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Political engagement among college freshmen hits 40-year high

Annual survey also shows money concerns drive students' college choice

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College freshmen are more politically engaged today than at any point during the last 40 years, with 89.5 percent reporting that they frequently or occasionally discussed politics in the last year, according to UCLA's annual survey of the nation's entering students at four-year institutions.

The portion of incoming freshmen who frequently discussed politics in the last year — 35.6 percent — surpasses the 33.6 percent level recorded in 1968, itself a 40-year high mark of student political engagement. The 2008 level was also higher than in other recent presidential election years, including 1992 (29.7 percent), when Bill Clinton was elected, the survey found.

The CIRP Freshman 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.

"Overall this year, we saw a revival of interest in political involvement, a level comparable and in some cases surpassing the baby boom generation of college freshmen," said Sylvia Hurtado, a co-author of the report and director of the Higher Education Research Institute. "I think this last election, and the need to attend to the nation's problems, has captured the hope and imagination of college students who will be committed to helping to devise solutions."

Increases were also reported in the percentage of incoming students who stated that keeping up to date with political affairs is an "essential" or "very important" goal. After a record low of 28.1 in 2000, freshmen in the post-Sept. 11 era have shown increased interest in keeping up to date on political affairs; the level reached 39.5 percent in 2008.

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. The percentage of incoming students who characterize themselves as politically middle-of-the-road, however, has seen a steady decline and in 2008 reached an all-time low of 43.3 percent, roughly the same percentage as in 1970. One in five students (20.7 percent) identified themselves as conservative in 2008, down from 23.1 percent in 2007.

Liberal causes are also gaining more support. In 2008, two-thirds (66.2 percent) of college freshmen supported the right to legal marriage for same sex couples, and a similar percentage (60.4 percent) agreed with the statement "The wealthy should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now." Also noteworthy was the proportion of freshmen who support military spending, which since hitting a high of 45.0 percent in 2002 following the Sept. 11 attacks, declined to a low of 28.0 percent in 2008.

College Choice and Financial Issues

The percentage of students attending their first-choice college continued to decline, dropping from 63.9 percent in 2007 to a 34-year low of 60.7 percent in 2008. Also in decline is the percentage of incoming first-year students who were accepted by their first-choice college, which stood at 80.6 percent in 2007 and dropped to 77.8 percent in 2008.

A widening gap persists, however, between acceptances at first-choice colleges and actual attendance. In 2007, 16.5 percent of students were accepted at their first-choice institutions but elected to attend a lower-choice institution; that figure increased to 17.1 percent in 2008. The number of students applying to four or more colleges hit a record high of 60.1 percent in 2008, up from 56.4 percent in 2007.

Financial issues are most likely to drive a student to decline a first-choice institution in favor of a second choice, the survey found. In 2008, the percentage of students reporting that financial aid offers were "very important" or "essential" in choosing which school to attend was higher than at any time during the 36 years the survey question has been asked; from 2007 to 2008 alone, the proportion jumped from 39.7 to 43 percent.

The importance of cost in choosing college hit a high of 39.9 percent in 2008, up 3.1 percentage points from 2007. Although 79.6 percent of students reported that they will use financial resources from parents and relatives, students were also more likely to report using their own savings and planning to work while in college than in previous years (64.7 percent in 2008).

A greater proportion of students (49.4 percent) reported in 2008 that they will get a job in order to cover college expenses than at any time during the 32 years this question has been asked. Students were also more likely to receive funds from aid that need not be repaid, such as grants or scholarships (69.3 percent in 2008).

"More students are planning ahead to use multiple resources to pay for college," said John H. Pryor, a co-author of the report and the director of CIRP. "But some are also choosing to forgo their first choice because of concern about the lack of resources or financial aid."

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.

To illustrate, 84.9 percent of multiracial students reported they had the "ability to work cooperatively with diverse people," compared with 80.5 percent of African Americans, 80.4 percent of Latinos, 79.8 percent of Asian American/Pacific Islanders, 77.3 percent of white students and 66.8 percent of American Indians.

