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## **Incoming college students rate emotional health at record low, annual survey finds**

### **Economy continues to shape student expectations for college, political views**

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First-year college students' self-ratings of their emotional health dropped to record low levels in 2010, according to the CIRP Freshman Survey, UCLA's annual survey of the nation's entering students at four-year colleges and universities. The survey, part of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), is administered nationally by the [Higher Education Research Institute \(HERI\)](#) at [UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies](#).

Only 51.9 percent of students reported that their emotional health was in the "highest 10 percent" or "above average," a drop of 3.4 percentage points from 2009 and a significant decline from the 63.6 percent who placed themselves in those categories when self-ratings of emotional health were first measured in 1985.

Female students were far less likely to report high levels of emotional health than male students (45.9 percent versus 59.1 percent), a 13.2 percentage-point difference. Women were also more than twice as likely as men to feel frequently "overwhelmed by all I had to do" as high-school seniors.

While students' perceived emotional health took a downturn, their drive to achieve and their academic abilities are trending upward. More students than ever before (71.2 percent) rated their academic abilities as "above average" or in the "highest 10 percent," and 75.8 percent rated their drive to achieve in the same terms.

Often considered positive traits, high levels of drive to achieve and academic ability could also contribute to students' feelings of stress, said John H. Pryor, lead author of the report and director of CIRP.

"Stress is a major concern when dealing with college students," he said. "If students are arriving in college already overwhelmed and with lower reserves of emotional health, faculty, deans and administrators should expect to see more consequences of stress, such as higher

levels of poor judgment around time management, alcohol consumption and academic motivation."

### **Financial concerns still abound**

The challenging economic landscape continues to influence students' college experiences. The proportion of students using loans to help pay for college remains high, at 53.1 percent, and more students reported receiving grants and scholarships than at any point since 2001 — 73.4 percent, a 3.4 percentage-point increase over 2009.

"The increasing cost of higher education poses a significant barrier to college access for today's students," said Sylvia Hurtado, co-author of the report and director of the Higher Education Research Institute. "Students and families are now charged with the task of becoming more resourceful and strategic in finding new and creative ways to pay for college."

The survey documented the continuing effect of the economy, with unemployment on the rise for students' parents. The percentage of students reporting that their fathers were unemployed (4.9 percent) was at an all-time high, and the percentage reporting unemployed mothers (8.6 percent) also continued to increase. Students are weighing their preferences along with considerations regarding the net costs of attending particular colleges.

The survey also revealed that an increasing number of students are focused on the value that a college degree confers. In fact, more students than ever before (72.7 percent) indicated that "the chief benefit of college is that it increases one's earning power." This belief is in line with policymakers' efforts to advocate for public investment in higher education as a means to stimulate the economy.

### **Political views on gay rights and raising taxes**

Students expressed views on a variety of public policy issues, some of which transcended party lines.

In recent years, students have demonstrated increasing support for the rights of gays and lesbians, specifically regarding legal marital status for same-sex couples. This year, in a new question on the survey, more than three-quarters of entering first-year students expressed support for the legal right for gays and lesbians to adopt children, with 48.0 percent agreeing strongly and 28.5 percent agreeing somewhat.

"I am heartened to learn about students' overwhelming support for extending equal rights and dignity to gays and lesbians," said Carol Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. "Students' willingness to engage different perspectives and experiences is a virtual precondition for their own intellectual development in college and one of higher education's most important contributions to the future of a just and diverse democracy."

Economic concerns also seem to have influenced students' political views. An overwhelming 64.0 percent of students agreed that wealthy people should pay more taxes than they do now. This figure has been on the rise since 2002, when it was at 50.1 percent.

Nearly one-third of students agreed that "The federal government should raise taxes to help reduce the deficit," the highest percentage reported since this question was first asked 25 years ago. On this particular issue, students' opinions differed according to their political orientation. Students who considered themselves liberal were twice as likely to support raising taxes to reduce the deficit as those who identified as conservative (45.7 percent versus 21.2 percent).

### **College freshmen at a glance:**

- Fewer students than ever before are reporting above-average emotional health.
- Students feel increasingly overwhelmed before entering college; twice as many female students report feeling this way.
- Record high numbers of students believe the chief benefit of college is that it increases earning power.
- More than three-quarters of students support gays' and lesbians' right to adopt children.

The 2010 Freshman Norms report is based on the responses of 201,818 first-time, full-time students at 279 of the nation's baccalaureate colleges and universities. The data have been statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.5 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year colleges and universities as first-year students in 2010. Since 1966, the first year the survey was conducted, more than 15 million students have completed CIRP surveys at 1,900 colleges and universities. The CIRP Freshman Survey is the largest and longest-running survey of American college students.

To view a summary or to order a copy of the monograph "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2010" (J.H. Pryor, S. Hurtado, L. DeAngelo, L. Palucki Blake and S. Tran), visit [www.heri.ucla.edu](http://www.heri.ucla.edu).

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