

January 2009

# The American Freshman

## National Norms for Fall 2008

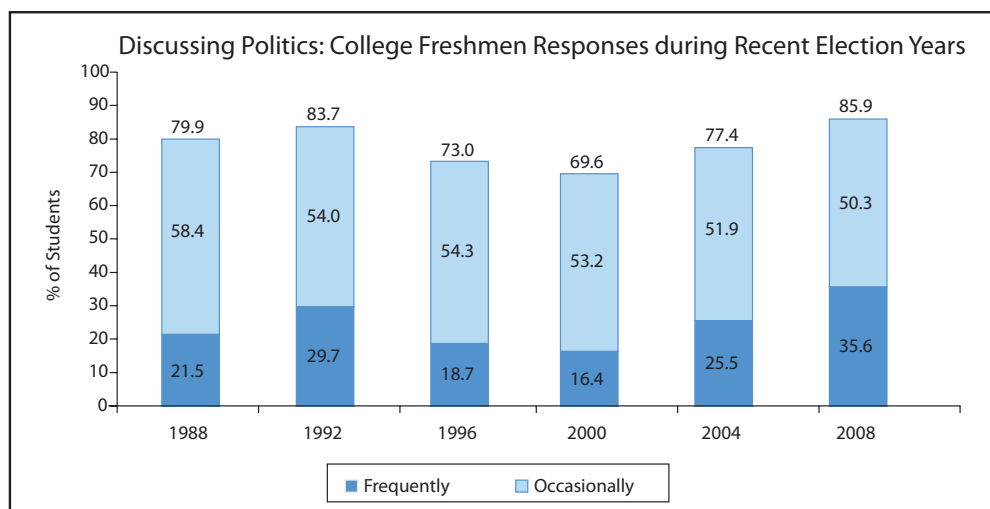
*The 2008 freshman norms are based on the responses of 240,580 first-time, full-time students at 340 of the nation's baccalaureate colleges and universities. The data have been statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.4 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year colleges and universities as freshmen in 2008.*

### A Revival of Political Engagement

A record number of incoming college students are politically engaged, with 85.9 percent reporting that they frequently or occasionally discussed politics in the last year. The number of students who frequently discussed politics in the past year (35.6 percent) is the highest level of such involvement since CIRP has reported on political engagement. This level surpasses that recorded in 1968 (33.6 percent), a year characterized by students who were very politically active. The 2008 level is also higher than other recent Presidential election years, including 1992, when Bill Clinton was elected president.

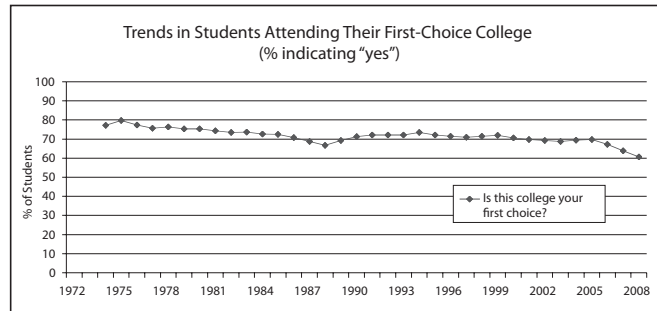
Steady increases have also occurred in the percentage of students who state that keeping up to date with political affairs is an “essential” or “very important” goal. After a record low of 28.1 percent was reported in 2000, post-9/11 freshmen have shown increased interest in keeping up to date in political affairs, rising to 39.5 percent in 2008. At the same time, however, these students have not yet surpassed their parents’ generation (baby boomers): Over 60 percent of students in 1966 reported that keeping up to date with political affairs was an important personal goal.

An increase was also seen in the proportion of students who characterize themselves as liberal, which reached its highest level in 35 years in 2008, at 31.0 percent. Trends also indicate that fewer students today characterize themselves as middle-of-the road in terms of their overall political view. This category has steadily declined and is at an all time low (43.3 percent), returning to roughly the same percentage as in 1970.



