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Parental Encouragement, Career and Financial Growth Motivate First-Generation Students to Attend College, UCLA Survey Reveals

More first-generation college students cite parental encouragement as a key reason for attending college than their peers with college-educated parents, according to a new survey of freshman trends released by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at UCLA.

The report, "First in My Family: A Profile of First-Generation College Students at Four-Year Institutions Since 1971," explores trends data collected between 1971 and 2005 on first-generation and non-first-generation college students as part of Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey.

The report, authored by CIRP staff, is issued in conjunction with the 40th anniversary of the Freshman Survey, which is administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies. The report was co-sponsored by the Foundation for Independent Higher Education.

"The notion that the parents of first-generation college students are a liability to college access is largely debunked, as these students are now more likely than their peers to report that a very important reason why they went to college was due to parental encouragement," said Victor Saenz, visiting assistant professor at UCLA and lead author of the report.

In 2005, 47 percent of first-generation students (compared with 43 percent of non-first-generation students) reported parental encouragement as a very important reason for attending college.

"This trend has more than doubled for first-generation college students since 1971," Saenz said.

Other reasons reported as very important by first-generation students include: to get a better job (70.6 percent in 1976 and 77.3 percent in 2005); to make more money (53.2 percent in 1976 and 76.4 percent in 2005); and to prepare for graduate school (42.1 percent in 1976 and 58 percent in 2005).

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“These trends mirror those of non-first-generation peers,” Saenz said. “One key exception lies in the importance of ‘making more money’ as a reason for going to college, as first-generation college students report that this remains a slightly more important priority relative to their peers (76.4 percent vs. 69.8 percent).”

U.S. education levels increase

Since 1971, the proportion of first-generation students within the overall population of first-time, full-time entering college freshman at four-year institutions has steadily declined, reflecting increasing levels of education among the U.S. population. In 1971, first-generation students represented 38.5 percent of all first-time, full-time college freshman. By 2005, the proportion of first-generation college students declined to 15.9 percent, its lowest mark since first measured by the CIRP Freshman Survey. Saenz suggests that any conclusions drawn from this decline should consider other enrollment trends for first-generation college students, such as their increasing enrollment within community colleges as an alternative to four-year institutions.

Racial and ethnic differences

Although the national average of first-generation students among entering freshmen was 38.5 percent in 1971, when disaggregated by racial/ethnic groups, the proportion was much higher for Hispanics (69.6 percent), African Americans (62.9 percent), Native Americans (44.8 percent) and Asians/Asian Americans (42.5 percent). Over the last 35 years, while the proportion of first-generation students within each of these racial/ethnic groups has steadily declined, it has remained highest for Hispanic first-generation students.

Over time, Hispanic students have remained more likely than their peers to be first-generation college students, with more than one-third (38.2 percent) included in this category in 2005. Non-Hispanic white students have remained consistently less likely to be first-generation students (37.3 percent in 1971 and 13.2 percent in 2005), while Asian/Asian American and Native American first-generation students have declined by half since 1971 (19 percent and 16.8 percent in 2005, respectively).

Since 1971, African Americans show the greatest decline in their representation of first-generation college students, dropping by almost two-thirds from 1971 (62.9 percent) to 2005 (22.6 percent). Even though African American students have shown the greatest proportional decrease in first-generation students in the last three decades, this is still a cause for concern, because the rate of this decline is faster than the declining proportion of African American adults without a college education in 2005 (55.7 percent).

“It is very probable that first-generation African American students are having more difficulty gaining access to four-year institutions,” said Sylvia Hurtado, director of the Higher Education Research Institute and a co-author of the report.

First-generation students work more in high school, expect to get jobs to pay for college

More first-generation college students report working 20 hours per week or more during their last year of high school, and more of them expect to work to pay for college expenses than do their non-first-generation peers. In 1987, 26 percent of first-generation students reported working more than 20 hours per week in their last year of high school, compared with 18.9

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percent of non-first-generation students. In 2005, 22.2 percent of first-generation students reported working more than 20 hours, compared with 15 percent of their peers.

The gap between first-generation students expecting to get a job to pay for college expenses and their peers continues to increase. From 1987 to 2005, there was an increase of 13.6 percentage points in the proportion of first-generation college students reporting a very good chance that they would get a job to pay for college, increasing from two out of every five students (41.5 percent) to well over half (55.1 percent). In comparison, between 1987 and 2005, there was an increase of 8.3 percentage points among non-first-generation college students reporting a high expectation to get a job to help pay for expenses (36.7 percent to 45 percent).

“Over the last 20 years, there is an apparent consistent relationship between reported work experiences during high school and expectations to work in college,” said Saenz. “The sharp rise in tuition and fees from the mid 1980s to 2005 may be affecting these increased expectations for work during college.”

This important new trends report is based on 35 years worth of data collected through the Freshman Survey, administered annually at hundreds of four-year institutions around the country. In a typical year, more than 400,000 entering college freshmen participate in this survey, and national norms are then created to reflect all entering first-time, full-time students at the nation’s four-year colleges and universities. As an example, for 2005, these data were statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.3 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year colleges and universities as freshmen.

The Foundation for Independent Higher Education’s (FIHE) signature initiative — First Opportunity Partners — is a national effort to help increase the access and success of first-generation and other underrepresented student populations in the private college and university sector. Accordingly, FIHE’s interest in the report’s findings helps to strengthen its work.

“Enrollment in college by first-generation students represents the fulfillment of the American dream for many families,” said William E. Hamm, FIHE president. “The dream is not fully realized unless these students achieve their goals, and private colleges are particularly effective in retaining and graduating first-generation students. This important new study will be of vital interest to our private college leaders.”

FIHE is a national partner in a network of member state and regional fundraising associations. FIHE secures financial resources in support of America’s independent colleges and universities and their students; develops collaborative programs within its network and with other organizations; and, together with its members, is a primary voice of independent higher education to corporate and philanthropic communities.

For a summary of the study and for ordering information, visit the Higher Education Research Institute’s Web site at www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri.