

# RESEARCH BRIEF

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT UCLA



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## 2020 Your First College Year Survey

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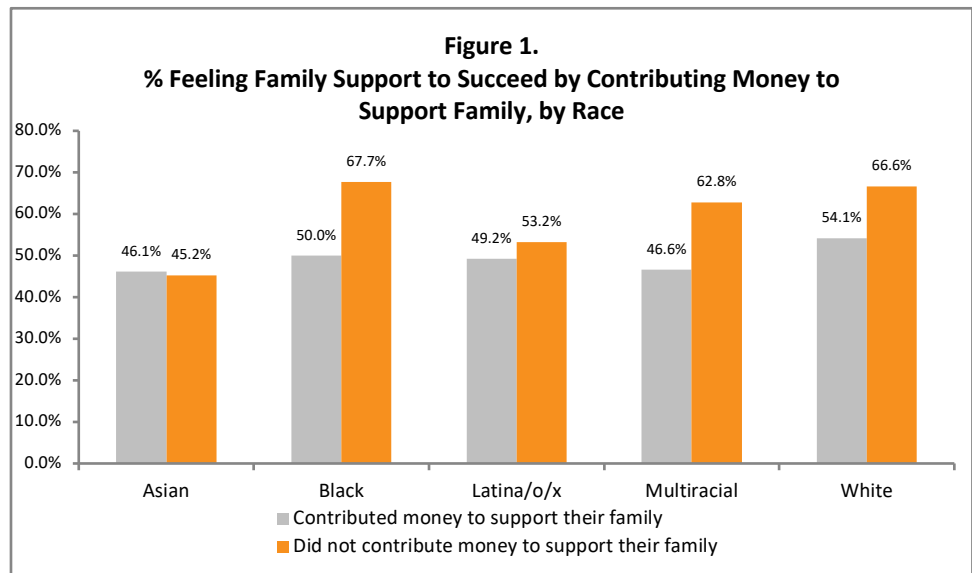
*The Your First College Year (YFCY) Survey assesses the academic and personal development of students over the first year of college. Developed in 2000 through a collaboration between the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and the Policy Center on the First Year of College, the YFCY provides higher education researchers and practitioners comprehensive information on students' social interactions, self-rated mental and physical health, political orientation, and future plans. The survey was administered between March and June 2020 and includes a sample of 2,376 full-time, first-year students from ten colleges and universities across the United States.*

### FAMILY, MONEY, AND SUPPORT

Considering that the YFCY Survey 2020 was administered around the first peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S., students' self-reported living situations may have been directly impacted. Notably, an overwhelming proportion of first-time, full-time students (42.0%) lived at home with family while attending college. Only about one-third of students (30.5%) lived in first-year student housing, whereas a smaller proportion of students lived in residence halls (16.6%), cultural/minority student housing (0.2%), single-sex housing (0.4%), special academic housing (0.4%), or other special interest housing (0.8%). Students also interacted with their own friends and families more often than college staff or faculty. For instance, over half of students (55.7%) interacted (e.g. by phone, email, text, or in person) on a daily basis with their parents/guardians. About two-fifths (41.9%) of students interacted on a daily basis with siblings or extended family. By contrast, only a small fraction of students interacted with faculty during office hours (20.9%) or academic advisors/counselors (9.0%) at least once a week.

While many college students in 2020 lived at home with family, they also supported and were supported by their families. About two in five (41.4%) students occasionally or frequently contributed money to support their family. Moreover, students of color were more likely to contribute money to support their family as Asian/Pacific Islander (32.7%), Black (41.0%), Latino/a/x (60.3%), and Multiracial (33.2%) students were more likely than white students (25.5%) to

contribute money to support their family. While students of color were more likely to contribute money to support their family, they were less likely to frequently feel family support to succeed. Overall, white students (62.7%) were slightly more likely to frequently feel family support to succeed than Asian/Pacific Islander (45.5%), Black (57.7%), Latino/a/x (51.0%), and Multiracial (57.8%) students.



As shown in Figure 1, when comparing those who contributed money to support their family with those who did not, there were some differences within race groups. For instance, the biggest difference, over 15 percentage points, in feeling family support based on contributing money was for Black students and Multiracial students. About half of Black students (50.0%, N=21) who contributed money to support their family frequently felt family support to succeed, compared to over two-thirds (67.7%, N=42) who did not contribute. These findings were similar for Multiracial students. Less than half



(46.6%, N=48) of those who contributed money frequently felt family support to succeed, compared to nearly two-thirds (62.8%, N=130) of those who did not contribute. Despite the small sample size for this comparison, the findings suggest that students who contributed money to support their family were typically less likely to feel support from their family to succeed. Colleges could benefit from paying closer attention to not only the needs of their students but how these needs are related to their students' families, especially if students are contributing money to support their family.

### MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many colleges to shut down on-campus operations and transition to online learning and services. As a result, it is unclear how institutions provided healthcare services and how students went about accessing healthcare and psychological services, especially those who lived further away from their college campus or lived at home with family. According to this year's YFCY survey findings, more than half of students did not utilize their campus' student health services (56.2%) or psychological services (76.2%) at all. While most students did not at all utilize their campus' health and psychological services, it is important to further explore all students' satisfaction levels with those services.

Students who utilized health and psychological services on their campus were more likely to be satisfied with those services. For instance, nearly seven in ten students (68.9%) who utilized their campus' student health services were satisfied or very satisfied with those services, whereas only one in two (51.3%) who did not use those health services were as satisfied. For students who utilized their campus' psychological health services, about two in three (63.7%) were satisfied or very satisfied with them, whereas only about two in five (41.0%) who did not utilize those services were as satisfied with them. In other words, students' satisfaction with their campus' health and psychological services tended to be higher if they had actually used those services. This finding raises a general question about how health services are perceived by students before they are even used and how these perceptions may impact students' decisions to actually utilize the services.

Next, students who felt worried about their health did not always utilize their campus' health and psychological services. For instance, a majority of students occasionally or frequently felt worried about their health (53.4%). About half (50.1%) of students who felt worried about their health compared to one in three (36.9%) students who did not feel worried about their health had utilized their campus' health services. Further, only about two in seven (27.4%) students who felt worried about their health compared to one in five (19.8%) students who did not feel worried about their health had utilized their campus psychological services. These findings suggest that students who felt worried about their health were more likely to use their campus' health or psychological services than students who did not feel worried about their health at all. Even though more students who felt worried about their health utilized campus

health and psychological services, they were differentially satisfied with those services.

When looking only at the students who utilized their campus' health services, students who felt worried about their health reported lower satisfaction levels with those services than students who did not feel worried about their health at all. More specifically, four in five (80.3%) students who did not feel worried about their health were satisfied or very satisfied with the services they utilized. On the other hand, only three in five (61.3%) students who felt worried about their health were satisfied or very satisfied with these services. In other words, those who felt worried about their health were less likely to be satisfied with health services than those who did not feel worried about their health at all.

Students' perception of psychological services was very similar. Students who did not at all feel worried about their health and utilized psychological services tended to be more satisfied with those services than students who felt worried about their health. For instance, about three-quarters (74.8%) of students who reported not at all feeling worried about their health were satisfied or very satisfied with the services they used. On the other hand, just over half (56.4%) of students who reported feeling worried about their health were satisfied or very satisfied with psychological services. These findings suggest that even though students who utilized campus health and psychological services may be relatively satisfied with them, colleges may benefit from exploring how to improve the perception of quality of those services and the actual quality for all students, particularly those who reported feeling worried about their health. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to unfold, college campuses can do a better job of helping the most vulnerable students access and utilize all necessary health and psychological services, especially for those who may live further away from, or cannot immediately access, their campus.

### STUDENTS AND POLITICS

While the YFCY Survey was administered several months before the 2020 presidential election, students' political views and civic engagement provided invaluable insight about politics in the midst of the pandemic. Over half of students (55.8%) characterized their political views as far left/liberal. Nearly one in three students (35.0%) characterized their political views as middle-of-the-road and only about one in ten students (9.1%) identified as far right/conservative. A majority of college students' political views leaned left and they were more likely to discuss politics compared to right-leaning students. For instance, nearly one in three (35.9%) far-left/liberal students frequently discussed politics, followed by far-right/conservative (21.5%) and middle-of-the-road (15.1%) students.

While left-leaning students were more likely to discuss politics, students from both sides of the spectrum were about as likely to work on a local, state, or national campaign and to consider influencing the political structure as a very important or essential goal. Specifically, far-right/conservative (11.3%), liberal/far-left (7.8%), and middle-of-the-road (6.1%) students

occasionally or frequently worked on a campaign at comparable rates within about five percentage points from each other. Furthermore, just over one-third (35.0%) of far-left/liberal students considered the goal of influencing the political structure as very important or essential, followed by far-right/conservative (26.3%) and middle-of-the-road (25.1%) students. Even though right-leaning and left-leaning students may have different political views, they were both more likely to work on a campaign and to consider the goal of influencing the political structure as essential than middle-of-the-road students.

