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Embargoed for Use Until
10 a.m. (EST), Jan. 25, 2006

More College Freshmen Committed to Social and Civic Responsibility, UCLA Survey Reveals

Survey reports significant rise in volunteering and community service work

(Note to Editors: To reach the Higher Education Research Institute, call 310-825-1925.)

This year's entering college freshmen exhibit record increases in commitments to social and civic responsibility, according to the results of UCLA's annual survey of the nation's entering undergraduates. Two out of three (66.3 percent) entering freshmen believe it is essential or very important to help others who are in difficulty, the highest this figure has been in the past 25 years, and an increase of 3.9 percentage points over last year (roughly 50,000 students nationally). The survey is part of the Cooperative Institutional Research Project (CIRP) conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies.

The beliefs of entering freshmen also are reflected in their actions. An all-time high of 83.2 percent volunteered at least occasionally during their high school senior year and 70.6 percent typically volunteered on a weekly basis. Additionally, the survey revealed an all-time high in the percentage of students who believe there is a good or some chance that they will continue to volunteer in college, at 67.3 percent.

"The Indian Ocean tsunami occurred during their high school senior year, and Hurricane Katrina hit the southern Gulf Region in August, as many students began college," said John Pryor, director of the CIRP Freshman Survey. "This widespread rise in student attitudes reflecting social concerns and civic responsibility could be a reaction to the worst global and national disasters witnessed in their lifetime."

"We typically observe steady trends in the data and do not see such widespread change across related survey items unless a major event occurs. This survey is evidence that last year's natural disasters impacted these freshmen in a significant way that we can continue to monitor," Pryor said. "These are known as period effects, societal or world events that impact students during an impressionable time of their lives."

"This cohort will likely have a special affinity for social responsibility as a result," said Sylvia Hurtado, director of the Higher Education Research Institute and a UCLA education professor.

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Now in its 40th year, the UCLA survey is the nation's longest-running and most comprehensive assessment of student attitudes and plans for college. Initiated in fall 1966, the CIRP Freshman Survey is an annual project of the Higher Education Research Institute. The survey serves as a resource for higher education researchers throughout the world. The 40th anniversary administration of the CIRP Freshman Survey in the fall of 2006 will mark a key opportunity to examine long-term changes in higher education.

Interest in community activism on the rise

According to the survey, more of today's freshmen believe it is important to take personal action on several levels. Approximately one in four (25.6 percent) reports that it is essential or very important for them to participate personally in community action programs, an increase of 4.1 percentage points over 2004 and the highest since 1996. An even larger percentage, 33.9 percent, find becoming a leader essential or very important, an increase of 3.2 percentage points over 2004. Larger still is the percentage of students who believe it is essential or very important to influence social values personally (41.3 percent), an increase of 3.0 percentage points over last year.

Not only is the rise in civic responsibility and engagement beneficial to the communities in which students live, but it also is correlated with improved practical and intellectual skills in the college years.

"Students' desire to influence society is associated with significantly higher scores on a standard test of the disposition to think critically, perspective-taking skills (the ability to see the world from someone else's perspective) and a willingness to think complexly about other people's behavior," Hurtado said.

"This survey shows that a growing number of students arrive at college ready to become involved in community service," said Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. "While earlier studies suggest that too few students sustain such commitments into their advanced college years, these new data should encourage educators to redouble their efforts to create new connections between academic study and challenges in larger society."

Military spending support declines while political participation grows

In the year after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, 45.0 percent of American freshmen supported increased military spending, whereas only 34.2 percent express the same opinion in 2005.

"Perhaps reflecting larger public concerns about the costs of the current war in Iraq, freshman support for military spending continues an annual downward trend," Hurtado said.

Nearly two-thirds of freshmen (65.8 percent) disagree with the statement that "federal military spending should be increased" (see figure 1), and 63.1 percent agree with the statement that "only volunteers should serve in the armed forces."

A new survey item revealed that 63.0 percent of freshmen believe that "dissent is a critical component of the political process." In addition, nearly half (49.7 percent and the highest percentage in the survey's history) participated in an organized demonstration as high school seniors. More than one-third (36.4 percent) believe it is important or essential to "keep up to date with political affairs,"

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a response that has rebounded to 1994 levels. This increased political involvement may be due to recent election activity, as 12.0 percent worked in local, state or national political campaigns in high school. Though the percentage is small and many students were not eligible to vote a year ago, it is the highest since 1971, a year that posted a record 15.4 percent participation rate in electoral politics among entering freshmen.

