

The American Freshman

National Norms for Fall 2004

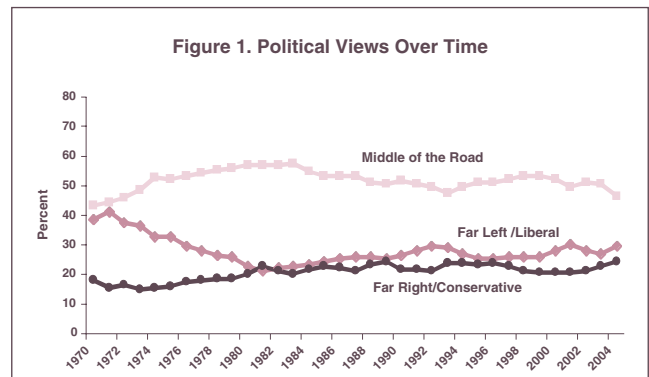
Political Extremes and Tech Disparities

Political Orientations More Polarized; Support for Military Spending Declines

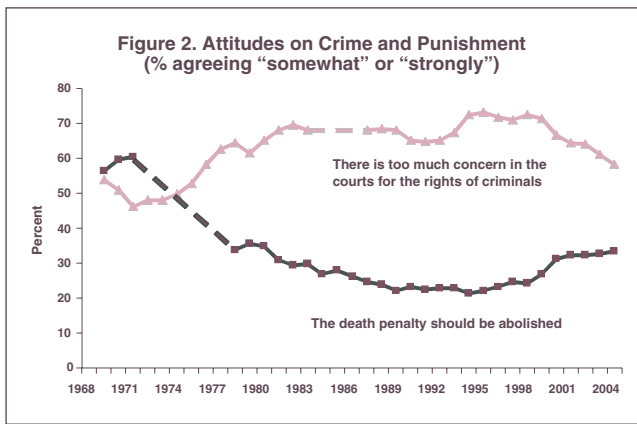
Students entering college have become increasingly polarized in their political orientations, as a record number of students label themselves as politically “far left” (3.4 percent) and “far right” (2.2 percent). Although these percentages are small, they reflect a significant increase over time in the 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.”



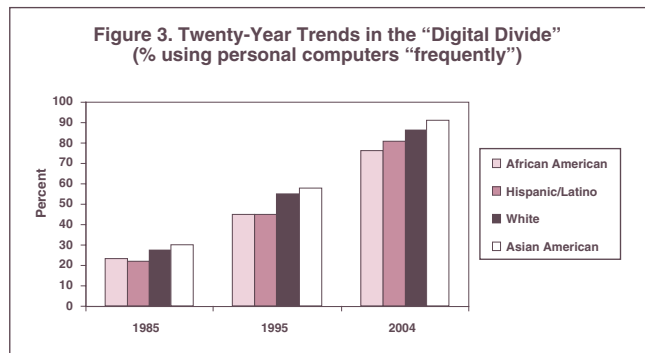
This is a sizable decline in support among freshmen in just two years. In addition, there is declining support for the death penalty and a growing sense that the legal system is not doing enough to protect the rights of criminals. Specifically, the belief that “The death penalty should be abolished” 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.

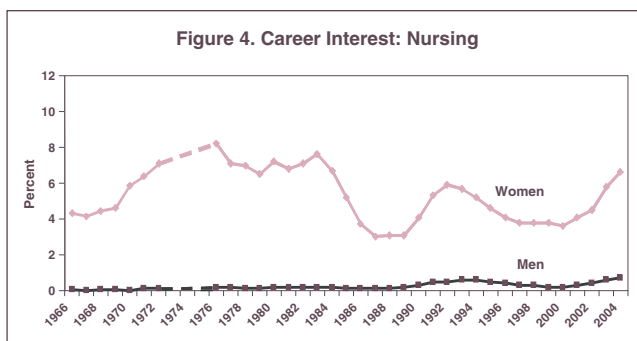
Although gender differences in computer usage have disappeared over time, differences based on race have persisted. Currently a spread of fifteen percentage

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, 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 4). 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. 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).

(From Sax, et al (2004). *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2004*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.)

The CIRP Freshman Survey

The CIRP Freshman Survey has been conducted annually since 1966. Each year some 700 two-year colleges, four-year colleges, and universities administer the survey to over 400,000 entering students during orientation or registration. The questionnaire covers a wide range of student characteristics: parental income and education, ethnicity, and other demographic items; financial aid; secondary school achievement and involvement; educational and career plans; and values, attitudes, beliefs, and self-concept.

Participating institutions receive a detailed profile of their entering freshman class, as well as national normative data for students in similar types of institutions. Colleges use these data for many purposes, including: admissions and recruitment; academic program development; institutional self-study and accreditation activities; etc.

Published each December in *The American Freshman*, results of the Freshman Survey provide a

comprehensive portrait of the changing character of entering students and American society at large.

Numerous studies have been conducted based on the CIRP data base, which contains data on more than 11 million students. Most recently, a longitudinal study used entering data from the 1994 CIRP Freshman Survey and degree completion data from college registrars to examine undergraduate persistence. A major finding was that *two-thirds of the variation among institutions in their degree completion rates is attributable to differences in their entering classes rather than to differences in the effectiveness of their undergraduate retention programs.*

Published by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) in 2002 and reprinted in 2005, *Degree Attainment Rates at American Colleges and Universities** also includes several formulas that an individual institution can utilize to compute an “expected” degree completion rate. The expected rate can be compared with the institution’s actual retention rate to gauge the effectiveness of its student retention program.

Information on the CIRP Freshman Survey, research and publications based on these data, and other surveys conducted by the Higher Educational Research Institute can be found at the HERI website: www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html or via email at heri@ucla.edu.

*Astin, A.W. & Oseguera, L. (2005) *Degree Attainment Rates at American Colleges & Universities*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

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Upcoming 2005 CIRP Surveys

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) will offer three student surveys in 2005. These surveys are open to all two- and four-year colleges and universities. For further information please refer to the HERI website: www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html

The Freshman Survey

The annual survey of entering college freshmen covers an array of demographic, experiential, and attitudinal issues. The questionnaire covers degree aspirations, major and career plans, and expectations about college. Participating institutions receive a campus profile report, plus national normative data. Institutions can merge their Freshman Survey data with other campus data to create a longitudinal data file for institutional research, planning, and accreditation studies. (Registration period 3/05–9/05.)

“Your First College Year” (YFCY)

The YFCY Survey provides information on the academic, social, and personal development of first-year college students. These data are useful for studying persistence, adjustment and other first-year outcomes. Students’ responses are compared to national and institutional peer group aggregates to enable institutions to determine where their first-year cohort “stands” relative to the first-year experience at large. (Registration period 9/04–1/05.)

The College Student Survey (CSS)

The CSS permits institutions to assess how their students have changed since they entered college. The survey includes 15 measures of self-assessed academic, social, intellectual, and emotional capabilities, and more conventional measures of academic success such as undergraduate GPA and GRE test scores. When combined with the CIRP Freshman Survey data, the CSS serves as a longitudinal measure of cognitive and affective growth in students. (Registration period 11/04–5/05.)

Publications Order Form

The American Freshman: Thirty-Five Year Trends. Summarizes trends in the CIRP freshman survey data from 1966 to 2001.

The American College Teacher: National Norms for the 2000–01 HERI Faculty Study. Provides an informative profile of teaching faculty.

Degree Attainment Rates at Colleges and Universities. Provides latest information on four- and six-year degree attainment rates collected from 262 institutions.

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