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Financial concerns of first-year college students have wide impact, annual survey finds

Interest in business majors at new low; political engagement decreases

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More first-year college students have some concerns about their ability to finance college than at any time since 1971, according to the CIRP Freshman Survey, UCLA's annual survey of the nation's entering students at four-year colleges and universities. Such concerns are part of an overall picture of the impact of the economic downturn on the experiences of entering college students.

More than half of incoming first-time students in 2009 reported "some" concern about financing college, and more students were turning to loans to pay for college — 53.3 percent in 2009, up 3.9 percentage points from 2008 and the highest level reported in the last nine years.

In addition, fewer students reported experiences in the workforce as high-school seniors, with 62.8 percent having worked, compared with 69.3 percent in 2007. Students were not unique in having difficulty finding employment: More parents of incoming first-year students were also unemployed in 2009. About half (49.3 percent) of all students were planning to get jobs to pay for college.

The CIRP Freshman Survey, part of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), is administered nationally by the [Higher Education Research Institute \(HERI\)](#) at UCLA's [Graduate School of Education & Information Studies](#).

Financial concerns also affected students' college choice, with 41.6 percent reporting that cost was a "very important" factor in choosing which college to attend, the highest level since this question was added to the survey five years ago. In addition, those reporting that an offer of financial aid was important in their college choice increased to 44.7 percent, up from 43.0 percent in 2008 and 39.4 percent in 2007. And 8.9 percent reported that *not* being offered

financial aid at their first-choice college was important in their college selection, the highest mark since the question was first asked in 1984.

Students were also more likely to place high importance on choosing a college where graduates get good jobs; the percentage of students reporting this as "very important" increased to 56.5 percent in 2009, the highest level since the question was introduced in 1983.

"Given that more students report taking on debt to finance college, it makes sense that employment and financial success are on the minds of this year's entering students," said John H. Pryor, lead author of the report and director of CIRP. "Being well-off financially was a top goal for students last year and is even higher this year, at 78.1 percent, the highest we have seen since 1966."

Despite the fact that students want to be well-off financially, fewer students see a major or career in business as a way to achieve that goal. Incoming students intending to major in a business field dropped from 16.8 percent in 2008 to 14.4 percent in 2009, the lowest level seen for business majors in 35 years. The percentage of those who reported that they intend to have a career in business dropped as well, from 14.1 percent in 2008 to 12.1 percent in 2009, an all-time low going back to 1976.

Political issues, post-election

While the 2008 first-year class had the highest percentage of liberals since 1973, at 31.0 percent, the level dropped to 29.0 percent in 2009, similar to the pre-election level of 29.3 percent in 2007.

Although a drop in the proportion of first-year students identifying as liberal might appear to be a reaction to President Obama's first year in office, it actually follows a pattern seen in CIRP Freshman Survey data since President Jimmy Carter was elected in 1976. Following a political party change in the White House, regardless of the political party, the next survey year typically shows a slight drop in the percentage of liberal students and a slight increase in the percentage of conservative students. (The exception occurred in 2001, following the 2000 election George W. Bush, when the percentage of liberal students increased and the percentage of conservative students remained fairly stable.)

Students were also less likely, following an election year, to discuss politics frequently (33.1 percent in 2009, compared with 35.6 percent in 2008) or to believe that keeping up to date with political affairs is "very important" or "essential" (36.0 percent, compared with 39.5 percent in 2008).

The percentage of students indicating that helping to promote racial understanding was "very important" or "essential" also dropped this year, perhaps as a result of the election of the nation's first African American president. In 2008, just prior to Barack Obama's election victory, 37.3 percent of incoming first-year students indicated that helping to promote racial

understanding was personally "very important" or "essential"; in 2009, the level was at 33.1 percent, a 4.2 percentage-point drop. Decreases were seen across all racial groups, perhaps indicating that students feel race relations do not merit as much attention.

Personal and social responsibility

A new recognition of the importance of developing excellence, integrity and civic responsibility at the college and university level is reflected in efforts such as the [Core Commitments initiative](#) of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) — and gauging students' predispositions is essential in developing programs, as well as in assessing progress in student development, around these goals.

In 2009, a record number of incoming first-year students reported that they expected to participate in community service or volunteer work in college, with 30.8 percent indicating there was a "very good chance" they would take part in civic engagement. Volunteering in high school appeared to predispose students toward volunteer efforts and community service in college, with 56.9 percent who volunteered "frequently" as high school seniors indicating there was a "very good chance" they would do so in college, compared with those who volunteered "occasionally" (22.3 percent expected to volunteer in college) or who did not volunteer (8.2 percent).

