

# RESEARCH BRIEF

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT UCLA



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## 2019 YOUR FIRST COLLEGE YEAR SURVEY

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Now marking its 20th administration, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) has administered the Your First College Year (YFCY) survey since 2000. The YFCY survey assesses the academic and personal development of students over the first year of college. This research brief reports on a set of experiences and features of the first year, such as social networks, political views, mental health, and academic transitions and engagement, by various social identities and demographics. This brief highlights data from 6,263 first-year students from 23 four-year colleges and universities across the United States.

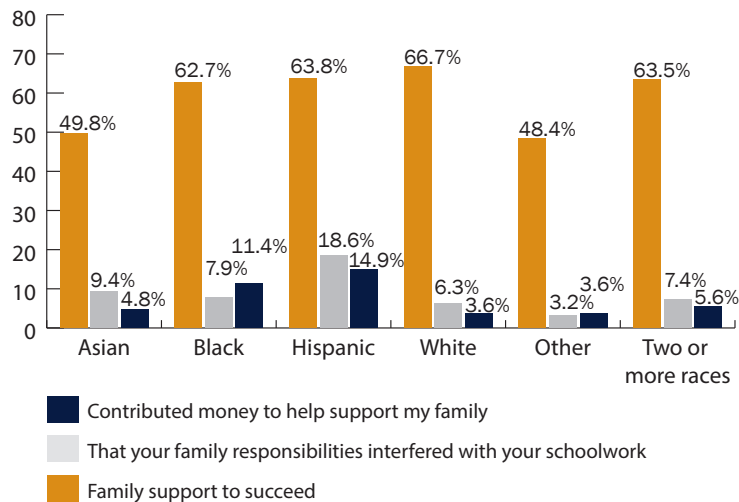
### FAMILIAL SUPPORT AND RESPONSIBILITIES

By understanding the eco-systems that college students place or find themselves in, colleges and universities can better understand who students turn to for mentorship, support, information, and networking. While the YFCY does not focus on the quality of students' interactions with their family, students are asked how frequently they interact with various people (e.g., by phone, email, text, or in person). For the 2019 YFCY survey, 64.3% of students connected with siblings and extended family members at least once a week and over four in five (83.9%) communicated with their parents at least once a week. Notably, over one-third of students (35.3%) interacted with their parents daily. Beyond these frequent interactions with family, an overwhelming majority (91.6%) of students felt their family supported their success (63.3%, frequently; 28.3%, occasionally). When examining frequent familial sense of support by gender identity, we found a notable difference amongst women/transwomen (67.1%), men/transmen (58.0%), and gender non-conforming students (48.1%). However, as Figure 1 shows, such percentage-point differences were less visible across racial/ethnic groups with the exception of students who identify as Asian (49.8%) or Other (48.4%). While White students felt the most frequently supported (66.7%), Black (62.7%), Latina/o/x (63.8%), and Multiracial (63.5%) students had similar rates. In addition, a majority of students felt their family responsibilities did not interfere with their coursework (62.8%). As Figure 1 highlights, Latina/o/x (18.6%) and Asian (9.4%)

students had the highest proportion of students who felt their home responsibilities frequently affected their academics in comparison to other racial/ethnic groups. In contrast, White (6.3%) and Other race (3.2%) students were less likely to feel this way. One way that family might affect students' schoolwork is by having to provide their family with financial support. As Figure 1 shows, Latina/o/x (14.9%) and Black (11.4%) students were more likely to state they frequently supported their family financially during their first year of college than White (3.6%), Asian (4.8%), Other race (3.6%), and Multiracial (5.6%) students.

It is important to note that students who frequently contributed to their family's finances were more likely to

**Figure 1. Student's Sense of Family Support and Responsibility, by Race Group (% Frequently)**



feel that their familial responsibilities frequently interfered with their classes (33.3%) compared to those who made no (5.0%) or occasional (12.1%) financial contributions. All in all, while Latina/o/x students did feel their family supported their success, they were also the most likely group to state that their family responsibilities affected their success. It is important to understand these nuances of support and stress that can impact how students navigate their first year.

**PEER AND ADVISOR RELATIONSHIPS ARE A SOURCE OF SUPPORT**

Students also depended on their friends, both on and off campus. While 70.8% of students interacted with friends not at their current institution at least once a week, just over three-quarters of students (75.7%) interacted with close friends at their current institution daily, 17.2% of students interacted with them one to three times a week, and 7.2% of students rarely interacted with them, if at all. This is not surprising given that 69.1% found it somewhat or very easy to make friends at their campus. Our findings show that how students perceived the ease of making friends related to how often they felt lonely or homesick. Figure 2 shows the easier it was for students to develop friendships, the less they felt lonely or homesick. For example, 55.1% of students who found it very difficult to make friends on campus frequently felt lonely or homesick. By contrast, just 8.9% of students who found making friends very easy felt frequently lonely or homesick during the first year of college.

Just over three-quarters of students (75.7%) reported using academic advising services at their institution. While a small proportion (7.9%) never communicated with academic advisors, the majority (59.4%) of students communicated with their academic advisors and counselors about once or twice per term. Fewer (23.2%) communicated about once or twice per month and a small percentage of students

communicated on a weekly basis (6.4%) with academic advisors and counselors.

Notable differences emerge when we disaggregate the data by major. Students majoring in Education (14.4%) and Arts and Humanities (12.9%) were more likely to communicate with their academic advisors and counselors at least on a weekly basis. On the other hand, students who majored in Business (8.6%) or STEM (8.4%) were most likely to never meet an academic advisor or counselor during the academic year. Beyond academic advising, students also utilized study skills advising (32.8%) and financial aid advising (30.1%).