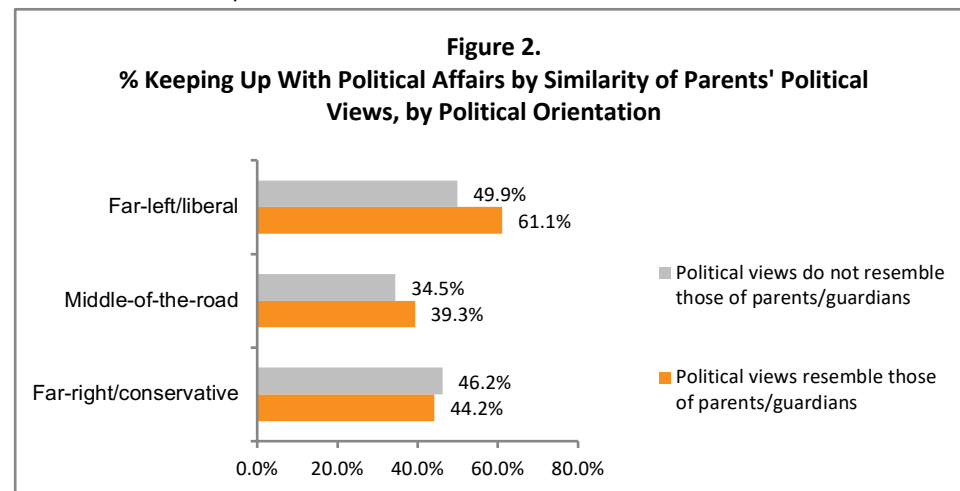
Furthermore, nearly the same proportion of far-left/liberal (64.3%) and far-right/conservative (66.0%) students agreed or strongly agreed that their political views closely resemble those of their parents. On the other hand, less than half (47.9%) of middle-of-the-road students agreed or strongly agreed with that same statement. Additionally, over half (57.2%) of far-left/liberal students considered the goal of keeping up to date with political affairs as very important or essential, followed by far-right/conservative (44.9%) and middle-of-the-road (36.9%) students.

To dig even deeper, students whose political views closely resemble those of their parents were more likely to consider the goal of keeping up to date with political affairs as very important or essential for far-left/liberal and middle-of-the-road students.

with political affairs as a very important or essential goal than those whose political views do not resemble their parents'. These findings were different for right-leaning students. For instance, just under half (44.2%) of far-right/conservative students whose political views resemble those of their parents considered it very important or essential to keep up to date with political affairs, compared to a slightly higher percentage (46.2%) of those whose political views do not resemble their parents'. In other words, politically right-leaning students who shared their parents' political views were about as likely to consider keeping up to date with political affairs as very important or essential as those whose political views differed from their parents' views. These findings may raise general questions about how right-leaning and left-leaning students may be influenced differently by their parents with regard to keeping up to date with political affairs and other measures of civic engagement. Despite having more left-leaning and middle-of-the-road students than right-leaning students on college campuses, students from either side of the political spectrum were typically more civically and politically engaged than middle-of-the-road students.

