

COLLEGE FRESHMEN SPEND LESS TIME STUDYING AND MORE TIME SURFING THE NET, UCLA SURVEY REVEALS

-- High school grade point averages hit record high despite decline in study time—

Editor's note: To reach the Higher Education Research Institute directly, call (310) 825-1925.

Freshmen are spending less time studying or doing homework and more time using the Internet in the year prior to entering college, according to the results of UCLA's annual survey of the nation's students entering undergraduate classes at four-year colleges and universities. Additionally, the survey shows that despite the continued decline in time devoted to schoolwork, students' high school grade average continues to climb.

The fall 2002 survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies finds a record low (33.4 percent) of today's entering freshmen report studying or doing homework six or more hours per week during their senior year in high school. This figure is down from last year's previous low of 34.9 percent and a high of 47.0 percent in 1987 when the question was first asked. The percent of students studying less than one hour per week has nearly doubled (from 8.5 to 15.9 percent) over the past 15 years.

"One factor that may contribute to these marked declines in homework and study time is the increasing use of computers, and the Internet in particular," said Linda Sax, UCLA education professor and director of the survey. Frequent use of personal computers hit a record 83.9 percent in 2002, compared to 82.0 percent last year. The percentage of freshmen indicating that they used the Internet for research or homework during their last year in high school has also increased (from 74.5 percent in 2001 to 78.4 percent in 2002). "It is unclear if computer and Internet use has enabled students to complete their homework in less time, or whether the time students spend using the computer simply takes away from the time that they could be spending on their studies," added Sax. The percent of students surfing the net for "other" uses (excluding studying or research for homework) increased from 52.2 percent in 2000 to 61.6 percent today.

Now in its 37th year, the UCLA Survey is the nation's longest-standing and most comprehensive assessment of student attitudes and plans. Conducted in association with the American Council on Education, the survey serves as a resource for higher education researchers throughout the world.

The 2002 freshman norms are based on the responses of 282,549 students at 437 of the nation's baccalaureate colleges and universities. The data has been statistically

adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.2 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year colleges and universities as freshmen in 2002.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADE AVERAGES CLIMB BUT VARY BY INSTITUTIONAL TYPE AND GENDER

Today, 45.7 percent of freshmen report earning “A” averages in high school, compared to the record high of 44.1 percent last year and a low of 17.6 percent in 1968. The proportion of entering freshmen with “A” averages from high school varies widely by institutional type. Seven out of ten students attending private universities (69.6 percent) earned “A” averages in high school, compared with only three out of ten (34.4 percent) at public four-year colleges. Grades also varied by gender, with 50.1 percent of today’s entering female freshmen having earned “A” averages in high school, versus 40.4 percent of men.

MORE STUDENTS SETTLE FOR THIRD OR LOWER CHOICE SCHOOL; GROWING RELIANCE ON EARLY DECISION PROGRAMS

Today’s students are applying to more colleges than in the past (13.7 percent apply to seven or more colleges, up from 13.6 percent last year and 8.3 percent in 1991). The percentage applying to seven or more colleges is six times higher than it was during the 1960’s. Over two-thirds (69.2 percent) of students are attending their first choice institution, but this percentage has declined steadily over time from 71.9 percent in 1999 and 79.7 percent in 1977. “Although over 90 percent of students are attending their first or second choice institution, more students today than at any previous time are attending a school that was less than their second choice,” said Sax. Today’s percentage (9.4) has increased from last year (8.7 percent) and has doubled since 1974 (4.7 percent).

More students are relying on “early action” or “early decision” programs to enhance their chances of being admitted to their first choice college. In 1999, 5.5 percent of students indicated that their participation in such programs was “very influential” in choosing their present college. Today, that figure has risen to 8.5 percent (up from 7.7 percent last year) with women more likely than men to take advantage of these programs (9.1 percent vs. 7.9 percent). “This pattern of growing multiple applications and increasing use of early admission decisions suggests that college admissions have become more competitive than ever,” says UCLA education professor Alexander W. Astin, director of the Higher Education Research Institute and founding director of the survey.

