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## **Political Interest on the Rebound Among the Nation's Freshmen, UCLA Survey Reveals**

**Survey reports students have a renewed interest in politics**

*(Note to Editors: To reach the Higher Education Research Institute directly, call 310-825-1925. For more information related to the American Council on Education, an important associate in the preparation of this survey, call Tim McDonough at 202-939-9365. For a summary of the survey, visit [www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html); click on "recent findings.")*

After a long period of decline, interest in politics is on the rise, according to the results of UCLA's annual survey of the nation's students entering undergraduate classes. The fall 2003 survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies finds that one-third (33.9 percent) of students feel that "keeping up to date with political affairs" is a very important life goal. Prior to 2000, the study revealed a three-decade trend of plummeting political interest among freshmen, with a record low of 28.1 percent in 2000 (see figure 1). Students in the new millennium express a renewed attraction to the political sector. The percentage of freshmen who discuss politics on a frequent basis increased from 19.4 percent in 2002 to 22.5 percent in 2003, marking the highest point reached since 1993.

Political engagement remains far below the level recorded in the late 1960s, when 60.3 percent of the 1966 freshmen valued keeping up with politics and one-third of the 1968 freshmen discussed politics frequently. "Although today's freshmen show far less interest in politics than their parents' generation, these recent shifts are noteworthy given their reversal of the long-term trend toward political disengagement," said Linda J. Sax, UCLA education professor and director of the survey.

Resurgence of students' political concern is also reflected in the personal importance students place on influencing the political structure, which increased for the fourth consecutive year. Currently, 20.1 percent of students consider this a very important life goal, compared to 19.6 percent last year and a low of 17.1 percent in 1999.

Recent years have also witnessed a moderate shift to the political right among college freshmen. Among the 2003 entering class, 22.7 percent identify as "conservative" or "far right," compared with 21.3 in 2002. Although the popularity of "far left" actually increased (from 2.5 percent to 2.8 percent), the "liberal" label declined by a larger margin (from 25.3 percent to 24.2 percent). Nevertheless, the left-right political balance among college freshmen continues to

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favor the left, a fact that has held steady throughout the 38-year history of the study. One-half of freshmen consider themselves to be “middle-of-the-road” (50.3 percent), a figure that has changed little in recent years.

Now in its 38th year, the UCLA Survey is the nation’s longest-running and most comprehensive assessment of student attitudes and plans. Conducted in association with the American Council on Education, the survey serves as a resource for higher education researchers throughout the world.

The 2003 freshman norms are based on the responses of 276,449 students at 413 of the nation’s baccalaureate colleges and universities. The data has been statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.2 million first-time, full-time students entering all four-year colleges and universities as freshmen in 2003.

### **Students volunteer in record numbers**

Today’s college freshmen are continuing a decade-long trend of record-setting volunteerism. 83.1 percent of students report participating in volunteer work during their last year in high school, compared to 82.6 percent in 2002 and a low of 66 percent in 1989. Paralleling the trend is that a growing number of high schools make community service a requirement for graduation. Nearly one in three students (31.3 percent) attend these high schools, marking a substantial increase since this item was introduced on the 1998 survey when less than one-quarter (23.2 percent) of students performed service on a compulsory basis.

It appears that this growing trend at the high school level is matched by increases at the college level. The percentage of students who say there is a “very good chance” that they will participate in volunteer or community work in college also reached a record high of 25.3 percent, compared with a low of 16.9 percent when this item was introduced on the 1990 survey. An additional 41.2 percent of today’s students indicate that there is “some chance” of participating in service while in college. “This growing commitment to service is encouraging news because participating in service yields clear benefits for student learning both inside and outside the classroom,” Sax said.

### **Students achieving “A” averages reach record high, while study time remains low**

Students earning “A” averages in high school increased to an all-time high 46.6 percent, compared to 45.7 percent last year and a low of 17.6 percent in 1968. The percentage of students earning average grades of “C-plus or below” fell to a record low of 5.1 percent, compared to 5.3 percent last year and a high of 23.1 percent in 1968 (see figure 2). Students’ academic confidence also hit a record high, with 69.7 percent of students believing their academic ability is above average or in the highest 10 percent among people their age. “These long-term trends show that as the ‘A’ average becomes the norm, the ‘C’ grade is becoming a thing of the past,” said Alexander W. Astin, UCLA education professor and founding director of the survey.