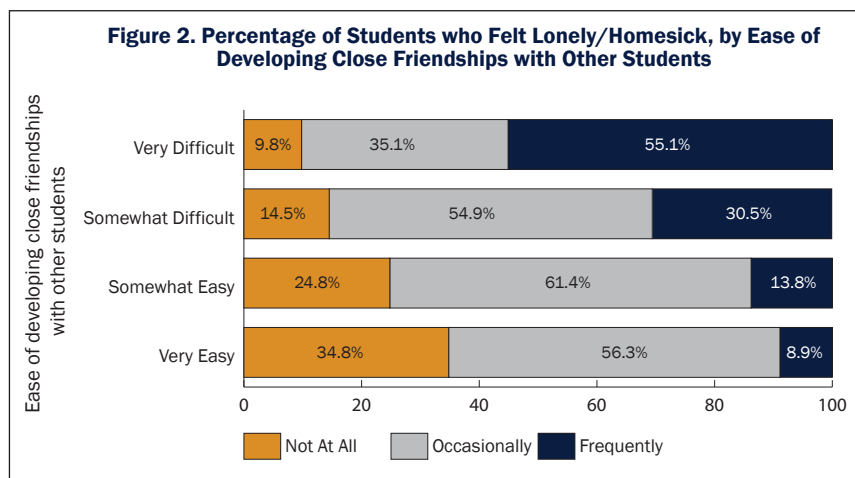
**STUDENTS' POLITICS**

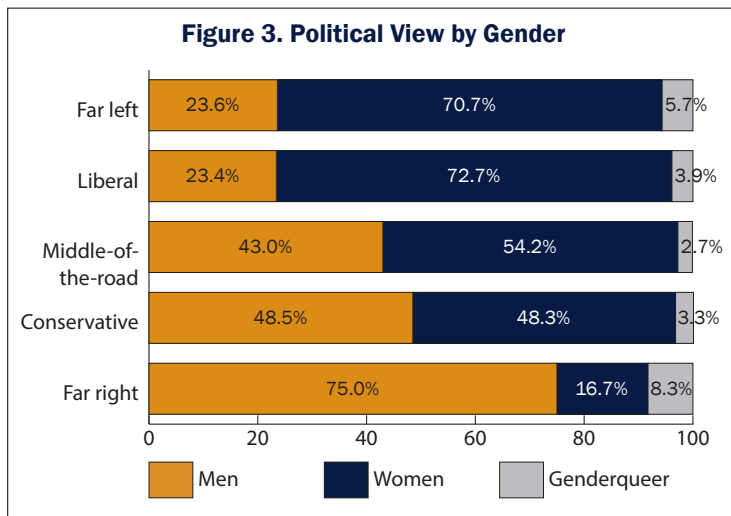
As we enter a presidential election year, students' political views are of increasingly greater consequence. Just over one-third (34.2%) of students characterized their political views as middle-of-the-road. On the flanks, 16.8% of respondents categorized themselves as far right or conservative while nearly half (49.1%) opted for liberal or far left. Among all students, nearly two-thirds (67.2%) would agree or strongly agree that their political views closely resemble those of their parents/guardians.

Differences in political views can be more clearly appreciated after taking into account the distribution of students by gender (Figure 3). Women make up the largest group of first-time, full-time students in our survey at 59.6%, followed by men at 36.7%, and genderqueer students at 2.9%. Considering this representation, we can see that men are overrepresented within both middle of-the-road (43.0%) and conservative (48.5%) students while comprising a staggering three-quarters (75.0%) of students who identify as far right. On the opposite end of the political spectrum, women are more numerous among students who describe their views as liberal (72.7%) and far-left (70.7%) while

being underrepresented among middle of-the-road (54.2%), conservative (48.3%), and far right students (16.7%). Curiously, genderqueer students represent a larger share of far right (8.3%) than far left students (5.7%).

In addition to gender, political views also vary by institution control. Students who identify as far right or conservative constitute 18.0% of all first-time full-time students at public institutions whereas their like-minded peers represent only 16.0% of the student body at private institutions. Likewise, middle of-the-





road students have greater representation at public (38.4%) than private colleges and universities (31.7%). On the other hand, students who describe themselves as far left or liberal make up 43.6% of those at public institutions and more than half (52.2%) of those at private institutions. These figures illustrate a clear contrast of political views at public and private institutions.

Moving from variation in political views to disparities in voter registration, important differences are observed in the likelihood that students are registered to cast their ballot. While more than three quarters (77.4%) of students indicated they are registered to vote, this percentage varied by political views. Middle-of-the-road students were the least likely to be registered to vote (66.3%) while their far right (84.2%) and conservative (76.1%) peers trailed both liberal (84.8%) and far left (90.2%) students. While not as clearly defined as differences by political views, women (78.9%) were more likely than both their male (75.2%), and genderqueer (72.2%) peers to be registered to vote.

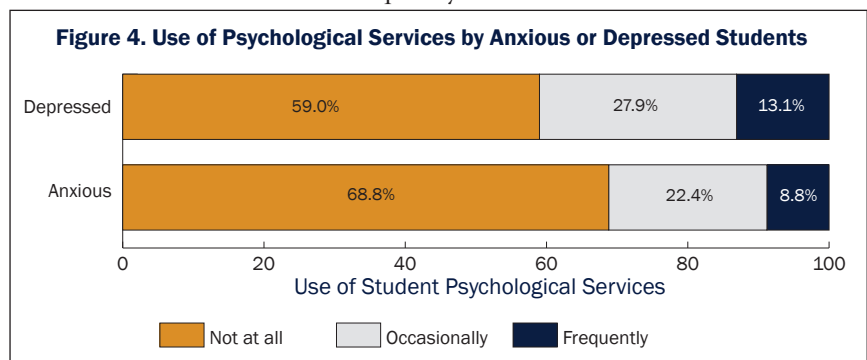
Not surprisingly, students who were most interested in effecting political change were more likely to be registered to vote. Of those who rated influencing the political structure as an essential goal, 83.4% were registered voters. In contrast, only 73.9% of those who answered not important were registered to vote. Similarly, as students' interest in politics increased, so did their likelihood of being registered to vote. Nearly two-thirds (65.0%) of students who reported keeping up to date with political affairs was not important were registered to vote. These students clearly trailed their peers who answered somewhat important (74.6%), very important (81.0%), and

essential (85.2%). Despite these differences, students demonstrate significant engagement in the political process, with 56.6% occasionally and 27.5% frequently discussing politics since entering college.

