

November 2014

Your First College Year Survey 2014

INTRODUCTION

Developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and the Policy Center on the First Year of College in 2000, the Your First College Year survey (YFCY) is administered annually through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the University of California, Los Angeles. The YFCY was the first national survey designed specifically to measure student development in the first year of college, and it is distributed to students at the end of their first year of college. The YFCY was administered for the fifteenth time in the Spring of 2014, when 10,170 students at 47 institutions took part in the survey.

EXPLORATION AND ADJUSTMENT IN THE FIRST YEAR

The first year of college can be full of new information and exploration. The vast majority of students (88%) stated that their college experience has exposed them to diverse opinions, cultures, and values and that their courses have “frequently” or “occasionally” inspired them to think in new ways (90%). This may play a role in the fact that by the end of the first year about a third of students have already changed their major (34%) and their anticipated career choice (32%). Compared to expectations of when these students first entered college, over half (56%) of the students who predicted a “very good chance” that they would change their majors actually did, and about a quarter (24%) of students

who reported a “very good chance” that they would change their anticipated career actually did so in their first year. This shows the impact the first year can have on students’ decisions regarding their immediate and distant future.

While the first year of college is filled with new experiences and expectations, it can be difficult for students to adjust. More than a third of students expressed difficulties in developing effective study skills (37%) and adjusting to the academic demands of college (37%); and almost half (47%) of students found it difficult to manage their time effectively.

As shown in Table 1, struggles with these measures of adjustment were particularly salient for students of color compared to those identifying as White. In particular, Latina/o, Black and Asian/Asian American students were more likely to have difficulties developing effective study skills (44%, 43%, and 43% respectively). This likely relates to these students’ similar struggles

Table 1. Students’ Difficulties Adjusting to College, by Race/Ethnicity

	Percent of Students Responding “Very Difficult” or “Somewhat Difficult”			
	Understand what your professors expect of you academically	Develop effective study skills	Adjust to the academic demands of college	Manage time effectively
Asian/Asian American	27	43	40	54
Black/African American	21	43	43	51
Latina/o	20	44	44	57
Two or More Races/ Ethnicities	18	38	38	48
White	17	34	35	44
Other	32	35	49	48

adjusting to the academic demands of college (44% of Latina/o, 43% of Black, and 40% of Asian/Asian American). Time management proved to be a bigger hurdle for all students, especially Latina/o students. Almost six out of ten (57%) Latina/o students found it “very” or “somewhat” difficult to manage their time; 13 percentage points higher than the 44% of White students who had difficulties with time management. Among the measures of adjustment, understanding what their professors expect from them academically was the least difficult for students during their first year. This may be due to opening up lines of communication with faculty, described in further detail in the next section.

INTERACTION AND COMMUNICATION WITH FACULTY

Interacting with faculty both in and outside of class can help first-year students succeed academically. While there are multiple avenues students can take to interact with their professors, the majority of first-years (86%) reported that they had approached a professor for advice after class. Significantly fewer students (32%) reported meeting with their professors once or twice a term during office hours. The structure of the classroom definitely encourages interaction with faculty and can increase the approachability of professors as evidenced by the high proportion of students who reported taking advantage of the time immediately following class. Taking that a step further, half (50%) of

