HERI Research Brief

CIRP

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

January 2013

The American Freshman:
National Norms Fall 2012

This research brief highlights findings from the 2012 CIRP Freshman Survey report, which uses data from 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 first-year students entering 1,613 four-year colleges and universities across the country in 2012. This means differences of one percentage point in the results reflect the characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes of roughly 15,000 first-year students nationally.

INCREASED IMPACT OF ECONOMICS

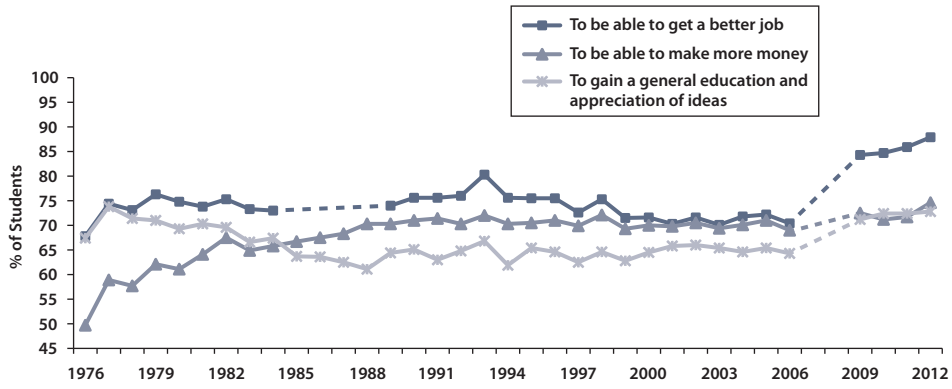
More students entering college in the fall of 2012 believe that the current economic situation significantly affected their college choice, rising to 66.6% in 2012 from 62.1% two years earlier when we first asked the question.

Incoming students persist in putting a premium on job-related reasons to go to college. Continuing to rise is the importance of going to college in order to get a better job, which rose two percentage points this year to an all-time high of 87.9%, up from 85.9% in 2011 and considerably higher than its low of 67.8% in 1976 (see Figure 1). In the minds of today's college students, getting a better job continues to be the most prevalent reason to go to college.

Also at an all-time high as a reason to go to college is "to be able to make more money," moving from 71.7% in 2011 to 74.6% in 2012. A related finding is that "being very well off financially" as a personal goal rose to an all-time high in 2012, with 81.0% of incoming students reporting this as a "very important" or "essential" personal goal, up from 79.6% in 2011.

In looking at specific important reasons for choosing the college they are attending, more students carefully considered "the cost of attending this college," which moved upwards in importance to 43.3%. This is an increase of 2.7 percentage points over the 2011 figure of 40.6%. It is also an all-time high for this item since first asked in 2004, when only 31.0% of incoming students thought that cost was "very important."

Figure 1. Trends of Reasons in Deciding to go to College (% Indicating "Very Important")



This year sees 13.4% of incoming first-year students reporting that not being able to afford their first choice was "very important" in deciding which institution to attend. This is the highest this percentage has been since we first introduced the item in 2006, when it was 9.4%.

The percentage of incoming students who report that not being offered aid by their first choice was a "very important" reason in choosing where to matriculate is at an all-time high of 9.5%. Although this is not markedly different from the 9.3% that we reported in 2011, this figure has more than doubled from the 4.4% who were not offered aid at their first choice in 1984, when we first asked the question.

A MISMATCH BETWEEN EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY OF TIME TO GRADUATION

The vast majority (84.3%) of incoming first-year students believe that they will graduate from college in four years. This will likely only come true for approximately half of them, as they are attending schools that on average only graduate 40.6% of their students in four years. Clearly there is a mismatch between reality and expectations. Despite efforts to publicize individual college graduation rates, many incoming students seem to be unaware that most college students are not graduating from the college they entered in a four-year period.

Prospective engineering majors are also more likely to expect a five-year path to graduation, with almost 1 in 5 (19.1%) anticipating the extra year. This is followed by prospective education majors, at 14.0%. No other major categories are over ten percent for this item.

To further examine the relationship between college graduation rates and college choice, we introduced a new response category into the set of items that investigate how important certain reasons are in determining which college to attend. Only 30.4% of students report that "the percentage of students that graduate from this college" was "very important" in their decision to attend that college. Given the economic realities of adding an extra year of college, there seems to be a gap in understanding the realities of the time to college completion by a fair amount of incoming students.