Volunteering is also connected to "social agency," a CIRP scale of six items on the survey that measures the extent to which students value political and social involvement in their community as a personal goal. Incoming students who have volunteered or participated in community service as part of a class as high school seniors are more likely to score high in social agency values than those who have not. The same finding holds for increases in "pluralistic orientation," another CIRP scale that measures the extent to which students take seriously the perspectives of others.

"Educational and civic leaders know that colleges and universities play an active role in advancing students' commitments to civic engagement and community involvement," said AAC&U President Carol Schneider. "It is very heartening to see that those students who have these kinds of experiences in high school are also far more likely to volunteer and have higher levels of social agency and pluralistic orientations in college. This supports the efforts of institutions to build on students' predispositions and resonates with the AAC&U Core Commitments initiative to energize campuses."

Increase in AP classes and exams, but racial, ethnic differences persist

Today, more than two-thirds (67.9 percent) of all first-time, full-time entering college students report having taken at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course in high school. In addition, the percentage of students taking at least one AP exam has increased by nearly 10 percentage points over the last five years, from 50.9 percent to 60.3 percent.

Yet despite the increases, differences between racial and ethnic groups in AP experiences continue to exist. Opportunities in high school often determine if students gain access to AP courses. While only 5.4 percent of entering students at four-year institutions reported attending a high school where no AP courses were offered, the percentages were much higher among American Indian students (9.1 percent) and African American students (6.8 percent) than among Asian American students (5.8 percent), white students (5.3 percent) and Hispanic students (3.6 percent).

Among those who reported having taken between one and four AP classes in high school, Hispanic students, at 54.3 percent, compared very favorably with other groups, including white students (49.9 percent), multiracial students (50.0 percent), African American students (45.3 percent) and American Indian students (a low of 39.1 percent). Asian American students, however, were more than twice as likely to take between five and nine AP courses (33.8 percent) as white students (15.4 percent). The pattern was similar for students taking AP exams.

Special tutoring and remedial work

While more first-year students are entering four-year institutions having taken more AP classes and exams, there has also been an increase in the percentage of students who feel they will need special tutoring or remedial work.

Today, approximately one in five students (21.2 percent) entering a four-year college as a first-year student has had special tutoring or remedial work in high school. And almost twice as many (38.7 percent) believe that they will need special tutoring or remedial work in college.

In fact, remedial work in high school by these students is at the highest levels ever reported in the survey (with the exception social studies, which reached a high in 1980): English (7.2 percent), reading (6.5 percent), mathematics (14.5 percent), social studies (4.5 percent), science (6.1 percent), foreign language (5.9 percent) and writing (5.8 percent).

Veterans entering four-year colleges and universities

In 2009, given the renewed influx of veterans into college, the CIRP Freshman Survey introduced a new item on veteran status. Of the 297 schools surveyed in the report, 202 had at least one entering first-year student who was a military veteran, and a total of 595 entering first-year students reported veteran status.

Veterans tended to report receiving significantly lower grades in high school than non-veteran students entering the same colleges. For example, while 11.5 percent of veterans reported receiving A or A+ grades in high school, non-veteran students were more than twice as likely (23.1 percent) to report such grades. While only 4.6 percent of non-veterans reported a C+ average or lower, 19.8 percent of veterans did so. Veterans were also more likely than

non-veterans to report a need for special tutoring or remedial work in mathematics (35.8 percent vs. 24.3 percent) and writing (20.7 percent vs. 11.6 percent).

Although fewer veterans rated themselves in the "high" category in the CIRP scales of "academic self-concept" (21.0 percent, compared with 24.9 percent of non-veterans) they were much more likely to be in the "high" category for "social self-concept" (46.3 percent vs. 29.6 percent). In particular, veterans were more likely to rate themselves higher in leadership ability than other freshmen entering the same colleges.

Though this was the case, fewer veterans reported that there was a "very good chance" they would become involved in students clubs or groups (34.6 percent, compared with 45.9 percent of non-veterans) or discuss course content with students outside of class (37.1 percent vs. 46.1 percent).

"It will be important for campuses to introduce veterans to both the academic and social milieu in college, to engage them in social networks necessary for college success and assist them in meeting their academic goals," said Sylvia Hurtado, a co-author of the report and director of the Higher Education Research Institute.

The 2009 Freshman Norms report is based on the responses of 219,864 first-time, full-time students at 297 of the nation's baccalaureate colleges and universities. The data have been statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.4 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year colleges and universities as first-year students in 2009. Since 1966, the first year the survey was conducted, more than 15 million students have completed CIRP surveys at 1,900 colleges and universities. The CIRP Freshman Survey is the largest and longest-running survey of American college students.

To view a summary or to order a copy of the monograph "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2009" (J.H. Pryor, S. Hurtado, L. DeAngelo, L. Palucki Blake, & S. Tran), visit www.heri.ucla.edu.

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