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Political Orientations of the Nation's Freshmen Are More Polarized, UCLA Survey Reveals

Survey reports more students label themselves as politically far left and far right

(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.")

A record number of students define themselves at the political extremes of "far right" and "far left," according to the results of UCLA's annual survey of the nation's students entering undergraduate classes. The fall 2004 survey, conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, finds that 3.4 percent of students consider themselves as "far left" and 2.2 percent as "far right."

"Although these percentages are small, the change between 2003 and 2004 numbers — concurrent with the presidential election year — reflects the largest one-year shift in students' political orientation in the 35 years that it has been included in the survey," said Linda J. Sax, UCLA associate professor of education and director of the survey.

Identification as either "liberal" (26.1 percent) or "conservative" (21.9 percent) is also up from last year. "Middle-of-the-road" remains the most popular category at 46.4 percent, but reaches its lowest point in more than 30 years, and marks a nearly four-percentage point drop since last year (50.3 percent in 2003). (See Figure 1.)

Now in its 39th year, the UCLA survey is the nation's longest running and most comprehensive assessment of student attitudes and plans. The survey serves as a resource for researchers, practitioners and policy makers throughout the world.

The 2004 freshman norms are based on the responses of 289,452 students at 440 of the nation's baccalaureate colleges and universities. The data have been statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.2 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year colleges and universities as freshmen in 2004.

Interest in politics grows while support for military spending declines

Interest in politics is still on the rise, with 34.3 percent of students who feel that "keeping up to date with political affairs" is a very important or essential life goal. This marks a substantial increase from the item's record low of 28.1 percent reported among freshmen in 2000 and the highest level of political interest since 1994.

2-2-2 Freshmen Survey

The percentage of freshmen who frequently “discussed politics” increased from 22.5 percent in 2003 to 25.5 percent in 2004, marking the highest point in more than a decade. In 1966, 60.3 percent of freshmen valued keeping up with politics and one-third of 1968 freshmen discussed politics regularly.

“The current indicators of political engagement are far lower than the peaks of the late 1960s, but represent a noteworthy increase over the past four years, a shift we can safely attribute to the events surrounding Sept. 11, the war in Iraq and the recent U.S. presidential election,” Sax said.

The 2004 survey also reveals a number of shifts in attitudes about the role of federal and state governments. Currently 35.4 percent of students believe that federal military spending should be increased, marking a decline of 10 percentage points from a high of 45 percent in 2002, the immediate aftermath of Sept. 11. However, the percentage of today’s freshmen who advocate increased military spending is double the rate reported in 1992 (17.4 percent).

Additionally, there is declining support for the death penalty and a growing sense that the legal system is not doing enough to protect the rights of criminals. The belief that “The death penalty should be abolished” reached 33.2 percent, its highest point since 1980, while the opinion that “There is too much concern in the courts for the rights of criminals” fell to 58.1 percent, its lowest point since 1976 (see Figure 2).

“Those beliefs might reflect the widely publicized moratorium placed on the death penalty in states like New York, clemency for death row inmates in Illinois and a call for a moratorium on executions from the American Bar Association,” said Sylvia Hurtado, UCLA education professor and director of HERI.

Digital divide remains unconquered

Although gender differences in computer usage have disappeared over time, differences based on race have persisted. A spread of 15 percentage points exists in rates of frequent computer usage across racial/ethnic groups and disparities in technological preparedness based on race have widened over time (see Figure 3). Notably, Hispanic/Latino students have surpassed African American students in their levels of pre-college computing experience. Differences in computer use are minimized among students from high-income families, but are heightened at lower income levels.

“As rates of computer use have increased for all students, little or no progress has been made in bridging the ‘digital divide’ since it gained national attention in the 1990s,” Sax said.

Interest in health careers at record high

Student interest in majoring in the general biological sciences, biochemistry or biophysics reached an all-time high this year, with twice as many freshmen indicating an interest in these fields compared with students in the late 1980s. Additionally, interest in nursing reached a 20-year high (3.9 percent). While women far outnumber men in this career field (6.5 percent vs. 0.7 percent), there have been steady increases in nursing interest among both men and women over the last four years. Freshman interest in other health careers, such as pharmacy (2.4 percent)

3-3-3 Freshmen Survey

and dentistry (1.1 percent), is also at all-time highs. Interest in medical careers held steady, with women continuing to outnumber men (7 percent vs. 5.1 percent).

“Women may soon no longer be underrepresented in these fields at the graduate level. Capitalizing on renewed interest in the biomedical sciences, we are launching a new longitudinal study on this cohort to determine racial/ethnic differences in paths toward research careers,” Hurtado said. This new project is sponsored by the National Institutes of Health.

