HERI Research Brief

CIRP

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT UCLA
home of the COOPERATIVE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH PROGRAM

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Your First College Year Survey 2012

INTRODUCTION

Developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and the Policy Center on the First Year of College in 2000, the Your First College Year survey (YFCY) is administered annually through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the University of California, Los Angeles. The YFCY was the first national survey designed specifically to measure student development in the first year of college, and is distributed to students at the end of their first year of college. The YFCY was administered for the eleventh time in the Spring of 2012, when 14,460 students at 61 institutions took part in the survey.

SATISFACTION WITH FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCES AND COLLEGE CHOICE

Student responses indicate very positive experiences in the first year of college. The majority, 75%, were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their overall first-year experience. Regarding their academic experience, 81% were "satisfied" or "very satisfied." More specifically, most were "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the size of their classes (78%), their general education and core curriculum courses (76%), the overall quality of instruction (76%), and the amount of contact with faculty (69%).

Students also responded with high levels of satisfaction with non-academic aspects of their first year experience. A large majority confirmed being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their interactions with fellow students (77%) and the availability of campus social activities (69%). Overall, 67% felt satisfied with the sense of campus community. One telling indicator of the level of satisfaction is whether or not students would recommend their college to others; 88% responded "agree" or "strongly agree."

SELF-REPORTED EFFECTS OF THE FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE

The YFCY asks students to reflect on the changes they experienced over the first year of college. Most students indicated positive change across multiple areas. In knowledge of a particular field or discipline, 91% reported "stronger" or "much stronger" changes. The same percentage (91%) also reported "stronger" or "much stronger" changes in their general knowledge. Students also reported "stronger" or "much stronger" changes in their ability to think critically (79%), solve problems (75%), and conduct research (69%).

A large majority of respondents indicated that they "occasionally" or "frequently" work with classmates on group projects during (89%) or outside (90%) of class. Fewer respondents, however, reported a "stronger" or "much stronger" change in their ability to work as part of a team (60%). This perhaps indicates that instructors need to place higher priority on helping students to become more effective team members, especially when this is seen not only as such an integral part of the learning environment, but as an essential skill for life after college.

POSITIVE CROSS-RACIAL INTERACTIONS WITH PEERS

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that the multiple academic and affective benefits of attending a college with a racially diverse student body are strongly influenced by students' cross-racial interactions. The YFCY asks students to report the frequency with which they have positive interactions with racially and ethnically diverse peers, finding that a majority of students

"often" or "very often" dined or shared a meal (59%), socialized or partied (54%), or studied or prepared for class (51%) with a student of a different race or ethnicity. Accordingly, almost two-thirds (62%) of respondents reported having "stronger" or "much stronger" knowledge of people from different races and cultures than when they first began college.

Fewer students, however, reported engaging in more intimate levels of cross-racial interactions. Less than half "often" or "very often" had intellectual discussions outside of class (46%), shared personal feelings and problems (45%), or had meaningful and honest discussions about race/ethnic relations outside of class (39%) with diverse peers. About a third of students reported having a roommate of a different race/ethnicity (34%) during the first year.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT BEHAVIORS AND GOALS

Participation in a range of civic-related activities during college can enhance personal and social responsibility. The YFCY collects data on a number of behaviors and goals that indicate civic engagement. The majority of first-year students (63%) reported performing volunteer work "occasionally" or "frequently."

Fewer students "occasionally" or "frequently" communicated their opinion about a cause publicly (43%), helped raise money for a cause or campaign (37%), demonstrated for a cause (22%), or worked on a local, state, or national political campaign (8%).

A majority of respondents "agree" or "strongly agree" that they are interested in seeking information about current social and political issues (56%). With regard to goals related to civic engagement, more than half of students (53%) reported that influencing social values was "very important" or "essential," though fewer (40%) felt that way about keeping up to date with political affairs. Civic engagement is an important component of attaining goals of democratization and social action, and it may be that students are just starting to engage in these behaviors by the end of their first year in college.

VALIDATION IN THE FIRST-YEAR OF COLLEGE

The YFCY provides information on two forms of validation: academic and interpersonal. Both constitute an enabling and supportive process that fosters student development (Rendón, 1994) and retention. Validation can be initiated by in- and out-of-class agents—for example, by faculty or staff—and can occur inside or outside of the classroom.

Academic Validation in the Classroom

An overwhelming majority of first-year students felt that faculty encouraged them "occasionally" or "frequently" to ask questions and participate in class discussions (95%). Similarly, a large majority of respondents felt that their contributions were valued in class (94%), and that faculty provided them with feedback that helped them assess their progress in class (92%).

Slightly fewer students "agree" or "strongly agree" that faculty encouraged them to meet with them outside of class (78%), or that faculty showed concern about their progress (70%).

Civic Engagement During the First Year of College

	Percentage of Students Responding			
	Frequently	Occasionally	Not at All	
Demonstrated for a cause (e.g., boycott, rally, protest)	3%	19%	78%	
Performed volunteer work	14%	49%	37%	
Worked on a local, state, or national political campaign	1%	7%	92%	
Helped raise money for a cause or campaign	8%	29%	63%	
Publicly communicated your opinion about a cause (e.g., blog, email, petition)	11%	33%	57%	
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am interested in seeking information about current social and political issues	13%	43%	34%	10%
	Essential	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Goal: Influencing social values	16%	38%	36%	11%
Goal: Keeping up to date with political affairs	12%	28%	40%	20%

Interpersonal Validation from Faculty and Staff

The YFYC also measures interpersonal validation generated by faculty and staff. A large majority of first-year students "agree" or "strongly agree" that faculty believe in their potential to succeed academically (90%), or that faculty empower them to learn (87%). Additionally, 85% "agree" or "strongly agree" that at least one faculty member has taken an interest in their development.