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As their grades continue to escalate, students' time spent studying remains low. In 2003 only 34 percent of entering freshmen report studying or doing homework six or more hours per week in their senior year of high school, the second-lowest figure since that item was added to the survey in 1987 (when it reached 47 percent).

#### **Religious involvement declines, family values rank highest**

The importance of raising a family ranks highest among the survey's list of 21 values, with a record 74.8 percent of freshmen noting it as a very important or essential life goal, compared with 73.6 percent last year and a record low of 58.8 percent reported in 1977 (see figure 3). Students' second-highest priority is succeeding financially, which reached its highest point in 13 years (73.8 percent). Conversely, students' desire to "develop a meaningful philosophy of life" dropped to its lowest point in the history of the survey, with only 39.3 percent viewing it as an important life goal compared to 40.6 percent in 2002 and a high of 85.8 percent in 1967 (see figure 4). "These contrasting trends," Sax said, "reflect the continuing tension between extrinsic and intrinsic values within this generation of college students."

Religious involvement has declined as well, with the percentage of freshmen who attended religious services frequently or occasionally during their last years in high school falling to 80.4 percent, its lowest point in 35 years. Although this reflects a small drop from last year's figure of 81.9 percent and a significant decline from the record high 91.7 percent reported in 1968, it is clear that overall levels of religious service attendance remain high. Similar trends are witnessed regarding the time students devote to prayer or meditation. Since that item was first included on the survey in 1996, the proportion of students who pray on a weekly basis has declined from 66.9 percent to 63.8 percent. Further, the percentage of students who rate their level of "spirituality" as "above average" or "highest 10 percent" among their peers dropped for the fourth consecutive year to 38.3 percent, compared to a high of 46.4 percent in 1999. (This item was added to the survey in 1996.)

The number of students claiming "none" as their religious preference has nearly tripled over the history of the survey, reaching a record high 17.6 percent in 2003, compared with 17.2 percent last year and a low of 6.6 percent in 1966. The percentage of students indicating that their parents have no religious preference also reached record levels, with 13.9 percent of fathers and 9.1 percent of mothers reportedly identifying with no specific religion (see figure 5). "Despite these obvious trends toward secularization," Astin said, "it is important to keep in mind that the vast majority of American college students are involved with some form of organized religion."

#### **Drinking, smoking and partying continue to decline**

Freshmen entering college in fall 2003 reported the lowest rates of drinking and smoking in the history of the survey, with fewer than half of freshmen reporting frequent or occasional beer drinking (44.8 percent, compared to 46.5 percent last year and a high of 73.7 percent in 1982). Consumption of wine and other liquor also reached a record low of 50.7 percent in 2003,

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down from 52.5 percent in 2002 and a high of 67.8 percent in 1987. The time spent partying also reached an all-time low, with 24.1 percent reporting partying six or more hours per week in 2003, a significant drop from 36.8 percent in 1987, the year this question was first introduced.

While declines in drinking and partying have been fairly steady over the past decade, trends for cigarette smoking have been less consistent. Following the record-high number of freshmen who frequently smoked cigarettes reported in 1998 (12.7 percent), smoking rates have fallen over the past five years. Currently, a record-low 6.3 percent of entering college students report frequent cigarette smoking during their last year in high school. “This generation was raised during a time of vocal anti-drug campaigns,” Sax said. “Apparently, those efforts have enjoyed some degree of success.”

Copies of the 38th annual report, titled “The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2003” (Sax, L.J., Astin, A. W., Lindholm, J. A., Korn, W.S., Saenz, V. B. and Mahoney, K.M.; 2003), are available to the public for \$25, plus \$5 (and \$1 for each additional book) for shipping. Send payment to the Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, 3005 Moore Hall, Box 951521, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1521.