NATIONAL RANKINGS AND WEBSITES HAVE RISING IMPACT ON COLLEGE CHOICE

More students are considering college rankings published in national magazines and information from college websites when deciding which school to attend. When asked the extent to which publicized ranking in national magazines were influential in

their decision to enroll at their present institution, 13.3 percent say the information was “very important”(up from 11.1 percent last year). Web information was also “very important” in deciding to attend a particular college for 11.1 percent of today’s freshmen (up from 8.5 percent last year and 6.8 percent in 2000). Women are comparatively more likely than men to consider website information in selecting their undergraduate college (12.2 percent versus 9.6 percent).

POLITICS PLAY MORE CENTRAL ROLE IN STUDENT’S LIVES

For the second consecutive year students’ commitment to “keeping up to date with political affairs” increased. Currently 32.9 percent of freshmen view keeping up with politics as a “very important” or “essential” life goal, compared with 31.4 percent last year and an all-time low of 28.1 percent in 2000. “While the current rate of political interest remains far lower than the high of 60.3 percent reported in 1966, this two-year upswing likely reflects two events that have re-ignited America’s interest with politics: the hotly-contested 2000 presidential election and the events of September 11, 2001,” said Sax.

STUDENTS VOICE MORE CONSERVATIVE MILITARY AND GUN VIEWS WHILE SOCIAL ATTITUDES BECOME MORE LIBERAL

Another reflection of the impact of 9/11 and other recent events can be witnessed in the political orientations of entering freshmen. Following five consecutive years in which students gravitated toward more liberal political labels, 2002 signals a modest shift back towards more moderate and conservative political orientations. The percent of freshmen identifying themselves as “liberal” or “far left” decreased to 27.8 percent (compared to 29.9 percent in 2001) and the percent considering themselves “middle-of-the-road” grew from 49.5 percent to 50.8 percent. The percent identifying with the “far right” declined from 1.6 percent to 1.3 percent in the past year, while the “conservative” label became slightly more popular, rising from 19.1 percent in 2001 to 20.0 percent in 2002.

A record-high number of students support military spending. When asked whether “Federal military spending should be increased,” 45.0 percent of students agreed “somewhat” or “strongly,” more than double the level of support expressed among students in 1993 (21.4 percent), the last time this question was included in the survey.

A one-year conservative shift also is evident on the topic of gun control. In 2002, record-low numbers of freshmen agreed “somewhat” or “strongly” that “The Federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns.” Although more than three-fourths of the students still support gun control, agreement with this item showed the largest one-year decline (to 77.8 percent from 80.8 percent in 2001).

In contrast to these trends, several other items reflect a continuing shift to the left, particularly in relation to certain social issues. Support for gay rights reached new heights, with 59.3 percent of freshmen agreeing that “Same-sex couples should have the

right to legal marital status,” compared with 57.9 percent last year and 50.9 percent when this question was first introduced on the survey in 1997. Additionally, a record-low 24.8 percent of students believe that “It is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships,” less than half of what it was in 1987 (50.4 percent).

Another liberal trend is the increasing student support for the legalization of marijuana, which reached its highest point in 23 years. Today, 39.7 percent of incoming freshmen agree that “marijuana should be legalized,” compared to 36.5 percent last year and a low 16.7 percent in 1989. More men favor legalization (45.8 percent) than women (34.7 percent). “Given these liberal trends on social issues,” says Astin, “it seems reasonable to conclude that the rising support for military spending and the declining support for gun control are reflections of the events of September 11, 2001.”

DRINKING, SMOKING AND PARTYING CONTINUE TO DECLINE

Despite the increasing student support for legalizing marijuana, student smoking, drinking, and partying is on the decline. The percent of incoming freshmen who smoke cigarettes frequently has dropped for the fourth straight year, reaching a fifteen-year low of 7.4 percent (down from 8.6 percent last year and a high of 15.2 percent in 1967). Entering freshmen are also drinking and partying less. An all-time low 46.5 percent report drinking beer “frequently” or “occasionally” during the past year, down from 47.1 percent last year and a high of 73.7 percent in 1982. The percent who consume wine or liquor declined to an eight-year low of 52.5 percent, down from 53.7 percent in 2001 and a high of 67.8 percent in 1987. The number of hours per week spent on “partying” also declined with 25.1 percent of entering freshmen reporting that they spend six or more hours per week partying, down from 26.8 percent last year and a high of 36.8 percent in 1987. Additionally, there has been a steady increase in the percent of students who spend little or no time partying. In 2002, 35.8 percent of freshmen reported that in a typical week the amount of time they spend partying is “none.”

