

## Findings from the 2015 College Senior Survey

September 2015

### INTRODUCTION

The College Senior Survey (CSS) has been administered by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) since 1993. This year marked the survey's 23rd administration; it contains data from 23,523 seniors graduating from 95 colleges and universities across the United States.

### RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

Beyond courses and class projects, college students gain valuable skills, knowledge, and experiences by participating in research programs and projects, and opportunities for undergraduates to engage in research continue to increase. From this sample of graduating seniors, approximately one-fourth (26.1%) indicated that they had taken part in an undergraduate research program, while 40.7% had spent time working on a professor's research project. Nearly one-quarter (23.3%) of students participated on a professor's project for at least four months during college.

There are notable differences in research participation by students' major department (see Table 1). Students in the physical sciences were most likely to spend at least four months on a professor's research project (61.1%), followed by biological science majors,

where nearly half (46.7%) did so. This compares to 25.8% of social science majors and 12.5% of business majors. While different fields of study may be more conducive to incorporating undergraduate students into faculty research projects, institutions may consider the specific pathways and barriers to access research opportunities in the context of students' choice of major.

Students with research experience felt more prepared for a graduate or advanced degree program. A slight majority (50.3%) of students who participated in an undergraduate research program strongly agreed that their institution prepared them for graduate education compared to 34.9% of students who did not participate. Similarly, 36.5% of students who spent three months or less working on a professor's research project strongly agreed that the institution contributed to their graduate preparations, compared to 46.9% of students who participated at least four months.

Students not only felt more prepared for graduate school but they were also more likely to enroll full-time upon college graduation. Among undergraduate research program participants, 37.7% plan to enroll in graduate school full-time in the fall, compared to 20.5% of students who did not participate in a similar program. Research opportunities may inspire or confirm students' aspirations for doctoral degrees, as 48.9% of research program participants aspire to earn a doctoral degree (Ed.D., J.D., M.D. or Ph.D.) whereas 19.3% of students not in a research program aspire to the same types of degrees.

While research programs help prepare students for graduate school, they can also benefit those who are interested in entering the workforce. Among students who are planning for employment post-college, 43.7% of students who participated in a research program reported receiving an offer of employment at the time of graduation, compared to 40.2% of students who

**Table 1. Time Spent Working with Professors on Research, by Academic Major**

Major	% Who Worked with a Professor on Research 4+ Months
Physical Sciences	61.1
Biological Sciences	46.7
Engineering	33.1
Social Sciences	25.8
History/Political Science	21.7
Education	17.1
Humanities	14.7
Business	12.5

did not participate in a similar program. While students who conduct research may be more desirable to employers overall, students may also benefit from the experiences, skills, and networks they develop and cultivate through their research programs. Thus, such programs can provide important opportunities for students to prepare for either a job search or the graduate school admissions process.

### STUDENT LOANS AND STUDENTS' FUTURE PLANS

Results from the 2011 Freshman Survey, when many from the Class of 2015 entered college, revealed the most important reason students cited for attending college was to get a better job. Four years later, 59.2% of seniors in this sample considered it very important for their career path to provide high income potential, with 85.3% desiring a path that offers a stable, secure future.

At the time of graduation, debt and loans were on the top of many students' minds and may have influenced how they think about their career. Among students in this sample, 63.2% indicated that they utilized a loan to cover some part of their educational expenses in the past year, with 36.7% of the sample taking out \$10,000 or more in loans for their senior year. Approximately half of the students in the sample (49.4%) reported they will graduate with some loan debt. Among those graduating with debt, the median amount owed is \$26,000.

Similar to data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (Paslov & Skomsvold, 2014), African American students in this sample were the most likely to report owing money at the time of graduation (see Figure 1). The same also held when considering loan amounts of \$26,000 or greater, as approximately one-third (34.7%) of African American students reported carrying such loan balances. Such disparities in loan amounts present important barriers to achieving

equity, as students' college experiences and career considerations relate to their student loan debt.

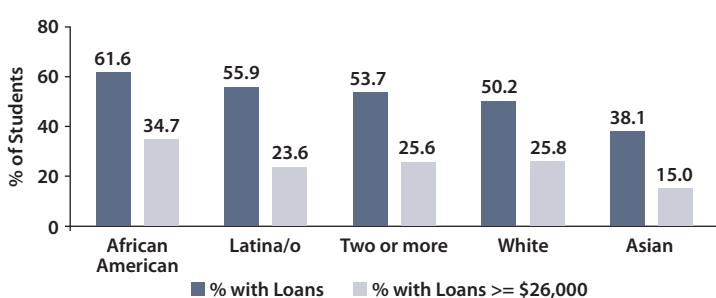
During college, students try to meet their college costs and minimize their debt obligations through part- or full-time employment. However, such jobs are often insufficient for students to meet higher education's increasing costs. Among students who worked more than ten hours per week off-campus, 63.4% reported owing money. Students who worked fewer hours or not at all were less likely to report carrying a student loan at the time of graduation. Individuals who graduate with student loan debt and worked while in college encounter a double tax—they likely had fewer opportunities to engage in campus life due to off-campus work and will continue to pay for college for several years after graduation.

