN MANAGE TIME BETTER BUT FEEL MORE OVERWHELMED THAN MEN

While women are more likely than men to rate their time management skills as “above average” or “highest 10 percent” (37.4 vs. 31.5 percent), they are also twice as likely as men to indicate that they frequently feel overwhelmed by all they have to do (36.4 vs. 16.3 percent). In part, the greater tendency for women to feel overwhelmed may be a reflection of how they spend their time. Men, for example, were comparatively more inclined than women to spend more than 10 hours per week during their last year in high school engaged in recreational activities such as socializing with friends (53.1 vs. 48.7 percent), exercising or playing sports (40.7 vs. 27.2 percent), watching television (15.5 vs. 9.1 percent), and partying (13.7 vs. 8.2 percent). By comparison, women were more likely than men to spend more than 10 hours per week in non-recreational activities such as working for pay (45.7 vs. 42.3 percent), studying and doing homework (18.5 vs. 11.6 percent), and engaging in housework and childcare (5.2 vs. 2.8 percent).

Perhaps as a function of their comparatively higher levels of involvement in potentially stress-buffering activities, men are more likely than women to rate their emotional health as “above average” or “highest 10 percent” (57.1 vs. 45.8 percent). Similarly, men within the 2004 entering freshman class are less likely than women to report that they felt frequently or occasionally

depressed over the past year (48.5 vs. 61.6 percent). Men are also less likely than women to indicate at least “some” chance of seeking personal counseling while in college (30.3 vs. 37.5 percent).

Gender differences are also apparent in terms of students’ self-rated physical health, with 42.6 percent of women rating their physical health as “above average” or “highest 10 percent,” compared to 64.1 percent among men. Further, women are more likely to report that they missed school because of illness during the past year (76.6 vs. 62.9 percent). In response to a new item added to the survey this year, fewer women than men indicated that they frequently maintained a healthy diet (33.7 vs. 37.9 percent). Finally, 78.1 percent of incoming college students report that they stayed up all night at least occasionally during their senior year in high school, with men being more likely than women to frequently go without sleep (18.6 vs. 15.7 percent).

HIGH SCHOOL GRADES—AND STUDENT BOREDOM—REACH RECORD HIGHS

Students’ grades continue to improve, with the proportion of students earning “A” averages in high school increasing to an all-time high of 47.5 percent, compared to 46.4 percent last year and a record low of 17.6 percent in 1968. Similarly, the percent of students earning average grades of “C+” or below stayed at the all-time low of 5.1 percent reached in 2003 (compared to a high of 23.1 percent in 1968).

Interestingly, as grades have risen, so has student boredom. The percent of students who were frequently “bored in class” during their last year of high school reached a record 42.8 percent, compared to 40.1 percent last year and a low of 29.3 percent reported in 1985. We also witness a downward trend in the amount of students’ out-of-class interactions with their high school teachers. Less than half of students (47.0 percent) report spending at least one hour per week talking with their teachers outside of class, compared to a high of 63.0 percent reported in 1989. Further, this year marks a record low in the percent of students who report being a guest in a teacher’s home (24.0 percent, compared to 39.7 percent in 1967).

VOLUNTEERISM REMAINS HIGH; YOUTH SERVICE MOST PROMINENT ACTIVITY

Continuing the high levels of engagement in service activities that have characterized recent cohorts of entering freshmen, the vast majority of entering college students (82.1 percent) report participating in volunteer work during their last year of high school. Women continue to be more likely than their male counterparts to participate in volunteer work (85.9 vs. 77.5 percent). Furthermore, more than half (53.0 percent) of the 2004 entering class report performing community service as part of a high school course. Here again, women participate in greater numbers than do men (55.9 vs. 49.4 percent).

Nearly one in three students came from high schools that had a community service requirement for graduation, however the service requirement varied depending on the type of high school attended. More than two-thirds (68.1 percent) of students from private high schools reported that service was a required activity, compared with only 22.9 percent of students from public high schools.

In 2004, the survey also collected data on the nature of students' volunteer activities. The most common activities are connected with serving youth: 44.5 percent of all students participated in tutoring/teaching activities during high school, and 32.9 percent provided child care. One in three students (33.2 percent) also performed service activities connected to their religious community. Over one-quarter of students report engaging in environmental activities (25.5 percent) and community improvement/construction work (25.3 percent). Other volunteer activities included services to the homeless (21.2 percent), counseling/mentoring (18.2 percent), and eldercare (18.1 percent).

DECLINING INTERACTION ACROSS RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUPS

Due to the increasingly diverse population in many states across the country, we would expect to see changes in attitudes and behaviors that reflect increasing interaction across racial and ethnic groups. However, fewer freshmen today indicate that "Helping to promote racial understanding" is an "essential" or "very important" personal goal than any other entering class in the history of the survey (29.7 percent, down from a high of 46.4 percent in 1992). Further, over the last three

years we have seen an increase in the number of freshmen who feel that racial discrimination is no longer a problem in America. In 2004, this belief was espoused by a record 22.7 percent of incoming freshmen (up from 22.4 percent in 2003, and a low of 12.5 percent in 1993), although differences exist across racial groups. Only 12.6 percent of African Americans, for example, agree with this view.

Recent declines in interaction patterns are also evident, and others have documented a deepening segregation in American schools (Orfield and Easton, 1996). Although 67.8 percent of freshmen in 2004 state that they frequently socialized with someone of a different racial/ethnic group in high school, this represents a decline from 70.0 percent in 2001. Moreover, while 63.1 percent of entering freshmen report that chances are “very good” that they will socialize with someone of a different racial/ethnic group during college, the current figure is the lowest since we began asking this question in 2000. Racial differences are also evident in interaction patterns (see Table 2). In an increasingly multicultural world, curricular and co-curricular activities designed to improve students’ knowledge and skills in this realm, such as diversity courses and inter-group dialogue, may be especially important (see Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). Future follow-up HERI surveys of the class of 2004 (using the Your First College Year Survey and the College Student Survey) will examine more closely the quality and context of students’ peer interactions in college.

Table 2. Racial/Ethnic Differences in Racial Attitudes and Interactions

| Survey Item | White | African American | American Indian | Asian American | Hispanic/Latino |
|---|-------|------------------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| <i>Indicates “very important” or “essential”:</i> | | | | | |
| Helping to promote racial understanding | 23.5 | 54.8 | 33.8 | 40.9 | 43.6 |
| <i>Agrees with the statement:</i> | | | | | |
| Racial discrimination is no longer a problem in America | 24.9 | 12.5 | 19.8 | 17.7 | 18.3 |
| <i>While in high school:</i> | | | | | |
| Frequently socialized with someone of another racial/ethnic group | 62.9 | 79.8 | 77.2 | 83.4 | 82.1 |
| <i>Reports “very good chance” that they will:</i> | | | | | |
| Socialize with someone of another racial/ethnic group in college | 60.1 | 67.6 | 70.7 | 73.6 | 73.2 |

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