**MENTAL HEALTH**

Given the importance of supporting the mental health needs of college students, it is critical to understand how students are experiencing college from a mental health perspective. At the end of the first year of college, three in five students reported feeling isolated from campus life, 17.1% frequently and 43.4% occasionally. Of those who frequently felt isolated, more than half (53%) frequently felt depressed and another 38.6% did so occasionally. Analysis by gender reveals that genderqueer students (23.5%) were more likely than female (18.2%) and male (15.5%) students to report frequently feeling isolated on campus. Moreover, genderqueer students (35.5%) were also more likely than female (22.4%) and male (13.5%) students to frequently feel depressed.

Students also expressed alarmingly high rates of anxiety, with half reporting occasionally (50.3%) and 38.8% responding frequently. Anxiety also appears to have a diverging effect by gender, with genderqueer students (50.6%) being more likely than their female (46.3%), and male (26.8%) peers to report feeling frequently anxious. Despite worryingly high rates of anxiety, students are still unlikely to seek help for their mental health needs (Figure 4). Among those who frequently felt anxious, 68.8% said they hadn't used their campus psychological services at all. On the other hand, 8.8% of students who frequently felt anxious utilized psychological services on a frequent basis. Of those who frequently felt depressed, 59.0% hadn't used psychological services at all while 13.1% frequently did so.



**ACADEMIC TRANSITIONS AND ADJUSTMENT**

As colleges and universities continue to redesign services

and supports for first-year students, it is important to understand students' perceptions and behaviors regarding their transition and adjustment to college. Just over half of students reported being late (47.0% occasionally; 7.2% frequently) or skipping class (51.4% occasionally; 3.8% frequently). If they did make it to class, some students still had challenges remaining engaged with instruction. In fact, just under one-third of students (26.6% occasionally; 3.1% frequently) reported they had fallen asleep in class and three-fourths of students (60.6% occasionally; 15.6% frequently) used social media during class. Given these findings, it is not surprising that about half (49.4%) of respondents found it somewhat or very difficult to manage their time effectively, 35.7% of students had difficulty developing effective study skills, and 37.9% of students had difficulty adjusting to the academic demands of college. In spite of these findings, only 6.6% of students report failing one or more classes by the end of the first year.

Despite observing behaviors that inhibit student success, about 80.0% of students easily understood what professors expected from them academically. Furthermore, students who participated in a course or first-year seminar focusing

on academic adjustment found it easier to develop effective study skills, with 62.9% finding it somewhat or very easy to do so, compared to 59.8% of those who didn't take such courses. While we do not know whether participation in these courses or programs is mandatory or optional, we also see a slight difference in students' ease of understanding professors' expectations as well with 81.5% of participants finding it somewhat or very easy to understand professors' expectations, compared to 79.4% of non-participants. Overall, it is evident that colleges, and most importantly students, benefit from having courses and programming designed to support first-year students.

### CONCLUSION

Our survey findings suggest students rely heavily on their friends and family for support, even more so than their academic advisors or faculty members. As the 2020 elections approach, students will continue using their voices to amplify their political views on campus and at both a local and national level. Lastly, it is clear that colleges and universities must continue to find ways to support students' mental health needs and academic transition to college.



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(HERI) is one of the premier research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Housed in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California,

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HERI administers the national Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) surveys, including the CIRP Freshman Survey, Your First College Year survey, Diverse Learning Environments survey, College Senior Survey, Staff Climate Survey, and the triennial HERI Faculty Survey. CIRP has collected data on over 15 million college students from more than 1,900 colleges and universities since 1966.

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