Fewer Asian American/Pacific Islanders (59.3 percent) gave themselves high ratings on the "ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues" than members of other groups, such as African Americans (64.8 percent) and Latinos (61.5 percent). By far, the biggest gender difference was found in response to this question, with 69.4 percent of men rating themselves highly and 58.5 percent of women doing so.

The competencies for a diverse workforce have been the focus of several studies and higher education initiatives.

"The capacity for negotiating conflict and bridging differences across groups that hold different perspectives is tied to students' ability to understand complex issues, a willingness to challenge their own views, as well as interpersonal skills," Hurtado said.

"Students plainly recognize the importance of working and negotiating with people from very different backgrounds," said Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). "The challenge now is to capture this awareness and connect it with students' preparation both for careers and for citizenship. With diversity so essential both to the economy and to democracy, we need to make sure that students take their entering knowledge to the highest possible level of engagement, knowledge and sense of responsibility."

The CIRP Freshman Survey report will be released Jan. 22 at the annual meeting of the AAC&U.

College Readiness by Core High School Subject Areas

Nearly 100 percent of incoming freshmen indicated that they completed the required number of years of high school study in English, math and history as preparation for college, although fewer students — 92.9 percent — indicated they completed two years of a foreign language,

and 82.3 percent reported that they completed at least one year of art and/or music in high school.

Yet since 1984, when this set of questions was first asked on the CIRP Freshman Survey, the lowest level of achievement towards meeting college readiness has been completing two years of high school study in biological science. This is still the case, but there has been a record increase this year: 49.5 percent in 2008, up from 46.8 percent in 2006.

Noteworthy were distinct differences among racial and ethnic groups in the number of years of high school study devoted to core subjects, particularly in the physical and biological sciences. Only 48.0 percent of African American, 49.4 percent of American Indian and 59.8 percent of Latino freshmen reported having completed two years of physical science in high school, compared with 63.2 percent of white students and 67.3 percent of Asian American/Pacific Islander students.

Interest in engineering has also rebounded from the decade lows 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.

"We have a great opportunity to build on freshman interest in scientific fields in colleges and universities. Programs that bridge preparation in high school with college, academic enrichment opportunities and undergraduate research programs ensure students who are strongly motivated and have the disposition to do science are sustained in their interest and preparation," said Hurtado, who is currently working with HERI-affiliated scholar Mitchell J. Chang on a longitudinal study of aspiring students from college entry into graduate school.

Students Reporting Learning Disabilities

The number of students reporting that they have a learning disability is steadily rising. While 0.5 percent of freshmen reported having a learning disability in 1983, 3.3 percent did so in 2008. Self-reported learning disabled students indicate they are more likely than freshmen overall to need extra time to complete their degrees (11.6 and 6.4 percent, respectively) and to seek personal counseling (15.0 and 9.2 percent). They were also more likely to report that they expect to need tutoring for specific courses (43.5 and 31.6 percent).

"Research on learning disabled students shows that these students tend to experience more stress and anxiety related to the demands of succeeding in college," said Linda DeAngelo, a co-author of the report and CIRP assistant director for research. "One way students cope positively with their learning difficulties is by putting intense and extra efforts toward their studies."

Support for 'Green' Initiatives

Almost a third of entering freshmen (29.5 percent) reported feeling it is "essential" or "very important" to help clean up the environment, an increase from 26.7 percent in 2007 and 22.2 percent in 2006. Close to half (45.3 percent) believe it is "very important" or "essential" to adopt green practices to protect the environment, while 74.3 percent believe "addressing global warming should be a federal priority."

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.

Since 1966, the first year the survey was conducted, more than 13 million incoming first-year students at 1,700 colleges and universities nationwide have participated. The CIRP Freshmen Survey is the largest and longest-running survey of American college students.

To view a summary or order a copy of the monograph, "The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2008" (J.H. Pryor, S. Hurtado, L. DeAngelo, J. Sharkness, L.C. Romero, W.S. Korn, S. Tran), visit www.heri.ucla.edu.

The Higher Education Research Institute is widely regarded as one of the premier research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Housed in the UCLA Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, the institute serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies and research training in postsecondary education.