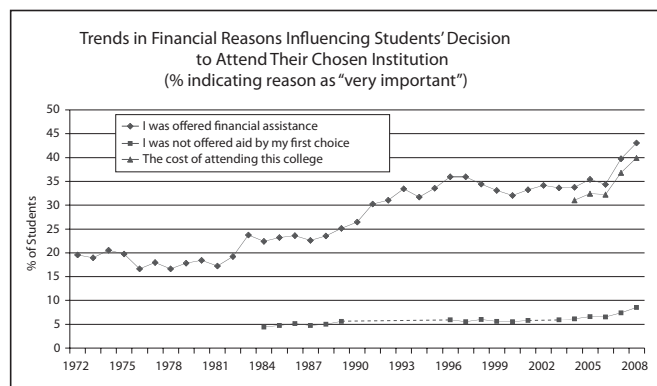
## College Choice and Financial Issues

The number of students *attending* their first-choice college continues to decline, dropping from 63.9 percent in 2007 to a 34-year low of 60.7 percent in 2008. Although this percentage was fairly stable from 1989 to 2005, hovering around 70 percent, it started a decline in 2006 that has only continued.



The percentage of incoming first-year students who were *accepted* by their first-choice college also declined from 2007 (80.6 percent) to 2008 (77.8 percent). It remains the case that there is a gap between acceptances at first-choice colleges and actual attendance, and that gap is increasing – from 16.5 percent in 2007 to 17.1 percent in 2008. In terms of applications to college, students applying to four or more colleges reached a record high in 2008, moving up to 60.1 percent from 56.4 percent in 2007.

Financial concerns are increasingly the force that drives a student to decline a first-choice college in favor of a second choice. More students report that being offered financial aid was a “very important” or “essential” consideration in choosing which school to attend than at any time in the past 36 years the question has been asked; from 2007 to 2008 alone, the percentage jumped from 39.7 percent to 43.0 percent. The importance of the cost of attending the chosen college is also at a high, at 39.9 percent, and up 3.1 percentage points from 2007. Additionally, 8.5 percent specifically reported that not receiving aid from their first choice college was very



important in choosing where to attend, up 1.1 percent from 2007 and the highest percentage since the question was first asked in 1984.

Today's incoming students are more likely to look to multiple income sources to pay for college. Family resources (e.g., parents, relatives) are still the most likely source of funds, with 79.6 percent of students reporting that they will use family resources. Incoming first-year students in 2008, however, are more likely to report using their own savings and planning to work while in college than in previous years (64.7 percent in 2008). In fact, more students report that they will get a job in order to meet expenses while in college (49.4 percent in 2008) than in the 32 years CIRP surveys have asked the question. They are also more likely to be receiving funds from aid that need not be repaid, such as grants or scholarships (69.3 in 2008). Planning ahead to use multiple sources, as well as making the decision to attend a different college based upon financial circumstances, may explain why although financial issues drive college choice for some students, we are not seeing larger changes in the percentages of students concerned about their ability to pay for college.

## Skills for a Diverse Workplace

This year, a new set of items was placed on the survey to capture some key skills employers consider appropriate for participation in a diverse workplace. Overall, the majority of entering students tended to rate themselves reasonably high on many of the items, with multiracial students rating themselves higher than other racial or ethnic groups. In contrast, American Indians tended to rate themselves less highly than other groups.

Skills for a Diverse Workplace, by Race/Ethnicity (percentages)

Reporting "Above Average" or "Top 10%"	White	African American	American Indian	Asian/Pacific Islander	Latina/o	Multiracial
Ability to see the world from someone else's perspective	64.0	62.2	58.5	69.7	66.4	72.9
Tolerance of others with different beliefs	72.6	67.5	60.9	77.9	74.1	79.6
Openness to having my own views challenged	56.3	61.4	51.6	62.6	61.2	64.0
Ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues	62.8	64.8	52.3	59.3	61.5	71.1
Ability to work cooperatively with diverse people	77.3	80.5	66.8	79.8	80.4	84.9

Note: PI = Pacific Islander

All groups tend to rate themselves lower on a cognitive development item, “openness to having my own views challenged,” while fewer Asian Americans tend to rate themselves highly on the “ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues.” By far, the biggest difference between men (69.4 percent) and women (58.5 percent) also occurs on this item. Students appear to have the most confidence in their tolerance of others with different beliefs and their ability to work cooperatively with diverse people. This may be a function of more diversity in the schools. Although

58.8 percent of all freshmen came from mostly White or all White high schools, slight increases were evident in those who came from mostly non-White (13.0 percent) and nearly a quarter (24.8 percent) came from roughly half non-White high schools. A continued decline in the percentage of White students among college freshmen was also evident this year: 71.9 percent of freshmen identified as White in 2008, compared with 81.8 percent of freshmen twenty years ago.