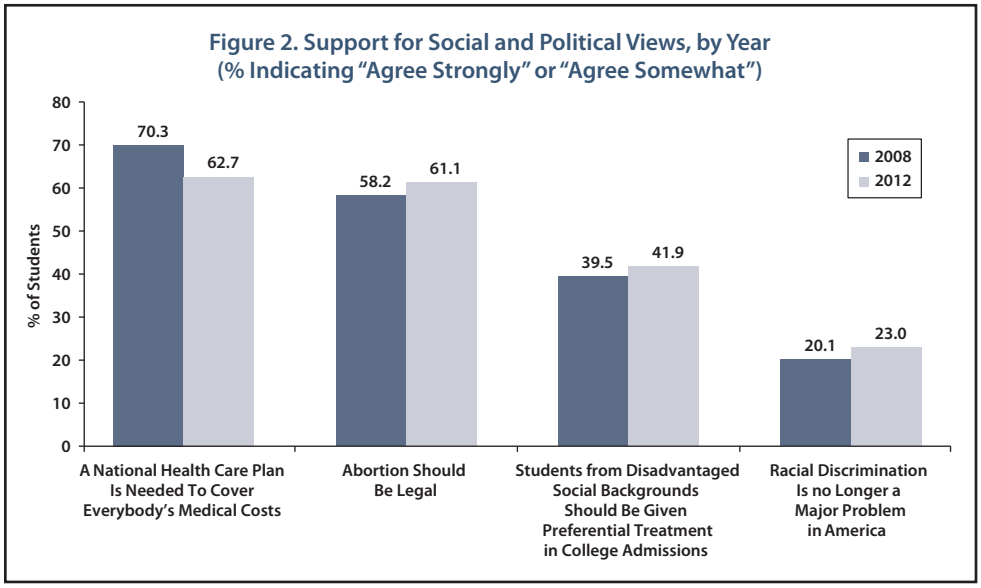
CHANGES IN STUDENTS' POLITICAL VIEWS AND ORIENTATION BETWEEN 2008 AND 2012

We ask students both to identify their political orientation on the survey as well as to agree or disagree with specific social and political views. In one significant point of comparison, students moved towards the center in self-perceived political orientation, with the "middle-of-the-road" category growing from 43.3% in 2008 to 47.5% in 2012.

Neither men nor women changed appreciably in identifying as "conservative" or "far right" in 2012, as roughly a quarter of incoming first-year men and one fifth of first-year women marked "conservative" or "far right" in both 2008 and 2012. By contrast, fewer men and women identified as "liberal" or "far left" in 2012 compared with 2008. The proportion of left-leaning men dropped by nearly four percentage points from 2008 to 2012 (30.3% in 2008 vs. 26.4% in 2012) while the percentage of women identifying as liberal or far left dropped by approximately five percentage points (37.4% in 2008 vs. 32.3% in 2012).

The consistency in the proportion of conservative-leaning students and the drop in the percentage of left-leaning students resulted in this increase of students identifying as "middle-of-the-road."

When we look at changing views regarding specific issues, however, the findings are somewhat mixed. Figure 2 shows changes in support for four political or social issues. While higher proportions of incoming students in 2012 endorsed more liberal positions



in two areas (abortion and preferential treatment for disadvantaged students in college admissions), more incoming students supported a more conservative opinion in two other areas (racial discrimination and the necessity of a national healthcare plan).

STUDENTS FOLLOWING A PRE-MED OR PRE-LAW TRACK

Other new information in 2012 related to course of study is whether or not incoming students consider themselves pre-med or pre-law. Among all incoming first-year students, 19.3% conceive of themselves as pre-med and 6.3% consider themselves pre-law. Across institutional type, students entering historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) are the most likely to report they intend to pursue a pre-med track (22.9%).

Approximately one-in-five (21.2%) students at public universities conceive of themselves as pre-med, only slightly more than at private universities (19.1%). This small gap essentially disappeared when comparing four-year colleges, with 17.8% of incoming students at public colleges as pre-med compared to 18.2% at private colleges.

Substantially fewer students across all institutional types report being pre-law, and this was again led by students at HBCUs, at 10.5%.

MORE ENTERING STUDENTS FELT OVERWHELMED AS HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

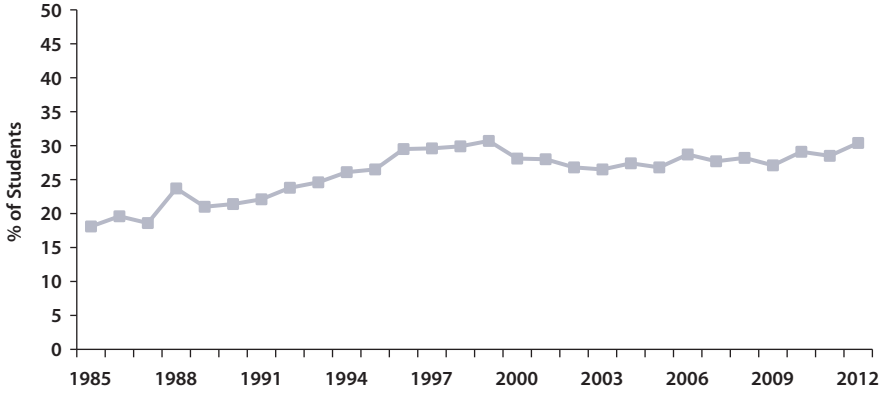
The percentage of incoming first-year students indicating that they frequently felt "overwhelmed by all I had to do" during their senior year of high school increased from 28.5% in 2011 to 30.4% in 2012, continuing an upward trend (see Figure 3). Differences between men and women also persist. The percentage of incoming first-year women who report feeling "frequently" overwhelmed is at its highest point, 40.5%, since the question was first asked in 1985. This is more than twice the rate of incoming first-year men (18.3%).

