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Concerns over college costs, financial aid hit all-time high as factors in students' choice of school

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Financial considerations are exerting an ever-greater influence on incoming freshman in the U.S., with college costs and financial aid playing an increasingly decisive role in their school-selection process, 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](#).

Although more than three-quarters (75.5 percent) of those surveyed were admitted to their first-choice campus in 2013, the number of those who actually enrolled at their first-choice school hit an all-time low, as cost and financial aid incentives swayed decisions.

Only 56.9 percent of students enrolled at their first-choice campus in 2013, the lowest proportion since CIRP first measured the item in 1974, while the percentage of students indicating that cost was a "very important" factor in their college-choice process reached its highest point (45.9 percent) in the 10 years CIRP has measured the item — an increase of nearly 15 percentage points from 2004.

Additionally, the percentage of students who indicated financial aid was a "very important" factor in their selection process was at its highest point in the 42 years since the question was first asked: Nearly half (48.7 percent) reported that a financial aid offer was a "very important" factor in their decision to enroll at their current campus, up from 33.7 percent in 2004.

"The difficult financial decisions that students and their families have to make about college are becoming more evident," said Kevin Eagan, interim director of CIRP. "Colleges that can reduce net costs to families are gaining more of an edge in attracting students to their campus. Over 62 percent of students who were admitted to but did not attend their first-choice college said they were offered aid by the institution they chose to attend."

Among first-generation students, more than half (53.9 percent) indicated that the cost of attending their current institution was a "very important" factor in their enrollment. But for continuing-generation students, only 43.8 percent rated cost as "very important" in their enrollment decision — a 10.1-percentage-point gap.

Financial aid was even more important in first-generation students' college-choice process, as more than 60 percent reported that being offered financial aid was a "very important" consideration in their decision to enroll at their current institution. Less than half of continuing-generation students (46 percent) felt the same way.

"First generation students do not want to create a financial burden for their families, who know less about the complex financial aid forms, details of loans and tax-credit benefits, which do not ease the burden of initial out-of-pocket costs," said Sylvia Hurtado, director of HERI. "Students are smart to understand net cost differences, but they otherwise must rely on high schools and institutions to help them navigate the college-choice and financial aid processes. It is not clear that there is adequate counseling for the final stage of decisions these students make."

Online education

Recent years have seen building momentum for online access to education, and the 2013 CIRP Freshman Survey included several new items related to online instruction. About four out of 10 students surveyed (41.8 percent) said they "frequently or occasionally" used an online instructional website as assigned for a class in their final year of high school. However, students were much more likely to make use of these resources independently; nearly seven out of 10 incoming students (69.2 percent) reported having used such sites "frequently or occasionally" to learn something on their own.

Even though colleges and universities across the country have been increasing their online course offerings to accommodate larger enrollments and reduce costs, few first-year students reported there was a "very good chance" they would enroll in online courses while attending their college (6.5 percent) or through supplemental enrollment at another institution (2.9 percent).

Gays, lesbians and the right to adopt a child

The vast majority of first-year college students (83.3 percent) support the right of gay and lesbian individuals to adopt a child, and this support has increased among both female and male students since 2010. Women, however, continued to be considerably more supportive than men in 2013 (86.8 percent vs. 79.2 percent). In 2010, 82.1 percent of women and 69.8 percent of men supported this right.

Undocumented students and access to public education

The proposal that undocumented immigrants should be denied access to public education was supported by fewer incoming students in 2013 than at any point since the question was first asked in 1996. Support for denying access to public education for undocumented students has fallen steadily, by 15.6 percentage points, since its peak of 56.3 percent in 1996.

Other survey findings:

- Freshman support for raising taxes to reduce the deficit reached its highest level (36.9 percent) since the question was first asked in 1985.
- Roughly three out of five students (63.8 percent) support stronger gun control by the federal government, an overall drop of 20 percentage points since support peaked in 1989.
- Diversity in high schools is on the rise; the proportion of freshmen indicating their high school was mostly or completely white has fallen 24.9 percentage points over 30 years (since 1983).
- Freshmen in general believe they are able to work cooperatively with a diverse group of others, but they scored themselves lowest on their openness to having their own views challenged.

The 2013 Freshman Norms report is based on the responses of 165,743 first-time, full-time students entering 234 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 1,583 four-year colleges and universities across the country in 2013. 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 2013" (M.K. Eagan, J.B. Lozano, S. Hurtado, and M.H. Case), visit www.heri.ucla.edu

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