

January 2008

# The American Freshman

## Forty-Year Trends: 1966 - 2006

*This brief summarizes key findings from the new report, the "American Freshmen: Forty-Year Trends 1966–2006." This significant new report documents the values and characteristics of college freshmen nationwide over the last forty years, and it is drawn from survey data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA.*

### CHANGING FRESHMAN DEMOGRAPHICS

White students represented 90.9 percent of the first-time, full-time freshmen in 1971 and their proportion declined to 76.5 percent in 2006, indicating proportional increases in the representation of other racial/ethnic groups and demographic shifts in the U.S. population. Most notably, Asian American/Asian students' representation has nearly doubled each decade, constituting 0.6 percent of freshmen in 1971 and now representing 8.6 percent of first-time, full-time freshmen. Similarly, although they are more likely than other groups to begin at community colleges, the percentage of Latinos entering baccalaureate-granting institutions has also steadily increased, due primarily to sheer demographic growth. Their representation among first-time, full-time freshmen increased from .06 percent in 1971 to 7.3 percent in 2006, with trends indicating their representation doubled from 1971 to 1980 and then tripled from 1990 to 2000.

In contrast, the representation of African American/Black students has increased, stalled, and slightly declined over time. While African American/Black students represented 7.5 percent of freshmen in 1971 and increased to 12.5 percent of all students in 1980, this group's representation subsequently declined to

represent 10.5 percent in 2006 across all baccalaureate-granting institutions (inclusive of historically Black colleges and universities or HBCUs). Overall, these differences across groups reflect U.S. population shifts, changes in college admissions criteria (from race-conscious to race-neutral), and variability in access and opportunity within and between schools for various groups.

### Racial/Ethnic Groups

	Percent In...				
	1971	1980	1990	2000	2006
White/Caucasian	90.9	84.1	80.7	76.1	76.5
African American	7.5	12.5	12.1	10.4	10.5
American Indian	0.9	0.8	1.3	1.9	2.2
Asian American/Asian	0.6	1.4	3.8	7.1	8.6
Latina/o	0.6	1.4	2.2	6.7	7.3
Other Race	1.0	1.7	1.8	3.6	3.6
Multiracial (two or more groups)	1.3	1.2	1.7	4.8	7.2

Additionally, other key demographics trends include: significant shifts in the gender composition of college freshman, as most entering college students are now women (55 percent); an increase in older first-time students (from 13.7 percent in 1967 to 29.6 percent in 2006); an increase in students reporting a learning disability (from 0.5 percent in 1983 to 2.8 percent in 2004); and, a decline in the proportion of first-generation freshman (decrease of 22.8 percent from 1971 to 2005).

**FRESHMAN PARENTAL INCOME IS RISING**

Parental income for entering college freshmen is outpacing the national income by a 2-to-1 margin and it 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. In 2005, entering freshmen came from households with a parental median income of \$74,000, sixty percent higher than the national average of \$46,326. This represents a 15 percentage point increase from 1971, when students' median family income was \$13,100, forty-five percent higher than the national average of \$9,028. In the last 35 years, college student parental income rose from \$65,700 to \$76,400 (inflation-adjusted), representing a 16 percent increase, while national income rose from \$44,900 to \$47,800 (inflation-adjusted), representing a 6.5 percent increase.

**ACADEMIC PREPARATION FOR COLLEGE-LEVEL WORK AND REMEDIATION RATES**

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.

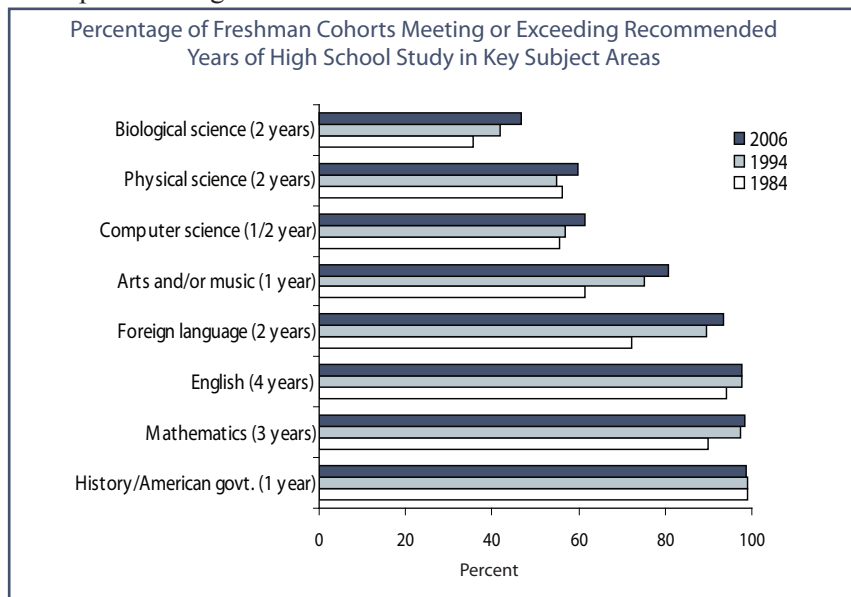
From 1979 to 2005, the percentage of students reporting that they would need remedial work in math in college rose from 21.5 percent to 24.1 percent and in science from 9.7 percent to 10.9 percent. In English, there was a slight improvement, from 10.9 percent to 9.4 percent. In addition, when looking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

