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Today's College Freshmen Have Family Income 60% Above National Average, UCLA Survey Reveals

(Note to Editors: To reach the Higher Education Research Institute, call 310-825-1925)

The nation's college freshmen are more financially advantaged today than they have been at any point in the last 35 years and come from families with a median income 60 percent higher than the national average, according to a new UCLA report that examined 40 years of data from UCLA's national survey of entering undergraduates at four-year colleges and universities.

The report, "American Freshmen: Forty-Year Trends 1966–2006," documents the values and characteristics of college freshmen nationwide and is part of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies.

"As colleges and universities continue their financial policies of increasing tuition and fees, we are seeing direct effects on students that come from poorer families," said José Luis Santos, UCLA assistant professor of education and an author of the report. "Poorer students alter their choices of whether or not to go to college at all, or choose a college based on financial costs and packages. Students from wealthier families can endure greater fluctuations in 'sticker price' than poorer students, and as a result, more students entering college come from homes that are increasingly wealthier than the national median income."

In 2005, entering freshmen came from households with a parental median income of \$74,000, 60 percent higher than the national average of \$46,326. This represents a 14 percent increase from 1971, when students' median family income was \$13,200, 46 percent higher than the national average of \$9,028.

Parental income for entering college freshmen is outpacing the national income by a 2-to-1 margin and accelerated during the mid-1980s, suggesting not only that students are from more economically advantaged homes than their predecessors but that the gap is widening.

"Increasing tuition and fees to offset state appropriation shortfalls or any other expenditure shortfall only favors families in the top fifth of the national income distribution, as they have the greatest ability to pay such rapid increases," Santos said. "For families whose

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income is below that, as their real wages continue to lose ground, they will face tougher choices regarding the attendance of college and what college to attend.”

Academic preparation for college-level work

The percentage of high school students taking the recommended years of study in various subject areas has increased since 1984. But even with the improvement, the level has remained low in certain areas, particularly the sciences: 46.8 percent of students completed recommended studies in biology, 59.9 percent in the physical sciences and 61.6 percent in computer science, leaving some students underprepared for college-level work in these areas. In addition, progress in all areas seems to have stalled, with most of the increases having taken place during the first decade of reform.

“Despite the No Child Left Behind initiative and state interest in removing remedial education in many four-year college and university systems, there has been little positive change in the percentages of students who believe they will need remedial work in college, and the critical subjects of math and science actually show an increased need for remedial support,” said Sylvia Hurtado, director of the Higher Education Research Institute.

From 1979 to 2005, the percentage of students reporting that they would need remedial work in math in college rose from 21.5 percent to 24.1 percent and in science from 9.7 percent to 10.9 percent. In English, there was a slight improvement, from 10.9 percent to 9.4 percent.

In addition, when looking at the academic habits of these students in their last year of high school, more reported having been late to class frequently — 60.6 percent in 2006, compared with 48.2 percent in 1966 — and only 32.8 percent reported spending six or more hours a week on homework, compared with 47 percent in 1987.

“A large part of the success that students have in college comes from accomplishments and academic habits they acquired in high school,” said John H. Pryor, director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program’s Freshman Survey.

Attitudes concerning diversity

With greater racial and ethnic diversity than ever before on today’s college campuses, student attitudes around race relations is critically important. Yet there may be cause for concern with regard to today’s entering students on this issue: Only slightly more than one-third (34 percent) rated the objective of helping to promote racial understanding as “essential” or “very important,” which represents a decline from a high of 46.4 percent in 1992, the year of the Rodney King-related riots in Los Angeles.

“As the workplace and our society become increasingly more diverse, students require more consistent opportunities outside of national events to discuss issues of race and to improve intergroup relations,” said Hurtado. “More freshmen felt the need to promote racial understanding immediately after the Rodney King incident than they do today. Although such events provide more occasion for discussion in schools and among peers, educators shouldn’t count solely on these events to foster values and skills related to racial understanding amongst students if they are necessary for our future.”

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Student values: Philosophy of life and altruism

For today's entering college students, the most important belief is in raising a family (75.5 percent), followed by "being well-off financially" (73.4 percent). "The importance of helping others," at 66.7 percent, is the highest it has been in 20 years and in 2006 was the third highest common value held by incoming students.

Becoming a community leader is more important now than ever, with 35.2 percent of students rating it "very important" or "essential." The percentage of students who said there was a very good chance they would participate in community service in college — which measured 16.9 percent in 1990 — increased to 26.8 percent in 2006. In community service, women outperformed men on their participation by a 2-to-1 margin over the same time period.

"Students today are more interested in helping others," said Pryor. "And because they hold such values to be important, they're volunteering in record numbers."

Reasons for going to college

In 1976, and again in 2006, students said the two most important reasons for attending college were "To learn about things that interest me" and "To get a better job." In 2006, earning more money was a close third, with 69 percent of students saying that "To be able to make more money" was a very important reason for going to college, compared with 49.9 percent of incoming students in 1976. And in 2006, 66.5 percent of students indicated that "the chief benefit of a college education is that it increases one's earning power."

Are students today more preoccupied with money?

"It would be simplistic to view today's college students as materialistic because they feel it is important to be well off financially," said Pryor. "In fact, students are also very interested in raising families and helping others, both of which are accomplished with greater ease if one is well-off financially."

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program

Since 1966, the first year of the CIRP Freshmen Survey, more than 8.3 million incoming first-year students at 1,201 colleges and universities nationwide have participated in the survey. The CIRP Freshmen Survey is the largest and longest-running survey of American college students.

The CIRP "Forty-Year Trend Report" examines data culled from 1966 to 2006 and documents the changing nature of students' characteristics, values, attitudes and behaviors. The data have helped shape public opinion about key issues related to the concerns of college youth and contribute to critical policy considerations in education

For a copy of "The American Freshman: Forty-Year Trends, 1966–2006" (J.H. Pryor, S. Hurtado, V.B. Saenz, J.L. Santos, and W.S. Korn), visit www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/40yrtrends.php.