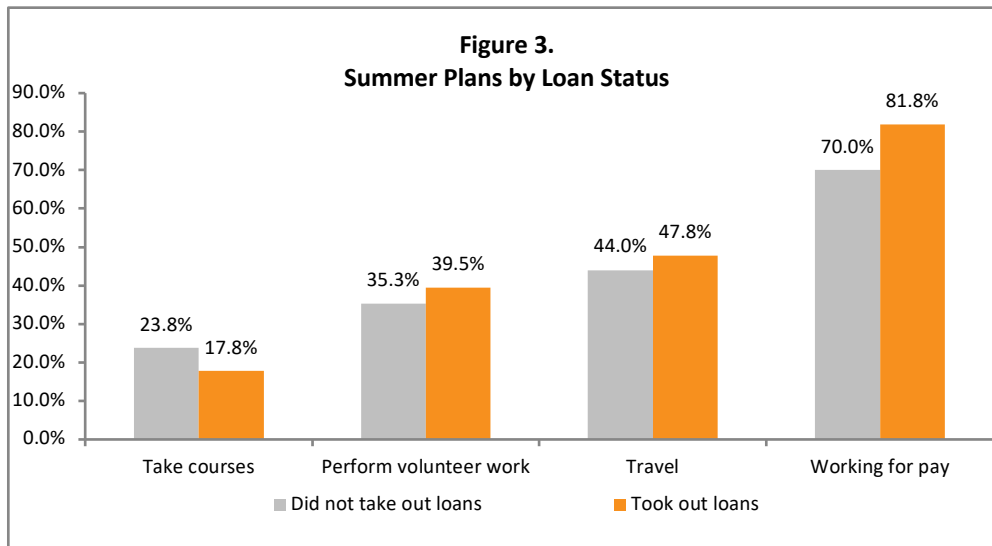
**PANDEMIC SUMMER PLANS AND DEBT**

As COVID-19 restrictions bled into the summer term, students were more concerned with working for pay than other activities. When thinking about summer plans, less than half of students planned to take courses at their institution (21.7%), perform volunteer work (36.8%), or travel (45.9%). However, nearly three in four students (74.1%) planned to work for pay. While working for pay is just one of many ways that students afford their college tuition, they may also receive financial aid through scholarships, federal grants, or loans. Even though only about one in three (34.2%) students received financial aid which must be repaid (loans), Figure 3 shows that these students



Take for instance Figure 2, a majority (61.1%) of far-left/liberal students whose political views closely resemble those of their parents also considered it very important or essential to keep up to date with political affairs, compared to about half (49.9%) of those whose political views do not resemble those of their parents. These findings were similar for middle-of-the-road students. Two-fifths (39.3%) of those whose views resemble those of their parents also considered it very important or essential to keep up with political affairs, compared to about one-third (34.5%) whose political views do not resemble those of their parents. These findings show that politically left-leaning and middle-of-the-road students who also shared their parents' political views were more likely to consider keeping up to date

were more likely to prioritize working for pay over the summer than students who did not take out any loans. Specifically, an overwhelming majority (81.8%) of students who took out loans to pay for college planned to work for pay over the summer compared to 70.0% of those who did not take out loans. Students who took out loans also planned to perform volunteer work (39.5%) or travel (47.8%) over the summer. By contrast, those who did not take out any loans planned to perform volunteer work (35.3%), or travel (44.0%) at comparably lower rates. On the other hand, students who took out loans to pay for college were less likely to take courses over the summer (17.8%) than students who did not take out loans (23.8%). In summary, students who took out loans were more likely than



those who did not take out loans to plan to work for pay, perform volunteer work, or travel over the summer, but less likely to take summer courses.

Exploring how much credit card debt students carry may also help explain the likelihood that they work for pay over the summer. Overall, the majority of respondents (62.9%) did not have a credit card, whereas just over one-quarter of students (27.0%) had a credit card but paid it off monthly. One in ten (10.1%) students carried at least some credit card debt per month. Students who did not have any credit card debt were slightly more likely to plan to work for pay over the summer. For instance, about three-fourths of students who did not have a credit card (74.1%) or had a credit card but paid it off monthly (76.3%) also planned to work for pay over the summer. A smaller proportion (67.9%) of students who carried at least some credit card debt per month planned to work for pay over the summer. In other words, students that did not carry any credit card debt were more likely to plan to work for pay over the summer than those with credit card debt. Therefore, having credit card debt is not associated with an increased likelihood that these students planned to work for pay over the summer. It could be the case that those who did not have a credit card or any credit card debt were more money conscious or fiscally responsible than those with credit card debt. It should also be noted that COVID-19 restrictions could have limited the variety of activities that students planned to do over the summer. These restrictions may have also influenced students to generally focus more on working for pay.

### CONCLUSION

The YFCY survey found that living at home with family in students' first year of college was common in 2020. This living situation may have also equipped students with more family responsibilities but may also be related to more family support. Additionally, students who felt worried about their health and utilized their campus' health and psychological services were less

satisfied with those services than students who did not feel worried about their health at all. It is important for colleges to better understand how to promote and improve the reputation and quality of their student health and psychological services for students who may benefit from them the most. Next, even though left-leaning and right-leaning students were similarly engaged with politics, students who politically identified as middle-of-the-road tended to be less civically and politically engaged. Lastly, students' summer plans in 2020 were

largely concerned with working for pay. While the summer of 2020 was unique for students, colleges may provide more attention to students' financial concerns.



### The Higher Education Research Institute

(HERI) is one of the premier research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Housed in the School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, the institute is an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in postsecondary education. 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.