Increasing expectations to work during college, especially among women

A record high 47.2 percent of 2004 entering freshmen believe that there is a very good chance that they will get a job to help pay for college expenses, compared to a low of 35.3 percent in 1989. More women (53.3 percent) than men (39.6 percent) currently indicate that there is a very good chance they will seek employment during college (see Figure 4).

In recent years, there has also been a steady increase in the percentage of students planning to rely on family resources and loans to cover their first-year educational expenses. This year 29.5 percent of incoming freshmen expect to receive more than \$10,000 in family support, up from 28.9 percent last year and 25.6 percent in 2001, the first year this question was asked. Among the 2004 incoming freshmen, 8.8 percent expect to borrow more than \$10,000 to cover first-year expenses, up from 7.8 percent last year and 5.6 percent in 2001. Although just 13 percent of all students report “major” concerns about their ability to pay for college (down from a record high 19.1 percent in 1995), the current figure jumps to 22.7 percent among students whose families earn less than \$60,000 per year.

Women manage time better but feel more overwhelmed than men

Although women are more likely to rate their time management skills as “above average” or “highest 10 percent” (37.4 percent vs. 31.5 percent), they are also twice as likely as men to indicate that they frequently feel overwhelmed by all they have to do (36.4 percent vs. 16.3 percent).

“The greater tendency for women to feel overwhelmed may be a reflection of the differences in how women and men spend their time,” Sax said, “with women devoting more time to academic and family commitments, and men devoting more time to recreational activities.”

Specifically, men were more inclined than women to spend more than 10 hours per week during their last year in high school engaged in the following activities: socializing with friends (53.1 percent vs. 48.7 percent), exercising or playing sports (40.7 percent vs. 27.2 percent), watching television (15.5 percent vs. 9.1 percent) and partying (13.7 percent vs. 8.2 percent). By comparison, women were more likely than men to spend more than 10 hours per week in non-recreational activities such as working for pay (45.7 percent vs. 42.3 percent), studying and doing homework (18.5 percent vs. 11.6 percent), and engaging in housework and childcare (5.2 percent vs. 2.8 percent).

Perhaps as a function of their comparatively higher levels of involvement in potentially stress-buffering activities, men are more likely than women to rate their emotional health as

4-4-4 Freshmen Survey

“above average” or “highest 10 percent” (57.1 percent vs. 45.8 percent). Similarly, men are less likely than women to report that they felt frequently or occasionally depressed over the past year (48.5 percent vs. 61.6 percent). Men are also less likely than women to indicate at least “some” chance of seeking personal counseling while in college (30.3 percent vs. 37.5 percent).

High school grades and student boredom reach record highs

Students’ grades continue to improve, with the number of students earning “A” averages in high school increasing to an all-time high of 47.5 percent, compared to 46.4 percent last year and a record low of 17.6 percent in 1968. The percentage of students earning average grades of C+ or below stayed at the all-time low of 5.1 percent reached in 2003 (compared to a high of 23.1 percent in 1968).

As grades have risen, so has student boredom. The percentage of students who were frequently “bored in class” during their final year of high school reached a record 42.8 percent, compared to 40.1 percent last year and a low of 29.3 percent reported in 1985. There was also a downward trend in the amount of students’ out-of-class interactions with their teachers. Less than half of students (47 percent) report spending at least one hour per week talking with their teachers outside of class, compared to a high of 63 percent reported in 1989.

Declining interaction across racial/ethnic groups

Fewer freshmen today indicate that “helping to promote racial understanding” is an “essential” or “very important” personal goal than any other entering class in the history of the survey (29.7 percent, down from a high of 46.4 percent in 1992). Further, over the last three years there has been an increase in the number of freshmen who feel that racial discrimination is no longer a problem in America. In 2004 a record 22.7 percent held this belief (up from 22.4 percent in 2003 and a low of 12.5 percent in 1993), although differences exist across racial groups.

Recent declines in interaction patterns are also evident, with 67.8 percent of freshmen in 2004 stating that they frequently socialized with someone of a different racial/ethnic group in high school, a decline from 70 percent in 2001. Moreover, while 63.1 percent of entering freshmen report that chances are “very good” that they will socialize with someone of a different racial/ethnic background during college, the current figure is the lowest since the question’s inclusion in the survey in 2000. “In an increasingly multicultural world, curricular and co-curricular activities designed to improve students’ knowledge and skills in this realm, such as diversity courses and inter-group dialogue, may be especially important,” Hurtado said.

Copies of the 39th annual report, titled “The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2004 (Sax, L.J., Hurtado, S., Lindholm, J.A., Astin, A.W., Korn, W.S. and Mahoney, K.M.), are available 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.