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More Than One-Third of College Faculty Believes Most of Their Students Lack Basic Skills Needed for College, UCLA Survey Reveals

(Note to Editors: To reach the Higher Education Research Institute directly, call 310-825-1925. For a survey summary, visit <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri>; click on "Recent Findings.")

Only half of educators today say that they are satisfied with the quality of their undergraduate students, according to the results of a recent survey of the nation's college and university faculty. The 2004–05 academic year survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies also finds that, across all types of colleges and universities, only slightly more than one-third (36 percent) of respondents agree that faculty on their campus feels that "most" students are well-prepared academically. Overall, 41 percent of the nation's faculty believes that "most" of the students they teach lack the basic skills for college-level work.

By contrast, findings from the institute's 2004 Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey showed that record numbers of today's entering college students (70 percent) rate themselves as "above average" or "highest 10 percent" academically. Nearly half (48 percent) also report earning "A" grades in high school.

There is, however, wide variation in perceptions of student preparedness among faculty at different types of colleges and universities. Educators at two-year colleges and public four-year colleges are the least inclined to view their students as academically well-prepared, while private university educators are the most likely to perceive their students as well-prepared.

This is the first time that the Higher Education Research Institute Faculty Survey has included questions specifically focused on educators' perceptions of students' "basic skills" preparation. However, satisfaction with the quality of their students and opinions about whether "most" students on their campuses are well-prepared academically have been queried regularly.

"While it may be disheartening that just 50 percent of today's faculty are satisfied with the quality of their students, it should also be noted that the current figure is actually higher than it has been in recent years," said Jennifer Lindholm, director of the survey.

Percentages of those educators satisfied with the quality of their students in the last two triennial surveys conducted in 2001 and 1998 were 44 percent and 42 percent, respectively.

2-2-2 College Skills

Similarly, there has been a steady increase over time in the percentage of professors who say that faculty at their institution feel that “most” of their students are well-prepared academically. Today’s figure of 36 percent is up from 32 percent in 2001 and 28 percent in 1998.

Nonetheless, Lindholm cautions, “the significance of the challenges that faculty who work with underprepared students face should not be overlooked.”

Working with what they consider to be underprepared students is a source of at least “some” stress for 56 percent of today’s faculty. This type of stress is most pervasive at two-year colleges, where 68 percent of faculty reports at least “some” stress within this realm and least common at private universities, where only 34 percent indicates similar stress levels.

This year’s faculty survey is the sixth in a series administered by the Higher Education Research Institute on a triennial basis, the first of which was conducted in 1989–90. The new report is based on data collected during the 2004–05 academic year from a national sample of 40,670 faculty members at 421 colleges and universities. The data have been weighted to approximate the results that would have been obtained if all college and university faculty in every accredited higher education institution throughout the United States had responded.

Goals for undergraduate education

Among college and university faculty, the most strongly emphasized goals for undergraduate education are developing students’ ability to think critically (endorsed as “very important” or “essential” by 99 percent of faculty), helping students master knowledge in a discipline (94 percent) and promoting students’ ability to write effectively (87 percent).

“The focus of today’s faculty is developing the practical skills embedded in a liberal education,” said Sylvia Hurtado, UCLA education professor and director of the Higher Education Research Institute.

Preparing undergraduates for employment after college and graduate or advanced education is deemed a “very important” or “essential” goal by 73 percent and 61 percent of today’s faculty, respectively. However, only 30 percent of faculty today believes that the chief benefit of a college education is that it increases one’s earning potential.

Teaching and research practices and perspectives

The survey shows that there are considerable differences in pedagogical practice among faculty who are at various stages of their careers. Most notably, early-career educators are more inclined than their mid- and advanced-career colleagues to use student-centered teaching and evaluation methods. Variations are especially evident in the extent to which “most” or “all” courses taught by faculty respondents include cooperative learning (57 percent of early-career vs. 36 percent of advanced-career faculty), group projects (37 percent vs. 27 percent), student presentations (48 percent vs. 40 percent), reflective writing/journaling (22 percent vs. 13 percent), student evaluations of each other’s work (20 percent vs. 12 percent) and student evaluations of their own work (22 percent vs. 16 percent).

3-3-3 College Skills

By contrast, advanced-career faculty members are more likely than their early-career colleagues to engage in extensive lecturing (62 percent vs. 51 percent) and to grade on a curve (25 percent vs. 14 percent).

“Given the relatively sizable gaps in many of these areas and the projected retirements of significant numbers of the advanced-career cohort in coming years, it will be interesting to see the extent to which faculty orientations toward use of student-centered approaches to teaching and learning continue to grow,” Lindholm said.

Engaged scholarship and public service

In general, today’s educators view the goal of maintaining close relationships between colleges and society at large as an important mission of higher education institutions. More than three-quarters (81 percent) report that colleges have a responsibility to work with their surrounding communities to address local issues and close to 85 percent support the idea that colleges should encourage students to be involved in community service activities.

“The importance of nurturing a sense of social responsibility among college students is part of the public service mission of higher education,” Hurtado said, “and faculty express different levels of commitment.”

For example, while for 61 percent of all faculty members, preparing students for responsible citizenship is a “very important” or “essential” goal for undergraduate education, only 38 percent assign similar levels of importance to instilling in students a commitment to community service.

Overall, 46 percent of faculty say that creating and sustaining partnerships with surrounding communities is of “high” or “highest” institutional priority. However, slightly less than one-third (31 percent) perceives there to be a similar degree of institutional emphasis placed on providing resources to support their engagement in community-based teaching or research.

Specifically in terms of perceived institutional priorities for undergraduate education, 33 percent of educators today indicate that their campus places “high” or “highest” priority on helping students learn how to bring about change in American society.

Copies of the 6th triennial report, “The American College Teacher: National Norms for the 2004–2005 HERI Faculty Survey” (Lindholm, J.A., Szelényi, K., Hurtado, S., and Korn, W.S.) are available for \$25 plus \$5 (plus \$1 per additional book) for shipping. Please send payment to the Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, 3005 Moore Hall/Mailbox 951521, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521. Telephone (310) 825-1925 for inquiries.