Students who felt overwhelmed in high school might be on the path to continue feeling overwhelmed in college. *Likelihood of Involvement* is a CIRP Construct that measures students' expectations about their involvement in college life generally, and nearly one-third (31.9%) of students who report feeling frequently overwhelmed score high in *Likelihood of Involvement*, compared to 18.6% of students who report not being overwhelmed. Depending on the types of activities they expect to be involved in, this could either ameliorate or exacerbate feelings of being overwhelmed. Involvement in college might actually be an effective way to bolster students' academic and social self-concepts as well as buffer lower levels of emotional health, if students participate in activities that research has shown are associated with academic success.

Indeed, when we look at students who report frequently feeling overwhelmed, they are more likely than peers who report not feeling overwhelmed to report that there is a "very good chance" they will participate in practices that will help them successfully navigate the transition to college and increase their academic self-concept, such as communicating regularly with their professors (44.8% versus 34.3%), getting tutoring (41.1% versus 26.0%), and studying abroad (38.0% versus 25.2%). Students who report feeling frequently overwhelmed are also more likely than their peers who report not feeling overwhelmed to say there is a "very good chance" they will participate in activities that have the potential to enrich social self-concept, including participating in student clubs and groups (54.7% versus 40.2%), and seeking personal counseling (15.9% versus 8.6%).

Taken together, these findings underscore the need for colleges to attend to signs of being overwhelmed in first-year students and to promote activities that not only support health and wellness, but also highlight important opportunities to build students' self-efficacy related to academics and social life.

Figure 3. Trend of "Felt Overwhelmed by All I Had to Do" (% Indicating "Frequently")



CHANGING PATTERNS IN WHERE STUDENTS RESIDE

Fewer incoming students report they plan on living in a college dorm during the fall term, falling from 79.3% in 2011 to 76.1% in 2012, a drop of 3.2 percentage points. At the same time, the percentage of incoming students indicating they plan to live with their family or other relatives rose 2.2 percentage points, from 15.0% in 2011 to 17.2% in 2012.

Looking more closely at students who live with family, we see differences in the type of institutions they have chosen to attend. Approximately one in five students (21.5%) attending a four-year college indicate they plan on living with family, nearly twice the percentage of students attending universities (12.6%). Students at public four-year colleges are the most likely to live with family (29.4%) and the least likely to report living in a college residence hall (61.5%).

Students who plan to live at home also have different reasons for choosing their particular college. They are more likely to report that it was very important to live near home (49%) than those who plan to live in a college residence hall (13.7%), that their parents wanted them to attend this college (23.3% versus 13.2%) and that the cost of attending this college (57.3% versus 40.1%) were "very important" reasons to attend their college.

With regard to how students are paying for college, we have previously reported on the decrease in scholarships and grants, and an increasing reliance on loans. When we look specifically at students who plan to live with family, we find that they are less likely to report financing at least some of their first-year expenses through loans (48.7%) than those who plan to live on campus (62.3%), a difference of 13.6 percentage points. They are also more likely to indicate that they are not using any family resources to pay for first-year expenses (21.1% compared with 12.7% of students living in college residence halls). Thus, fewer students who live at home are using loans or family resources to finance their education than those who live in college residence halls. It could be that their choice of college allows them to live at home, saving family financial resources and allowing them to incur less student loan debt.

Students living with family are more likely to be pursuing their degree while balancing work responsibilities. They are also more likely to report that there is a "very good chance" they will get a job to help pay for college expenses (55.6%) as compared to students who plan on living on campus (47.8%). Students living with family are also twice as likely to believe there is a "very good chance" they will work full time while attending college (14.0%) compared to both those who live in a college residence hall (5.9%), and incoming students overall (7.7%).

While balancing work and academic responsibilities is commonplace for many students, colleges should consider whether the structures and policies they have in place to support students who balance work and academics sufficiently address students who live with family as they pursue their degrees.

SOURCE

Pryor, J. H., Eagan, K., Palucki Blake, L., Hurtado, S., Berdan, J., & Case, M. H. (2012). *The American freshman: National norms fall 2012*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

This report can be downloaded at http://heri.ucla.edu/tfsPublications.php.

HERI

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