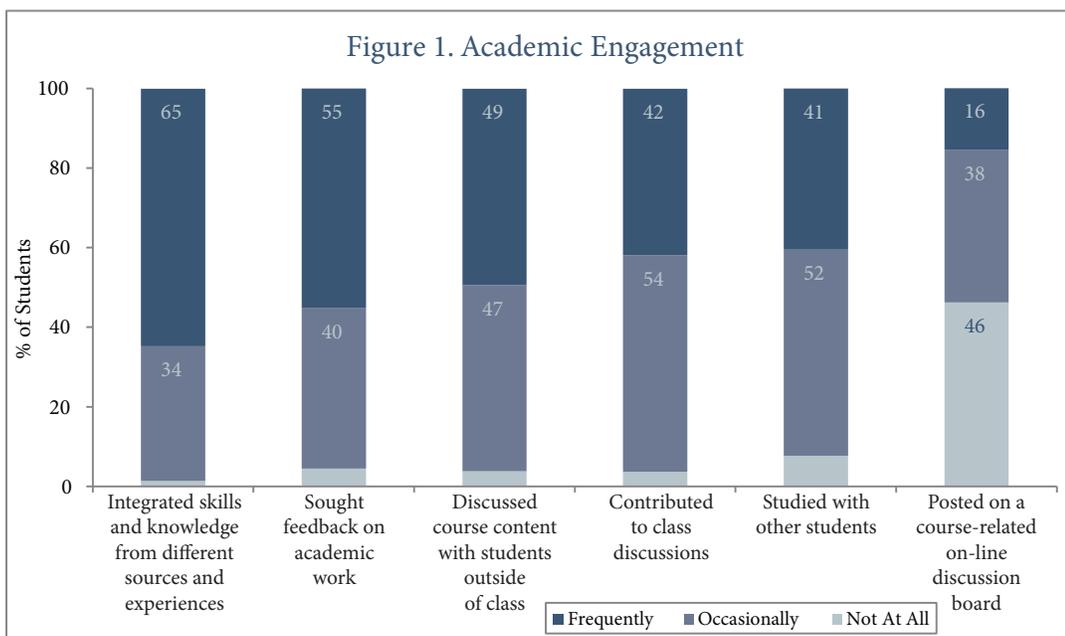
students reported that they enrolled in a first-year seminar specifically designed to connect them with faculty in focused academic inquiry. This additional effort to work more closely with faculty can pay off. While most students (69%) stated that they “frequently” or “occasionally” received advice from faculty about their educational program, students who enrolled in such seminars were much more likely to have received advice from professors than those who did not, 78% compared to 60%.

The support of faculty is a key element in students’ success in college. Students overwhelmingly agreed that the faculty at their institutions believe in their potential to succeed academically (87%) and that they empower them to learn (87%). Most first-year students also stated that at least one faculty member has taken an interest in their development (83%). Given a closer look, however, students at private institutions were much more likely to agree with these statements than students at public institutions – 91% compared to 82% stated faculty believe in their potential to succeed, 90% compared to 82% stated faculty empower them to learn, and 88% compared to 74% stated a faculty member has taken an interest in their development.

ENGAGEMENT WITH ACTIVE AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Students’ engagement in the classroom and with their peers is an integral part of learning in college, and it can take

on many forms, as shown in Figure 1. While most students reported contributing to class discussions “frequently” (42%) or “occasionally” (54%), fewer students engaged in virtual class discussions by posting to course-related online discussion boards either “frequently” (16%) or occasionally (38%).



Group projects were also a common form of collaborative learning in and out of the classroom as the majority of students reported that they worked with their peers on group projects either “frequently” or “occasionally” both during class (86%) and outside of class (89%).

Beyond the structure of the classroom, either physical or virtual, students continued to engage in learning with each other. Almost all students reported that they had “frequently” (42%) or “occasionally” (54%) discussed course content with each other outside of class. However, most students went beyond simply discussing their courses to working together with the aim of learning from one another. This is evidenced by the majority of students who studied with other students either “frequently” (41%) or “occasionally” (52%); and by those (almost half, 47%) who reported that they had tutored another student.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CIVIC AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT

Overall, students expressed a high level of civic awareness and engagement in their first year, but distinct gender differences were evident throughout these measures, especially when looking at civic awareness. Women were much less likely to score in the “high” group on this construct, which consists of students’ self-ratings of their understanding of problems facing their community, and of national and global issues (44% of men scored high on civic awareness compared to only 29% of women). When looking at these construct items individually, women were much less likely to rate their understanding of national (33%) and global (32%) issues as a strength when compared to men (50% and 47% respectively), but women tightened the gender gap when it came to understanding of problems facing their community (48% women compared to 52% men).

