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Record Level of Stress Found in College Freshmen

By TAMAR LEWIN

The emotional health of college freshmen — who feel buffeted by the recession and stressed by the pressures of high school — has declined to the lowest level since an annual survey of incoming students started collecting data 25 years ago.

In the survey, "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2010," involving more than 200,000 incoming full-time students at four-year colleges, the percentage of students rating themselves as "below average" in emotional health rose. Meanwhile, the percentage of students who said their emotional health was above average fell to 52 percent. It was 64 percent in 1985.

Every year, women had a less positive view of their emotional health than men, and that gap has widened.

Campus counselors say the survey results are the latest evidence of what they see every day in their offices — students who are depressed, under stress and using psychiatric medication, prescribed even before they came to college.

The economy has only added to the stress, not just because of financial pressures on their parents but also because the students are worried about their own college debt and job prospects when they graduate.

"This fits with what we're all seeing," said Brian Van Brunt, director of counseling at Western Kentucky University and president of the American College Counseling Association. "More students are arriving on campus with problems, needing support, and today's economic factors are putting a lot of extra stress on college students, as they look at their loans and wonder if there will be a career waiting for them on the other side."

The annual survey of freshmen is considered the most comprehensive because of its size and longevity. At the same time, the question asking students to rate their own emotional health compared with that of others is hard to assess, since it requires them to come up with their own definition of emotional health, and to make judgments of how they compare with their peers.

"Most people probably think emotional health means, 'Am I happy most of the time, and do I feel good about myself?' so it probably correlates with mental health," said Dr. Mark Reed, the psychiatrist who directs Dartmouth College's counseling office.

"I don't think students have an accurate sense of other people's mental health," he added. "There's a lot of pressure to put on a perfect face, and people often think they're the only ones having trouble."

To some extent, students' decline in emotional health may result from pressures they put on themselves.

While first-year students' assessments of their emotional health were declining, their ratings of their own drive to achieve, and academic ability, have been going up, and reached a record high in 2010, with about three-quarters saying they were above average.

"Students know their generation is likely to be less successful than their parents', so they feel more pressure to succeed than in the past," said Jason Ebbeling, director of residential education at Southern Oregon University. "These days, students worry that even with a college degree they won't find a job that pays more than minimum wage, so even at 15 or 16 they're thinking they'll need to get into an M.B.A. program or Ph.D. program."

Other findings in the survey underscore the degree to which the economy is weighing on college students.

"Paternal unemployment is at the highest level since we started measuring," said John Pryor, director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at U.C.L.A.'s Higher Education Research Institute, which does the annual freshman survey. "More students are taking out loans. And we're seeing the impact of not being able to get a summer job, and the importance of financial aid in choosing which college they're going to attend."

"We don't know exactly why students' emotional health is declining," he said. "But it seems the economy could be a lot of it."

For many young people, serious stress starts before college. The share of students who said on the survey that they had been frequently overwhelmed by all they had to do during their senior year of high school rose to 29 percent from 27 percent last year.

The gender gap on that question was even larger than on emotional health, with 18 percent of the men saying they had been frequently overwhelmed, compared with 39 percent of the women.

There is also a gender gap, studies have shown, in the students who seek out college mental health services, with women making up 60 percent or more of the clients.

"Boys are socialized not to talk about their feelings or express stress, while girls are more likely to say they're having a tough time," said Perry C. Francis, coordinator for counseling services at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti. "Guys might go out and do something destructive, or stupid, that might include property damage. Girls act out differently."

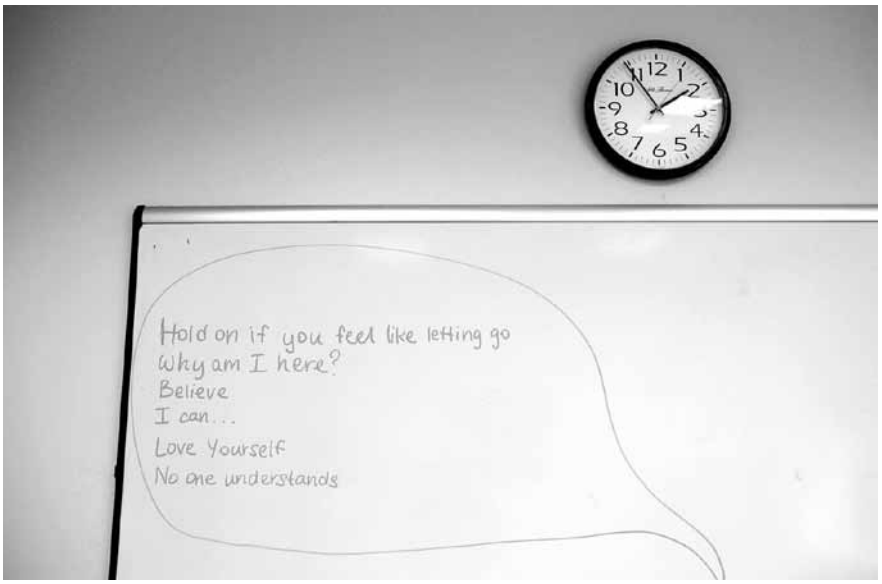
Linda Sax, a professor of education at U.C.L.A. and former director of the freshman study who uses the data in research about college gender gaps, said the gap between men and women on emotional well-being was one of the largest in the survey.

"One aspect of it is how women and men spent their leisure time," she said. "Men tend to find more time for leisure and activities that relieve stress, like exercise and sports, while women tend to take on more responsibilities, like volunteer work and helping out with their family, that don't relieve stress."

In addition, Professor Sax has explored the role of the faculty in college students' emotional health, and found that interactions with faculty members were particularly salient for women. Negative interactions had a greater impact on their mental health.

"Women's sense of emotional well-being was more closely tied to how they felt the faculty treated them," she said. "It wasn't so much the level of contact as whether they felt they were being taken seriously by the professor. If not, it was more detrimental to women than to men."

She added: "And while men who challenged their professor's ideas in class had a decline in stress, for women it was associated with a decline in well-being."



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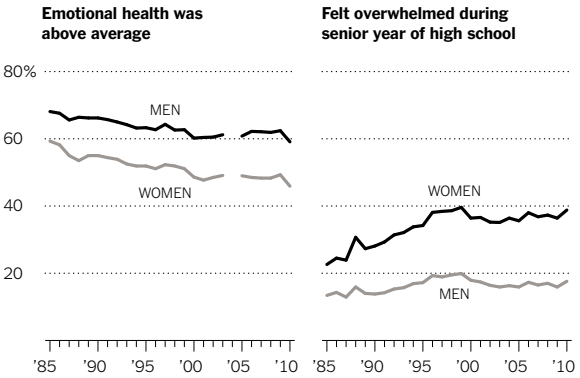
A student activities room at Stony Brook University's Health Services Building, where therapists meet with students.

College Freshmen's Emotional Health

Freshmen's self-assessment of their emotional health hit a 25-year low this year, according to an annual report. A much larger share of students said they had felt frequently overwhelmed with all they had to do as high school seniors. Women were twice as stressed as men.



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