Students who reported borrowing money to pay for their college expenses entered the workforce with similar career goals as their peers who did not borrow. For example, 73.0% of students who reported owing money think it's very important to find a career where they can express their personal values, compared to 72.6% of those who reported not owing any money. More than half of students who carry loans (54.3%) feel it's important to work for social change, which parallels the 52.0% of students without loans who also feel strongly about working for social change.

On the other hand, students with debt reported that they were more concerned about job availability (80.7% versus 76.6%) and were much more concerned about pursuing a career path that allows them to pay off debt (88.9% versus 59.7%) compared to their peers who did not report borrowing for school expenses. Students with debt may feel strongly about finding a career that aligns with their personal values and goals, yet they also feel additional pressures and constraints given their impending repayment requirements. These tensions may slow the progression of students with debt in achieving the personal and professional goals they identified at the time of graduation.

Student loan debt not only connects with students' career concerns but it also plays an important role in their post-graduate plans and opportunities. Students with debt were slightly more likely to plan for full-time employment (77.6%) than students reporting no debt (71.6%) and were somewhat less likely to plan for full-time graduate school enrollment (24.0% versus 26.5%). At the same time, students with loans were more likely to anticipate

Figure 1. Student Reported Debt Upon Graduation, by Race



pursuing part-time opportunities, with a third (33.0%) planning some form of part-time employment and 10.8% planning part-time graduate school. Students with debt may feel pressure to pursue other opportunities part-time in order to balance their career or educational goals within the constraints of their impending debt obligations.

### STUDENTS EXPRESS THEIR VOICE IN AND OUT OF CLASS

Along with events from this past year such as those in Ferguson, MO, and Baltimore, MD, and with growing concerns about law enforcement's use of deadly force, students across the country made their voices heard, organizing and participating in rallies, demonstrations, and protests. More than half (57.4%) of students reported they had publicly communicated their opinion about a cause, whether through emails, blogs, petitions, or other media during the last year. African American students were most likely (67.5%) to have publicly communicated their opinion compared to their Asian (53.4%), Latina/o (55.8%), and White (57.0%) peers. Among this sample of graduating seniors, approximately one-quarter (24.5%) reported they demonstrated for a cause in the past year.

In addition to participating in rallies or circulating emails and petitions, the college classroom can provide opportunities for students to challenge their peers and professors as they formulate their ideas, goals, and commitments. Among this sample of graduating seniors, a majority (57.6%) reported that they challenged a professor's ideas in class. A smaller percentage of first-generation students did so (53.0%) as compared to their continuing-generation peers (60.1%). Such differences may suggest that the classroom environment and structure do not facilitate first-generation students speaking up and challenging others' ideas in the same ways as non-first-generation students. Similarly, these differences reveal that first-generation students' perspectives and experiences may not be fully heard and considered within the classroom space.

Differences in students challenging a professor's ideas in class also emerge when considering major departments. In this sample, 71.2% of history and political science majors and 67.0% of English majors reported challenging a professor's ideas in class, compared to 48.5% of engineering majors and 44.5% of health professions majors. While some departments and courses may be more

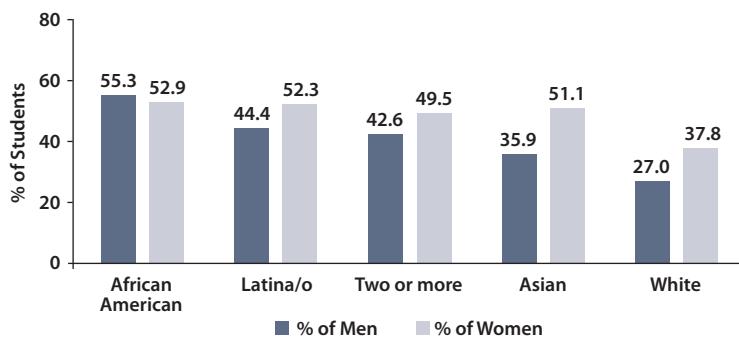
conducive for students to challenge a professor's ideas in class, it is important for campuses to consider whether their classes are designed and structured to allow for students to engage, and even disagree, with the material and with each other.