While the gender gap persists when looking at civic engagement, the survey showed that men are only marginally more engaged than women (24% of men scored high on the civic engagement construct compared to 20% of women). The individual measures of civic engagement reveal that, although women scored lower overall, they are more likely to volunteer or perform community service, possibly related to their increased awareness of problems facing their community.

DEVELOPING SKILLS FOR THE WORKPLACE

It is evident that while the initial year of college can be one of great adjustment and change, it is also one of positive development and growth. By linking responses from the 2013 Freshman Survey to the 2014 YFCY we are able to assess students’ growth and development of various skills during their first year of college. Over the course of their first year in college, students showed gains in both critical thinking and problem solving, skills that have shown to be valuable and have gained increased attention in the labor market. By the end of their first year of college students felt more confident with their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Of the 31% of students who reported that they were “average” at critical thinking upon entering college, 43% reported it as somewhat of a strength and 13% now consider it “a major strength.” A similar increase was reported for problem-solving skills. Of the 27% of students who felt that they were “average” at problem-solving at the beginning of their freshman year, 43% of them now consider themselves “somewhat strong”



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at problem solving and another 12% reported it as a “major strength.”

These longitudinal data show that students have also developed a greater sense of pluralistic orientation, a measure designed to examine skills and dispositions for living and working in a diverse society. Students were asked to rate themselves on their abilities to see the world from someone else’s perspective, discuss and negotiate controversial issues, work cooperatively with diverse people, how open they are to having their own views challenged, and their tolerance of others with different beliefs. Of the students who entered college scoring low on pluralistic orientation, a third (34%) increased to average and another 7% scored in the highest group for pluralistic orientation. And almost a

third of students (28%) who entered college with average pluralistic orientation shifted to the high group. These increases in pluralistic orientation could also be attributed to the fact that the majority of students reported that their college experience has exposed them to diverse opinions, cultures, and values, which has been positively linked to pluralistic orientation (Hurtado & DeAngelo, 2012).

PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

Students are becoming increasingly focused on the importance of a college degree in relation to employment after college, so two new questions were added to the YFCY this year to capture this mindset. Six out of ten first-years (59%) agreed strongly that it is important for them to be thinking about their career path after college. However, only one out of four (25%) confirmed that they have a clear idea of how to achieve their career goals. It should be noted that when looking only at the students focused on their post-college career path, 40% of those students strongly agreed that they already have a clear idea of how to achieve their career goals.

More first-year women than men were focused on their future career path: 61% of women strongly agreed that it is important for them to be thinking about their career path compared to 54% of men. There was practically no difference however between women and men when it came to having a clear idea of how to achieve their career goals (25% of women compared to 24% of men strongly agree). While it is evident that the

majority of students are thinking ahead toward post-college career plans during their first year, many are not yet sure what they need to do to make those plans a reality. On a related note, few students reported using career services on their campus during their first year, as just 35% of respondents noted occasional use of career services and only 6% frequently used such services. And although women seem to be more focused on their future careers than men, there was again no difference between the two when it came to taking advantage of campus career services (35% “occasionally” and 5% “frequently” for women compared to 36% “occasionally” and 6% “frequently” for men).

As evidenced by the 2014 YFCY survey results, these first-year students face a multitude of challenges and opportunities in their initial year of college. These results highlight areas that institutions can focus on to aid first-year students such as supporting academic major transitions, encouraging avenues of civic engagement, and providing resources for early post-college planning.

More information on the YFCY can be found at:
heri.ucla.edu/yfcyoverview.php

References

Hurtado, S. & DeAngelo, L. (2012). Linking diversity and civic minded practices with student outcomes: New evidence from national surveys. *Liberal Education*, (98)2.

 **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.

 **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 over 15 million students from more than 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.

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