Although research typically focuses on the role of faculty, it is also important to take a look at the role of staff on college campuses. A large percentage of students reported that they "agree" or "strongly agree" that at least one staff member has taken an interest in their development (87%), recognized their achievements (76%), or encouraged them to get involved in campus activities (73%).

NAVIGATION IN THE FIRST-YEAR: UTILIZATION OF CAMPUS SERVICES

Navigation is defined as the knowledge and capital critical to increasing students' academic goal attainment, such as obtaining a degree. One component of navigation includes the utilization of campus services, an action that can equip students with the knowledge necessary to make informed decisions towards the fulfillment of their academic goals. Campus services may provide spaces in which students can learn how to navigate and succeed in college.

Students were asked about the frequency with which they utilized eight student services. The largest majority of respondents reported "occasionally" or "frequently" using academic advising (84%), followed by student health services (57%). Fewer students reported "occasionally" or "frequently" utilizing the writing center (44%), study skills advising (43%), or financial aid advising (41%).

Only about one-third of student respondents reported utilizing career services (32%), despite recent campus initiatives by such centers to involve students earlier in their college career. In terms of other support services, few students reported "occasionally" or "frequently" using student psychological services (17%) or the disability resource center (10%).

In this brief we take a particular look at the first-generation college students (defined as students whose parents have less than some college education) and how they are navigating the first year of college.

The largest difference between first-generation students and non-first-generation students appears to be with regards to the use of financial aid advising. Fifty-nine percent of first-generation respondents, versus 38% of non-first-generation respondents reported "occasionally" or "frequently" utilizing financial aid advising services. This difference may be attributed to the fact that first-generation students reported financing their college education differently than non-first-generation students. Almost one-third (32%) of first-generation students reported having "major" concerns about their ability to finance their college education, compared to 16% of non-first-generation students.

Additionally, a smaller percentage of first-generation students reported using family resources to finance their education (80%) than non-first-generation students (92%). Meanwhile, a larger percentage of first-generation students than non-first-generation students reported using financial aid that does not need to be repaid (e.g., grants and scholarships)—93% compared

Navigation of Campus Resources by College Generation Status

	Percentage of Students Responding					
	Frequently		Occasionally		Not at All	
	First-Generation	Non-First-Generation	First-Generation	Non-First-Generation	First-Generation	Non-First-Generation
Study skills advising	14%	10%	39%	32%	48%	59%
Financial aid advising	12%	5%	47%	33%	41%	62%
Student health services	7%	8%	46%	51%	48%	42%
Student psychological services	4%	4%	15%	12%	81%	84%
Writing center	12%	9%	39%	36%	49%	55%
Disability resource center	3%	3%	7%	7%	90%	90%
Career services	5%	4%	30%	29%	65%	68%
Academic advising	23%	18%	63%	68%	14%	14%

to 86%. Similarly, a larger percentage of first-generation students reported the use of loans—78% compared to 62%.

More first-generation students utilized study skills advising than non-first-generation students (53% versus 42%). Notable, but smaller, differences were seen in the use of the writing center. A slightly higher number of first-generation students (51%) reported "occasionally" or "frequently" utilizing the writing center, versus 45% of non-first-generation students.

Slightly more non-first-generation students (59%) utilized student health services "occasionally" or "frequently" than did first-generation students (53%). It may be that first-generation students face certain barriers in seeking out student health services, such as the knowledge of what services are covered by student fees.

Institutions can use their survey data to determine whether these differences by generation status exist on their campus. Differences in the use of student services as navigational tools have implications for practitioners and educators working with first-generation students.

SOCIAL AGENCY

Some constructs found in the YFCY can be examined longitudinally, allowing researchers and campuses to assess students' growth over the first year of college in a number of developmental areas. In order to chart progress among first-year students, the 2012 YFCY response data are linked to response data from *The Freshman Survey* (TFS), administered to the same cohort at the start of college in 2011. Since only matched data are utilized in this analysis, it means that a subset of the larger data is used to represent the findings. The total number of students responding to both surveys for this cohort was 9,313.

One construct studied longitudinally is the *Social Agency* construct, which measures the extent to which students value political and social involvement as a personal goal. Students are asked about the personal importance they place on keeping up-to-date with political affairs, participating in a community action program, influencing social values, becoming a community leader, helping others who are in difficulty, and helping to promote racial understanding.

For many first-year students, their sense of *Social Agency* starts to change during the first year of college. At the start of college, fewer than one-third (28%) of first-year students ranked "high" in social agency. By the end of the first year of college, 38% scored "high" on *Social Agency*. Of the students who began "high" in *Social Agency* prior to starting college, a large majority (74%) remained so. The largest shift appears to be among those who scored "average" prior to starting college. Of these students, more than one-third (34%) scored "high" by the end of the first year of college.

The *Your First College Year Survey* is the only survey of its kind to comprehensively examine the first-year experience in a way that is developmentally appropriate to the challenges and goals unique to the first year of college. Further information on the YFCY can be found at http://heri.ucla.edu/yfcyoverview.php

REFERENCES

Rendon, L. I. (1994, Fall). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education*. *19*(1), 33–51.

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The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) is based in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. The Institute serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in postsecondary education.

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