

## **Fewer Freshmen Borrow in First Year, but Amount of Loans Rises**

In study by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, borrowing rates have decline but total amount borrowed in the first year has increased.

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Despite increasing college costs, students are less likely borrow money to pay for their first year of college compared to their peers who entered college 15 years ago, according to a new UCLA report that examined 50 years of data from UCLA's national survey of entering freshmen at four-year colleges and universities.

The report, "American Freshmen: Fifty-Year Trends, 1966-2015," documents the changing values, experiences, and characteristics of entering first-year college students nationwide and is a product of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.

In 2001, 61.0% of students took out loans to cover a portion of their educational expenses for the first year of college compared to 54.2% in 2015. Although a smaller proportion of students took out loans in 2015 compared to 2001, the proportion of students taking out loans in excess of \$3,000 increased over the past 15 years, and this shift was more notable among first-generation students. Nearly half (49.2%) of first-generation students borrowed at least \$3,000 in 2015 compared to 44.9% in 2011; 43.2% of continuing-generation students borrowed at least \$3,000 in 2015, up from 40.3% in 2001.

"Our findings suggest that, although more students are finding alternative sources of aid that allow them to avoid taking out loans to pay for their first year of college, those who do take out loans are borrowing larger sums than their peers who started college 15 years ago," said Kevin Eagan, director of CIRP. "This shift toward more relying upon larger loans is more prominent among first-generation students, who tend to be more at risk with respect to financing their college education than their peers whose parents attended at least some college."

The vulnerable nature of first-generation college students is further underscored by the

finding that fewer first-generation students in 2015 relied upon resources from parents or relatives to pay for their first year of college compared to their continuing-generation peers. In 2001, 80.3% of first-generation students used money from their parents or other relatives to cover some of their first-year educational expenses, but this figure dropped to 65.5% in 2015. By contrast, 91.6% of continuing-generation students relied upon funding from parents or other relatives to pay for their college expenses in 2001 compared to 84.3% in 2015.

### **Use of Early Action/Early Decision on the Rise**

As the composition of students' financial aid packages has shifted over time, their strategies for applying to college have also changed. The survey found a large jump in the proportion of students who indicated that an early admissions program was important to their decision to enroll in their current institution. In 1999, 15.2% of students reported that Early Action or Early Decision was important to their ultimate college enrollment decision, and this figure more than doubled to 32.9% in 2015.

The increase in students' use of early admissions programs was starkest at the most selective colleges and universities. In 2000, one-third (33.3%) indicated that an early admissions program was important in choosing their institution; by 2015, more than half (53.3%) of students at the most selective institutions said the same.

“Early admissions programs provide opportunities for enrollment managers to better predict overall yield for admitted students,” said Eagan. “These programs, however, may also exacerbate inequality in the college admissions process. We find that first-generation students, for example, tend to utilize early admissions programs at lower rates than their continuing-generation peers, and research suggests that students who apply via early decision or early action actually have a better chance of being admitted than if they apply via the regular decision process.”

### **Interest in Education Majors Drops While Aspirations for STEM Climb**

For 50 years, the survey has tracked students' intended major, and students' probable fields of study have shifted dramatically over the past five decades. In 1966, roughly similar proportions of students planned to major in business (11.4%) and education (10.9%). By 2015, interest in education as a probable field of study had been cut by more than half (4.3%) while interest in business had increased slightly.

The survey finds that, in recent years, students have become substantially more interested in pursuing majors in the biological sciences and engineering. In 2000, 8.7% of entering first-year students in 2000 expected to major in engineering, but interest in 2015 had increased 1.5 times as much to 13.2% of all incoming first-time, full-time freshmen. Similarly, 6.6% of first-time, full-time students intended to major in the biological sciences; however, by 2015, this figure had increased to 14.6%. In fact, 2015 was the first year on the survey since 1971 where a major other than business ranked among the most popular for incoming students.

### **College Students Grow More Progressive on Abortion, Marijuana, Taxes**

Over the past five decades, students' political views have become more progressive. The report highlights how students' political orientations have fluctuated over time, with identification as "liberal" or "far left" reaching its peak in 1971 (40.9%) while the proportion of "conservative" or "far right" students reached its highest point in 2006 (25.6%).

Students' views on particular issues, however, have more steadily shifted toward more progressive perspectives. Since 2000, students' support for the legality of abortion has increased 10 percentage points. The report highlights that liberal and centrist students have increased their support for the continued legal status of abortion over time while students identifying as right-of-center have become less supportive.

With respect to the legalization of marijuana, the report finds that, after erosion of support during the 1980s during the Reagan administration's war on drugs, students' support for the legalization of marijuana has steadily increased. More than half (56.4%) of students who started college in 2015 agreed that marijuana should be legalized.

Incoming college students also have grown increasingly supportive of taxing the wealthy in recent years. After registering its lowest level of support in 2002, when just over half (50.1%) of first-time, full-time students agreed that the government should increase taxes on the wealthy, support rebounded with the entering cohort of 2015. In 2015, 68.1% of all incoming students thought the wealthy should pay more taxes, and the backing of liberal and centrist students buoyed this increase in support in the overall sample. By contrast, roughly the same proportion of conservative students in 2015 (37.3%) believed the wealthy should pay more taxes as in 2002 (36.6%).

"It remains to be seen whether college students will exercise their collective influence on the 2016 presidential campaigns," Eagan noted. "What our data suggest, however, is that populist messages may resonate more with today's college students than such messages did more than a decade ago."

### **Other Findings**

- The racial/ethnic diversity of college students has increased substantively over time. In 1966, 90.1% of all incoming college students identified as White with just 7.0% identifying as Black 0.4% identifying as Latino, and 0.5% identifying as Asian. In 2015, 57.6% of students identified as White, 8.5% as Black, and 9.7% as Latino.
- Students' self-reported high school GPAs have increased, suggesting possible grade inflation. In 1966, 19.4% of students indicated they had earned an A- or better in high school; by 2015, 58.7% reported earning an A- or better in high school.
- Coupled with the decline in students' plans to major in education is a drop in

pursuing K-12 education as a career. In 1966, 23.3% of students indicated plans to work in K-12 education (teacher, administrator) as a career; by 2015, this figure had fallen to 4.5%.

### **The Cooperative Institutional Research Program**

Since the study was first conducted in 1966, more than 15 million students at 1,900 colleges and universities have completed the CIRP Freshman Survey. The CIRP Freshman Survey is the largest and longest-running survey of American college students. To view a summary or obtain a copy of the monograph, “The American Freshman: Fifty-Year Trends, 1966-2015” (K. Eagan, E.B. Stolzenberg, J.J Ramirez, M.C. Aragon, M.R. Suchard, C. Rios-Aguilar) visit [www.heri.ucla.edu](http://www.heri.ucla.edu).

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