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A Snapshot of the First Year Experience

Your First College Year Survey 2009

Developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and the Policy Center on the First Year of College in 2000, the YFCY is administered annually through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the University of California, Los Angeles. The YFCY was the first national survey designed specifically to measure student development in the first year of college, and is administered to students at the end of their first year of college. The Your First College Year survey (YFCY) was administered for the eighth time in the Spring of 2009. This year 26,758 students at 457 institutions were part of the 2009 YFCY.

SATISFACTION WITH COLLEGE AND CAMPUS COMMUNITY

Students reported overwhelmingly positive feelings about their first year on campus. Among students who expressed an opinion (i.e. those who did not mark “can’t rate/don’t know”), the majority (76.8%) indicated that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their overall college experience. Likewise, three out of four students reported that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the overall quality of instruction (79.1%) and class size (75.9%), while two-thirds were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the relevance of their coursework to every-day life (61.2%).

First-year students had favorable opinions of the opportunities to develop their social lives as well. Students reported being “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their interactions with other students (78.1%), availability of campus social activities (70.0%), and the overall sense of community among students (68.0%).

ADJUSTMENT AMONG FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

A set of questions on the YFCY asks students to assess how successful they felt they were in adjusting to the first year of college, both academically and socially. Perhaps as an indication of a high level of overall confidence in tackling the first year, 64.5% of students reported that they found it “somewhat easy” or “very easy” to adjust to the academic demands of college. The majority of students also found it “somewhat easy” or “very easy” to develop effective study skills during their first year (63.1%). In regards to adjusting

Student Self-Ratings of Success During the First Year of College

Measure of Student Success	Percentage of students responding			
	Very Difficult	Somewhat Difficult	Somewhat Easy	Very Easy
Understand what professors expect of you academically	1.1	15.7	56.8	26.4
Adjust to the academic demands of college	4.7	30.8	44.0	20.5
Get to know faculty	4.9	26.7	48.6	19.9
Develop effective study skills	5.1	31.8	47.1	16.0
Manage your time effectively	9.4	39.3	37.8	13.6
Develop close friendships with:				
Female students	3.1	12.5	39.4	45.1
Male students	5.9	15.9	37.0	41.2
Students of a different racial/ethnic group	4.0	16.5	42.3	37.1

to relationships with faculty, 83.2% found it “somewhat easy” or “very easy” to understand their professors’ academic expectations, while 68.5% reported finding it “somewhat easy” or “very easy” to get to know their faculty. Students had the most difficulty with managing their time effectively, with just over half (51.4%) of the respondents reporting that they found it “somewhat” or “very difficult” to do so.

Students were also asked about the ease with which they were able to establish friendships on campus. Students generally found it “somewhat easy” or “very easy” to develop close friendships with female students (84.5%), male students (78.2%), and/or students of a different racial or ethnic groups (79.4%).

HABITS OF MIND FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS IN COLLEGE

The Habits of Mind items on the questionnaire measure the behaviors and traits associated with academic success. These learning behaviors are seen as the foundation for lifelong learning. Many first year college students reported that they frequently engaged in Habits of Mind behaviors. The behaviors that the most students reported “frequently” doing during the past year included: revising papers to improve writing (51.0%), supporting opinions with logical argument

they “frequently” sought feedback on their academic work (47.8% vs. 38.6%), while more males than females reported that they “frequently” explored topics on their own, even though it was not required for a class (34.0% vs. 26.5%). On the other hand, a comparable proportion of female and male students reported “frequently” asking questions in class (36.4% vs. 35.4%, respectively).

ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES

Engagement and participation in the academic curriculum is the hallmark of the college experience. In terms of academic life, as would be expected, first-year college students reported spending a significant amount of their time attending class. In a typical week during their first-year, 78.8% of students attended classes/labs for more than ten hours. The amount of time students spent in class, however, does not match the amount of time spent studying or doing homework; only 34.6% spent more than ten hours per week engaged in this activity.

Participation in academic activities and programs represents a significant part in the college acculturation of first-year college students. Over half of students (56.2%) reported enrolling in a course or seminar

on college adjustment, two in ten students (20.4%) enrolled in a honors/advanced course, and 15.4% enrolled in a learning community where students take two more courses together. Students were also engaged academically outside of the classroom walls. A near majority (47.5%) reported “frequently” getting together outside of class to discuss course content with their fellow students and one-third (33.4%) reported studying

with other students with the same frequency.

INTERACTIONS WITH FACULTY IN THE FIRST YEAR

Interaction with faculty is an integral part of the academic experience during the first year of college. The majority of students (67.6%) reported they felt “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the amount of faculty contact in their first year. The percentage of students reporting at least weekly interaction with faculty was similar across settings, with 27.3% and 24.3% of respondents reporting at least weekly

Habits of Mind for Academic Success

Percentage of students reporting that in the past year they “frequently”:	Total	Female	Male
Revised your papers to improve your writing	51.0	56.4	40.4
Supported your opinions with a logical argument	48.3	46.7	51.4
Accepted mistakes as part of the learning process	46.8	46.6	47.1
Sought feedback on your academic work	44.7	47.8	38.6
Sought solutions to problems and explain them to others	43.9	44.0	43.8
Evaluated the quality or reliability of information you received	40.3	41.2	38.5
Sought alternative solutions to a problem	36.6	36.3	37.4
Asked questions in class	36.1	36.4	35.4
Looked up scientific research articles and resources	30.4	31.3	28.6
Explored topics on your own, even though it was not required in class	29.0	26.5	34.0
Took a risk because you felt you have more to gain	28.8	27.2	32.0

(48.3%), and accepting mistakes as part of the learning process (46.8%). Relatively fewer students reported that they “frequently” took a risk because they had more to gain (28.8%), or explored topics on their own, even though it was not required in class (29.0%). It is also worth noting that when asked how often in the past year they asked questions in class, nearly one in ten students (9.2%) reported “not at all.”

