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Survey: More freshmen than ever say they go to college to get better jobs, make more money

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The current economic situation in the United States has a major influence on first-year students' decisions about which college to attend and is reflected in their reasons for pursuing higher education, according to the CIRP Freshman Survey, UCLA's annual survey of the nation's entering students at four-year colleges and universities.

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 and Information Studies](#).

Two out of three first-year students (66.6 percent) surveyed said they believe current economic conditions significantly affected their choice of college, up from 62.1 percent just two years earlier, when the question was first asked.

Reflecting this concern, students are increasingly placing a premium on the job-related benefits of going to college. The portion of incoming freshmen that cited "to be able to get a better job" as a very important reason for attending college reached an all-time high of 87.9 percent in 2012, an increase from 85.9 percent in 2011 and considerably higher than the low of 67.8 percent in 1976. In the minds of today's college students, getting a better job continues to be the most prevalent reason to go to college.

Many incoming students also said the ability "to make more money" was a very important reason to attend college; this percentage rose from 71.7 in 2011 to 74.6 in 2012, another all-time high.

"Students have figured out that increased lifetime earnings result from a college education," said Sylvia Hurtado, director of HERI. "It is important to continue to encourage a long-term view of the benefits of college in this recovering economy."

Regarding college affordability, more first-year students reported not being able to afford their first-choice institution in 2012 — at 13.4 percent, this figure is the highest it has been since the question was first asked in 2006 (9.4 percent). As a result, fewer incoming students in 2012 were attending their first-choice institution (59.3 percent), compared with three and four decades ago, when roughly three-quarters of students attended their first-choice college.

The realities of college completion

A new question on the survey gauged student expectations concerning the amount of time it would take to earn their degree. The survey found that 83.4 percent expected to graduate from the college they had just entered in four years. Yet when looking at actual four-year graduation rates from colleges in the survey, it would be expected that only 40.6 percent would complete their education in four years.

"There is a large mismatch between students' expectations and the reality of time to college completion," said John H. Pryor, lead author of the report and director of CIRP. "Given the increasing number of students concerned about college affordability and the significant cost of adding an extra year of college, students could benefit from a better understanding of individual college graduation rates."

More students feel overwhelmed

More incoming college students reported that they felt frequently overwhelmed during their senior year of high school (30.4 percent in 2012 vs. 28.5 percent in 2011). More than twice as many incoming female students (40.5 percent) reported feeling frequently overwhelmed as first-year male students (18.3 percent).

Those who said they felt overwhelmed were also much less likely to report that their emotional health was in the "top 10 percent" or "above average" than students who did not report these feelings.

"These findings underscore the need for colleges to provide and promote resources that support students' health and wellness as soon as they arrive on campus," said Laura Palucki Blake, a co-author of the report and assistant director of CIRP.

There is some positive news for these students. The survey shows that they are more likely than their peers who report not having felt overwhelmed to anticipate participating in college activities that can help them ease the college transition. These activities include regularly communicating with their professors, getting help through tutoring, participating in student clubs and groups, and seeking personal counseling.

Other survey findings

Additional first-year student highlights include:

- 81.0 percent of incoming students — an all-time high — reported that "being very well off financially" is a very important personal goal, up from 79.6 percent in 2011.
- 76.7 percent were accepted at their first-choice school, but only 59.3 percent are attending that school, a gap of 17.4 percentage points.
- Support for same-sex marriage continues to climb at a high rate, having risen from 71.3 percent in 2011 to 75.0 percent in 2012.
- 17.2 percent of students intended to live with family or other relatives, up to from 15.0 percent in 2011.
- Fewer students intended to live in college residence halls — 76.1 percent in 2012, down 3.2 percentage points from 79.3 percent in 2011.

The 2012 Freshman Norms report is based on the responses of 192,912 first-time, full-time students entering 283 four-year colleges and universities of varying levels of selectivity and type in the United States. These data have been statistically weighted to reflect the approximately 1.5 million first-time, full-time students entering 1,613 four-year colleges and universities across the country in 2012. 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 obtain a copy of the monograph "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2012" (J.H. Pryor, M. K. Eagan, L. Palucki Blake, S. Hurtado, J. Berdan, M.H. Case), visit www.heri.ucla.edu.

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