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Students' intent to transfer could threaten broad-access institutions under proposed college ratings system

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A college rating system proposed by the U.S. Department of Education could hurt many broad-access and minority-serving colleges and universities given that those institutions are enrolling more students who may ultimately graduate from a different college or university. According to UCLA's annual [CIRP Freshman Survey](#), more than one-quarter of incoming freshmen at such colleges plan to transfer to another institution.

The survey of incoming students at four-year colleges and universities throughout the U.S. is part of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program and is administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.

Students enrolling at the least selective campuses are the most likely to intend to transfer: Among the least selective institutions, 30.3 percent of students at public and 29.9 percent at private colleges and universities report there is either "some" or a "very good" chance they will transfer to another institution. By contrast, just 11.8 percent of students at the most selective public institutions and 17 percent of students at the most selective private institutions express a strong intention to transfer.

In December, the Department of Education [announced the framework](#) for a system that would evaluate higher education institutions on criteria including accessibility and affordability, as well as "outcome measures" such as graduation rates, graduate school enrollment and earnings by graduates.

Department officials have said the ratings are intended to help students' families make more informed decisions about the colleges they're considering, and the Obama administration intends for the system to guide federal allocations for student loans and grants.

“For many years the federal government has measured graduation rates at four-year schools based on first-time, full-time students who earn a degree from their first institution within six years of enrollment,” said Kevin Egan, interim director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program. “We know from our research that students who start college intending to transfer tend to follow through on those plans.

“So it is important that the Obama administration’s new framework does not unfairly evaluate institutions with broad-access missions, given that these campuses enroll a greater proportion of students with strong transfer intentions.”

Graduate degree aspirations on the rise

The ratings system might also track the number of students pursuing post-baccalaureate degrees; the UCLA study found that more students are arriving on campus with plans for graduate study. Whereas 40 years ago, 50.8 percent of incoming first-year students aspired to earn no more than a bachelor’s degree, only 23.4 percent in 2014 reported similar aspirations.

Meanwhile, between 1974 and 2014, the percentage of students entering college with plans to earn a master’s degree increased to 43.6 percent from 28.1 percent, while students indicating they would like to earn a doctorate or first professional degree increased to 32.9 percent from 21.1 percent. Student perceptions that the labor market is highly competitive may be driving more incoming students to aspire to graduate level studies, Egan said.

Partying, use of alcohol and tobacco drop

The survey also found that fewer students spent time during the previous year at parties. Among respondents to the latest survey, 41.3 percent reported they did not attend parties at all, and 61.4 percent said they spent less than hour a week at parties. In 1987, just 24.3 percent said they spent less than an hour at parties. Over the same timeframe, the percentage of students who spent six or more hours per week at parties dropped dramatically, to 8.6 percent from 34.5 percent.

Additionally, the survey found the lowest self-reported rates of alcohol and cigarette use among incoming freshmen in approximately 30 years. While 74.2 percent of students in 1981 indicated they frequently or occasionally drank beer, the figure was just 33.5 percent in 2014. The percentage of students who said they consumed wine or hard liquor during their senior year of high school dropped to 38.7 in 2014; in 1987 it was 67.8 percent.

The study also found a marked decline in cigarette smoking, reflecting social, health policy and legal trends of the past few decades, including many states' changes to the minimum age for alcohol and tobacco consumption. In 2014, just 1.7 percent of students reported smoking cigarettes frequently; in 1981, 9.2 percent did.

Other findings

- Students' self-rated emotional health dropped to 50.7 percent — the lowest level ever and 2.3 percentage points lower than the entering cohort of 2013.
- The proportion of students who "frequently" felt depressed increased to 9.5 percent, 3.4 percentage points higher than in 2009, when the smallest percentage of students in the survey's history reported feeling frequently depressed.
- While a school's "good academic reputation" remained the single most important factor to students in choosing their college (65.4 percent), the percentage of incoming students who reported that being admitted through an early decision program was "very important" was 15.7 percent in 2014. It was just 6.9 percent in 1999.
- Many students arrive at college anticipating that they will need extra time to complete their degree. At the least selective public colleges and universities, 42.4 percent of students think there is "some" or a "very good" chance they would need extra time, compared to 35.6 at moderately selective and 29.5 percent at the most selective public institutions.
- When asked about their tolerance of others with different beliefs and their ability to work cooperatively with diverse people, over 80 percent of respondents answered both questions by rating their skills as either "a major strength" or "somewhat strong."

The study incorporated responses from 153,015 first-time, full-time students beginning their studies at 227 four-year colleges and universities of varying levels of selectivity and type in the U.S. The data was statistically weighted to reflect the approximately 1.6 million first-time, full-time students entering 1,583 four-year colleges and universities across the country in 2014. Since 1966, the first year the survey was conducted, more than 15 million students at 1,900 colleges and universities have completed CIRP surveys. The CIRP Freshman Survey is the largest and longest-running survey of American college students, and the 2015 administration will mark its 50th year.