### College Readiness by Core High School Subject Areas

Nearly 100 percent of incoming freshmen met the required number of years of study in English, math, and history/American government. Fewer students, 92.9 percent, indicate that they completed two years of a foreign language, and 82.3 percent indicate that they completed at least a year of art and/or music in high school. The story is different for the sciences. Since this set of questions was first asked on the 1984 CIRP Freshman Survey, the lowest level of achievement in terms of meeting college readiness has been completing two years of high school study in biological sciences. Although this is still the case, we see a new record of 49.5 percent in 2008, up from 46.8 percent in 2006.

Perhaps more importantly, there are some distinct differences by race/ethnicity in the years of high school study devoted to core subject areas, particularly in the areas of physical and biological sciences. In the physical sciences only 48.0 percent of African American, 49.4 percent of American Indian, and 59.8 percent of Latino/a freshmen report that they have completed two years of study in high school. In contrast, 63.2 percent of White freshmen and 67.3 percent of Asian American/Pacific Islanders freshmen report that they completed two years of study in this area.

College Readiness\* in Core High School Subject Areas, by Race/Ethnicity (percentages)

	English	Math	Foreign Language	Physical Sciences	Biological Sciences	History/ American Govt	Computer Science	Arts and/or Music
White	98.2	98.6	93.1	63.2	49.3	99.3	61.7	81.9
African American	96.9	97.8	89.0	48.0	43.7	97.1	61.4	76.5
American Indian	95.6	94.3	68.6	49.4	47.3	97.4	69.5	80.5
Asian/PI American	97.3	99.1	94.3	67.3	57.6	98.4	52.0	86.3
Latino/a	98.2	98.1	94.4	59.8	47.5	98.9	61.4	86.1
Multi-Racial American	98.2	98.3	93.5	61.3	49.7	99.0	59.3	85.7
Other	96.4	98.4	93.0	66.9	53.3	97.7	61.0	82.1
Total	97.9	98.5	92.9	61.8	49.5	98.9	60.8	82.3

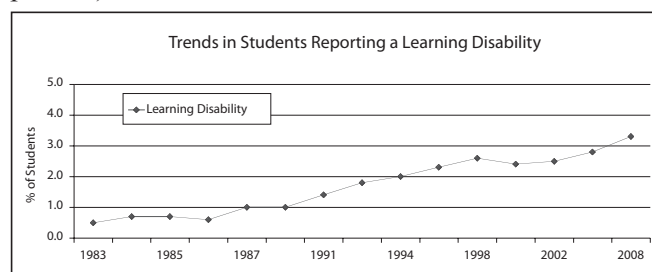
Note: PI = Pacific Islander

\* = College Readiness in each subject area is as follows: 4 or more years of English, 3 or more years of math, 2 or more years of foreign language, physical science and biological science, 1 or more years of history/American government, 1/2 or more years of computer science, and 1 or more years of Art/Music

Interest in engineering has also rebounded from the decade low of 7.5 percent (for the major), and 6.2 percent (for probable career) reported in 2007. A three-year decline was reversed in 2008, with 9.4 percent of freshmen reporting interest in the major and 7.4 percent expressing interest in engineering as a probable career.

### More Students Reporting Learning Disabilities

Among the incoming 2008 freshmen, 3.3 percent report that they have a learning disability. This figure has steadily and slowly increased since the question was first asked in 1983, when only 0.5 percent reported that they had a learning disability. Students with self-reported learning disabilities are more likely to anticipate that they will need extra time to complete their bachelor's degree and use campus counseling and tutoring services than freshmen overall. Specifically, incoming first-year students reporting a learning disability are more likely to expect that they will need extra time to complete their bachelor's degree (11.6 vs. 6.4 percent), more likely to anticipate that they will seek personal counseling (15.0 vs. 9.2 percent), and more likely to expect that they will need tutoring for specific courses (43.5 vs. 31.6 percent).



The 2008 monograph also highlights the increasing trend for student support of "green" initiatives, particularly among women; frequencies of internet usage and purposes (i.e., research, blogging, reading news sites); a continued decrease in student drinking behavior; and a rise in the importance of developing a meaningful philosophy of life.

The data reported in this monograph are weighted to provide a normative profile of the American freshman population for use by individuals engaged in policy analysis, educational research, college administration, human resource planning and guidance and counseling. The data are also useful to the general community of current and future college students, their parents, and college faculty. The full report provides data separately for men and women, and for 26 different institutional groupings.

*Please contact the Higher Education Research Institute for more information or to order your copy of the 2008 Freshman Norms.*

Suggested citation:

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