MORE STUDENTS EXPECT TO WORK DURING COLLEGE, ESPECIALLY WOMEN

The number of incoming freshmen who believe that there is a “very good” chance of getting a job to help pay for college rose to a record-high 47.1 percent in 2002, compared to 44.8 percent in 2001 and a low of 35.3 percent in 1989, with more women (52.9 percent) expecting to work than men (40.0 percent). “This gender difference is important because when we examine the long-term trends on this item, it becomes clear that this shift toward employment during college is accounted for entirely by changes among women students,” said Sax.

Concern that students will not have enough money to complete college grew for the second consecutive year with 65.3 students having “some” or “major” financial concerns, up from last year’s percentage of 64.6. Women are more concerned about whether they will have enough funds to complete college (70.9 percent) than their male counterparts (58.3 percent of men).

RISING INTEREST IN THE ARTS AND LAW, DECLINING INTEREST IN BUSINESS

Freshmen express greater interest in the arts than most previous entering classes. Desire for artistic expression is reflected in the record number who aspire to “become accomplished in one of the performing arts” (16.1 percent, up from 14.8 percent last year and a low of 9.3 percent in 1968). Interest in “creating artistic works” is also at a twenty-five year high (16.1 percent, up from 15.4 percent last year and a low of 11.8 percent in 1986), and the percent of entering freshmen who played a musical instrument in the last year reached a fifteen-year high (42.8 percent, up from 42.3 percent last year and a low of 40.6 percent in 1991.) Today’s students also are more interested in majoring in the arts and pursuing related careers, with 5.8 percent reporting their intent to major in art, music, speech, theatre or drama. Freshman interest in legal careers is also on the rise, reaching its highest point (4.3 percent) in eight years.

While student interest in the law and the arts continues to rise, interest in business is on the decline, decreasing for the third consecutive year to 16.2 percent (down from 16.6 percent last year and 16.8 percent in 2000). Today’s entering freshmen also are notably less drawn to pursuing business careers (13.8 percent compared to 23.9 percent who planned business careers in 1986). The specific aspiration to become a business executive (currently at 7.7 percent) shows an especially marked decline (down from 8.2 percent last year and 8.8 percent in 2000) relative to aspirations for other business-related pursuits.

STRESS AND DEPRESSION ON THE DECLINE, BUT GENDER GAPS REMAIN

Following an upsurge throughout the 1990’s in the percent of students feeling frequently “overwhelmed by all they have to do,” stress appears to be on the decline. After reaching a peak of 30.7 percent in 1999, the percent of students who report feeling frequently overwhelmed dropped for three consecutive years, and currently rests at 26.8 percent (compared to 28.0 percent last year). Gender differences on this item remain significant, with women more than twice as likely as men to report feeling frequently overwhelmed (35.2 percent versus 16.4 percent).

Rates of depression are also on the decline. In 2002, a record low 7.5 percent of freshmen reported feeling frequently depressed during the past year, marking the fourth consecutive decline in this item. Like stress, feelings of depression yield notable differences by gender (8.1 percent among women versus 5.8 percent among men).

Note to Editors: For more information related to the American Council on Education, an important associate in the preparation of this survey, call Tim McDonough

(202) 939-9365. For a summary of the survey, visit www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html, click on “Recent Findings.”

Copies of the 37th annual report, titled, “The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2002 (Sax, L.J., Lindholm, J. A., Astin, A.W., Korn, W.S., and Mahoney, K.M., 2001), are available to members of the public for \$25 (prepaid plus \$4.79 for the first book and 40 cents for each additional book for shipping) from the Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, 3005 Moore Hall, Box 951521, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521.

- UCLA-