Drinking in high school at record low

The percentage of entering college students who report that they frequently or occasionally drank beer as high school seniors dropped to an all-time low in 2005, moving down 2.1 percentage points to 43.4 percent. This figure continues to drop from the 1982 high of 73.7 percent, a total change of 30.3 percentage points. More men (49.1 percent) than women (38.8 percent) reported drinking beer frequently or occasionally as high school seniors. Although both sexes declined similarly from 2004 to 2005 (1.9 percentage points for men and 2.2 percentage points for women), the difference between men and women's drinking patterns has become smaller over time (see figure 2).

“Our findings of decreased high school drinking have been replicated in several other national studies and using a variety of measures,” Pryor said. “What is also clear is that college drinking is not in decline.”

Pryor, who took over as director of the CIRP surveys in 2005 and has expertise in college alcohol research, says that the Higher Education Research Institute will be designing follow-up studies with college students to further examine college drinking.

Motivations for attending college differ by gender

Men are more likely than women to report that they are attending college to be able to make more money (73.5 percent vs. 69.0 percent for women). Women's top reasons include “to learn more about things that interest me” (81.4 percent), followed by getting training for a specific career (73.1 percent). Men and women are equally likely to report they decided to attend college to be able to get a better job (72.1 percent and 72.2 percent respectively). The biggest gender differences in students' college-going motivations occur in aspects of personal and intellectual development, with women more likely than men to cite gaining a general education and appreciation of ideas (71.1 percent vs. 58.3 percent for men), becoming a more cultured person (48.3 percent vs. 35.3 percent) and “to find my purpose in life” (57.4 percent vs. 35.3 percent).

The 2005 freshman norms are based on the responses of 263,710 students at 385 of the nation's baccalaureate colleges and universities. The data have been statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.3 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year colleges and universities as freshmen in 2005.

Go to <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html> for a summary of the survey (click on “Recent Findings”), or to order copies of “The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2005,” Pryor, J.H.; Hurtado, S.; Saenz, V.B.; Lindholm, J.A.; Korn, W.S.; and Mahoney, K.M., (click on “Publications”).

Figure 1.

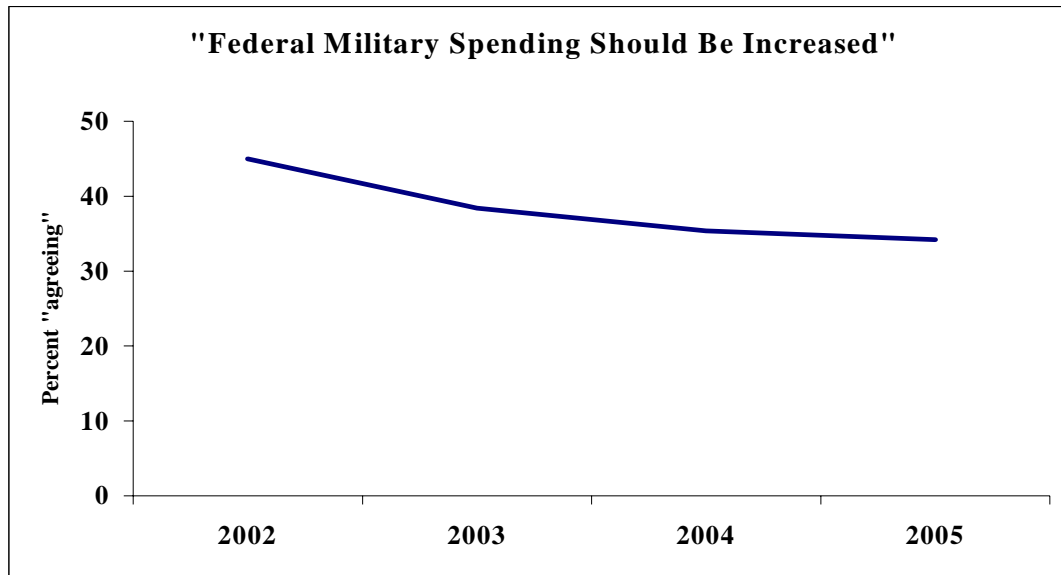


Figure 2.