Interestingly, students who challenged a professor's ideas also reported feeling that their contributions were valued in class. Among students who frequently challenged a professor's ideas in class, 64.1% also frequently felt their contributions were valued. Conversely, among those who did not challenge a professor's idea in class, only 36.6% frequently felt their contributions were valued. Thus, disagreeing with the professor and feeling valued do not appear to be mutually exclusive. Throughout college, experiences and opportunities inside and outside the classroom provide important opportunities to engage others even when they may disagree.

### CAMPUS RACIAL/CULTURAL AWARENESS WORKSHOPS

Campus centers and programs create and facilitate opportunities for students to engage more deeply around issues of race and ethnicity. Students were asked about one opportunity in particular—racial/cultural awareness workshops—and whether they had participated in the past year. Among this sample, 37.5% of students reported participating, with a majority of African American (53.7%) and half of Latina/o (49.9%) students attending such workshops compared to 33.8% of their peers who identified as White. Similarly, women (41.3%) were more likely than men (30.9%) to have attended, but this was not the case for all subgroups of students. Among African American students, for example, a greater percentage of men (55.3%) attended racial/cultural awareness workshops compared to their female (52.9%) peers (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Student Attendance at Racial/Cultural Awareness Workshops, by Race and Sex (% Attending)



Students who attended such workshops also indicated a confidence and a commitment to interacting with others who are different from them. For example, 54.5% of students who attended a racial/cultural awareness workshop had meaningful and honest conversations about race/ethnicity with peers of a different racial/ethnic background, compared to 31.5% of students who did not attend a similar workshop. A large percentage of students who attended the workshops (82.5%) rated themselves as above average on their understanding of others, compared to 72.6% of students who did not participate. Perhaps most importantly, students who attended these workshops were more likely to express a desire to promote racial understanding. For workshop participants, 68.6% indicated it's very important for them to help promote racial understanding compared to 40.1% of non-participants. Such opportunities may be critical for opening and sustaining dialogue, as well developing the skills and interest in improving communication across racial and ethnic differences.

### SENIORS' VIEWS ON SOCIAL ISSUES

When asked about their views on same-sex marriage upon college entry in 2011, more than 70% of the incoming Class of 2015 indicated support for legal marital status (Pryor, DeAngelo, Palucki Blake, Hurtado & Tran, 2011). In 2015, the Supreme Court issued its decision on *Obergefell v. Hodges*, declaring same-sex marriage to be protected under the Constitution. At the time of the Court's decision, over 80% of graduating seniors in this sample agreed that same-sex couples

should have this right, with 61.8% strongly agreeing. Among the 10 questions regarding students' views on various social issues, including questions on federal military spending and a national health care plan, no other question appeared to have such agreement at the highest response level.

Student views about affirmative action are more mixed, which is important to consider given the Supreme Court's decision to once again hear the *Fisher v. University of Texas* case concerning affirmative action in college admissions. When asked about whether students from disadvantaged social backgrounds should have preferential treatment in college admissions, 44.9% of students agreed, with 36.4% agreeing somewhat and only 8.5% agreeing strongly. A majority of African American (65.2%) and Asian students (58.5%) agreed with this policy, compared to their peers who identify as Latina/o (54.0%) and White (40.5%). Students who identify with two or more races/ethnicities (51.8%) also agree that students from disadvantaged social backgrounds should receive preferential treatment.

### REFERENCES

- Paslov, J., & Skomsvold, P. (2014). *Web Tables—Student Financing of Undergraduate Education: 2011–12* (NCES 2015-173). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.
- Pryor, J. H., DeAngelo, L., Palucki Blake, L., Hurtado, S., & Tran, S. (2011). *The American freshman: National norms fall 2011*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.



**HERI** 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 administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. CIRP is the oldest and most established study of American higher education, consisting of data on more than 15 million students from some 1,900 colleges and universities. CIRP continues to advance understanding of student learning and development in college through numerous books and publications and is the most comprehensive source of information on college students.

### Research Directors

- Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, HERI Director  
Kevin Eagan, CIRP Director  
Ellen B. Stolzenberg, CIRP Assistant Director

### Affiliated Scholars

- Walter R. Allen, Allan Murray Carter Professor of Higher Education  
Alexander W. Astin, Founding Director and Senior Scholar  
Helen S. Astin, Senior Scholar  
Mitchell J. Chang, Professor  
Kevin Eagan, Assistant Professor in Residence  
Sylvia Hurtado, Professor  
Patricia M. McDonough, Professor  
Linda J. Sax, Professor  
Victor B. Sáenz, Associate Professor, University of Texas at Austin