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Incoming college students more liberal on hot-button political, social issues, annual survey finds

Students also demonstrate increasingly positive academic behaviors

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First-year college students' political and social views shifted in a more liberal direction in 2011, according to the CIRP Freshman Survey, UCLA's annual survey of the nation's entering students at four-year colleges and universities. Notable changes were seen in student views on same-sex marriage, affirmative action and access to higher education for undocumented students.

The 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](#).

An unprecedented 71.3 percent of incoming college students indicated that same-sex couples should have the right to legal marital status, compared with 64.9 percent in 2009, a remarkable 6.4 percentage-point increase over a two-year period. While support for same-sex marriage is highest among female students and those who identify as liberal, a significant amount of conservative students (42.8 percent) and an increasing number of male students (64.1 percent in 2011 vs. 56.7 percent in 2009) expressed support for this issue.

"Among students entering college, we're seeing a more unified support for same-sex marriage that reaches across political party lines," said John H. Pryor, lead author of the report and director of CIRP. "Given the influence of young voters in the last presidential election, candidates may want to pay careful attention to the student perspective on these and other civil rights issues."

Students also demonstrated more progressive attitudes about policies that give students from disadvantaged backgrounds preferential treatment in college admissions. Despite the increasingly competitive admissions environment, which has resulted in fewer students gaining acceptance to their first-choice college (76.0 percent in 2011 vs. 78.9 percent in

2010), the number of students supporting preferential treatment in college admissions rose from 37.4 percent in 2009 to 42.1 percent in 2011, a 4.7 percentage-point increase.

In another finding with important implications in the current political climate, fewer students said they believe that undocumented students should be denied access to public education. Since the question was last asked in 2009, opposition to educational access for these students dropped by 4.2 percentage points, from 47.2 percent to 43.0 percent in 2011. While liberal students are much more likely to support undocumented students' access to education, 39.0 percent of conservative students also indicated their support.

Positive changes in academic behaviors

The Freshman Survey found that on the academic front, students showed more positive behaviors consistent with academic success than they had in the past. Among the findings:

More students taking AP courses

The proportion of students who had taken at least one Advanced Placement course rose from 67.9 percent in 2009 to 71.0 percent in 2011. Those who had taken five or more AP courses rose from 18.7 percent in 2009 to 21.7 percent in 2011.

Discussing college-course content outside class

More students indicated that as college students, they expected to discuss course content with their peers outside of class, a behavior that has been linked to retention and greater academic gains in college. This figure rose from 46.9 percent in 2010 to 48.8 percent in 2011.

Alcohol consumption at all-time low

The proportion of students who said they drank beer as high school seniors dropped from 38.4 percent in 2010 to 35.4 percent in 2011, while those who said they drank wine and/or liquor dropped from 43.3 percent in 2010 to 41.1 percent in 2011.

More hours spent studying in high school

The proportion of students who reported spending six or more hours a week studying or doing homework as high school seniors rose to 39.5 percent, from 37.3 percent in 2010.

Many of these behaviors have connections to degree completion, which is further explored in HERI's recently released report "[Completing College: Assessing Graduation Rates at Four-Year Institutions](#)."

Challenges of financing college

The economic downturn continues to affect students' ability to pay for college. Fewer incoming students reported financing college through grants or scholarships (69.5 percent, down from 73.4 percent in 2010). Students also reported receiving less aid. Only 26.8 percent

of students received \$10,000 or more in grants or scholarships in 2011, compared with 29.2 percent in 2010.

As students search for other ways to pay for college, it comes as no surprise that loan usage continues to surge. In 2001, 5.6 percent of students reported that they expected to use \$10,000 or more in loans to cover the costs of their first year of college. By 2011, this figure had more than doubled, to 13.3 percent.

"Scholarships and grants are fundamental to closing the gap between college costs and what students and families can manage to pay out of pocket," said Sylvia Hurtado, co-author of the report and director of UCLA's HERI. "This combination of fewer funds from scholarships and the increased high usage of loans exaggerates the problem of paying for and completing college."

The 2011 Freshman Norms report is based on the responses of 203,967 first-time, full-time students at 270 of the nation's baccalaureate colleges and universities. The data have been statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.5 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year colleges and universities as first-year students in 2011. 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 2011" (J.H. Pryor, L. DeAngelo, L. Palucki Blake, S. Hurtado and S. Tran), visit www.heri.ucla.edu.

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