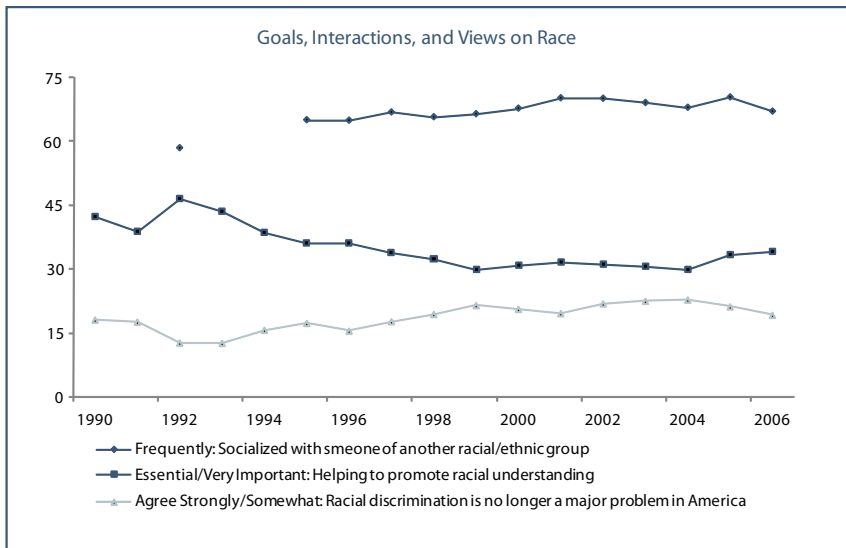
These trends in preparation coincide with remediation taken once in college. While there have been some increases since 1979 in the percentage of students reporting they had special tutoring or remedial work in high school, the largest increases have occurred in mathematics, with 12.7 percent of students in 2005 compared with 7.5 percent in 1979. However, there have been remarkably small changes in the last ten years. In general, the percentage of students reporting that they feel they need remediation upon college entry has declined since 1971, particularly in foreign language, science, and mathematics.

**STUDENT VALUES: A BETTER QUALITY 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 outpaced men in their participation by a 2-to-1 margin over the same time period.





In 2006, more than half (57.4 percent) of all entering college students indicated that the school’s good academic reputation was a “very important” reason for selecting their particular college, almost equivalent to the proportion in 1983 (58.4 percent). Two other characteristics that have held steady as very important reasons for students choosing a college are institutional track records of placing graduates in good jobs and in graduate school.

**MORE COLLEGE APPLICATIONS**

In 1967, less than one in five entering college students (19.9 percent) reported

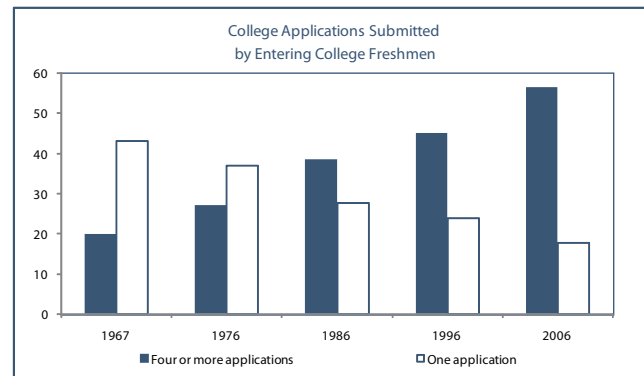
applying to four or more colleges, a figure that has nearly tripled to 56.5 percent in 2006. In contrast, the number of students who reported submitting only one college application has declined by more than half during this same time span (from 43.1 percent to 17.7 percent). A closer look at the actual number of college applications submitted by students indicates that this figure has doubled over the last 40 years, a trend that shows little sign of slowing down as the application process becomes increasingly streamlined and web-enabled.

**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.

**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.”



*Please contact the Higher Education Research Institute for more information or to order your copy of the Forty Year Trends monograph.*

**Source:**

Pryor, J. H., Hurtado, S., Saenz, V. B., Santos, J. L., & Korn, W. S. (2007). *The American freshman: Forty year trends*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

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The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) is based in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. The Institute serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in postsecondary education.

CIRP

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) is a national longitudinal study of the American higher education system. It is regarded as the most comprehensive source of information on college students. Established in 1966 at the American Council on Education, the CIRP is the nation's largest and oldest empirical study of higher education, involving data on some 1,900 institutions and over 13 million college students. The Higher Education Research Institute has administered the CIRP since 1973. The CIRP longitudinal program consists of The Freshman Survey, Your First College Year Survey, the College Senior Survey, and the triennial Faculty Survey. Information on the CIRP Freshman Survey, research and publications based on these data, and other research projects conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute can be found on the HERI website at: [www.heri.ucla.edu](http://www.heri.ucla.edu)

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