Differences between female and male first-year students’ Habits of Mind were also found. For example, a larger percentage of female than male students reported that

interaction with their professors during office hours and outside of class or office hours, respectively. For students whose interaction with faculty was more sporadic, results suggest that they tended to utilize opportunities during office hours rather than outside of class or office hours. Fewer than one in ten students (9.1%) reported “never” interacting with faculty during office hours, whereas one in four students (25.0%) reported “never” interacting outside of class or office hours.

their ability to conduct research and work as part of a team, respectively.

EXPERIENCES WITH DIVERSITY

The most common diversity experiences students reported were of a social nature—50.8% of students indicated that they had “often” or “very often” dined or shared a meal with someone of another racial/ethnic group, and almost the same proportion (44.7%) reported that they “often” or “very often” socialized or partied with racially or ethnically diverse students. When asked to report on other forms of interpersonal interactions, 38.8% of respondents indicated that during their first year they “often” or “very often” shared personal feelings and problems, and/or had honest conversations outside of class about race/ethnic relations with students from another racial/ethnic group (29.0%). In addition to socializing, students also reported engaging in the learning process with diverse peers. Specifically, 41.6% reported that they “often” or “very often” studied or prepared for class with diverse study groups, and 38.9% reported having intellectual discussions outside of class with students from racial/ethnic groups other than their own.

CIVIC AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT

Many first-year students showed evidence of a burgeoning civic awareness. The majority of respondents reported that over the course of their first year they have become “stronger” or “much stronger” in terms of their understanding national issues (61.3%), understanding of global issues (60.3%), and/or understanding of the problems facing their community (60.2%).

This group of first-year students entered college during a hotly contested election season. The majority of students (71.0%) reported voting in the 2008 presidential election, with slightly more students who identified as liberal reporting voting (77.3%) than those who identified as conservative (74.8%). Female students were more likely than males to report having voted in the 2008 election (73.4% vs. 66.4%).

In terms of political engagement on campus, the vast majority of students (86.4%) reported that since entering college they “occasionally” or “frequently” discussed politics. Fewer students reported “occasionally” or “frequently” participating in a political demonstration during the first year (24.0%), and even fewer indicated

Student-Faculty Interaction in the First College Year

Percentage of students reporting they	Percentage
Felt “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with:	
Amount of contact with faculty	67.6
Interacted with faculty during office hours:	
Never	9.1
1 to 2 times per term	35.5
1 to 2 times per month	28.0
At least once a week	27.3
Interacted with faculty outside of class or office hours:	
Never	25.0
1 to 2 times per term	28.9
1 to 2 times per month	21.9
At least once a week	24.3
“Occasionally” or “Frequently”:	
Asked a professor for advice after class	80.5
Communicated regularly with your professors	77.4
Received advice or guidance about your educational program	72.8

The vast majority of students (72.8%) reported “occasionally” or “frequently” receiving advice or guidance from professors regarding their educational program. Similarly, over three-quarters of first-year respondents indicated that they communicated regularly with their professors (77.4%), and/or asked a professor for advice after class (80.5%). These individual measures indicate that first-year students are engaging with faculty in meaningful ways.

SELF-REPORTED FIRST YEAR GAINS

When asked to compare themselves to when they first started college, nearly all students rated themselves “stronger” or “much stronger” in their knowledge of a particular field or discipline (91.7%), as well as in general knowledge (90.9%). Additionally, an overwhelming majority of students felt that their ability to think critically (76.4%) and their analytical and problem solving skills (72.9%) were “stronger” or “much stronger” at the conclusion of their first year. Perhaps as evidence of building new skill sets during the first year of college, 64.3% and 55.1% of students rated themselves as “stronger” or “much stronger” in

that they worked on a local, state, or national political campaign (11.6%).

Students in their first year also reported engaging in civic issues and activities. Specifically, more than half of students (57.7%) found time to perform volunteer or community service work in their first year.

A LONGITUDINAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE

Longitudinally linking student responses on the CIRP Freshman Survey (TFS) to responses on the YFCY allows for an assessment of the extent to which students develop and change over the first year of college. The full report on the 2009 YFCY includes longitudinal analysis on how expectations for college compared with reality, changes in time allocation between senior year of high school and the first year of college, growth in financial concerns, and changes in life goals. This brief provides a summary of the sections on first-year student expectations and changes in financial concerns.

In many cases students' expectations for college very closely matched the reality they experienced during their first year. For example, almost every student (98.0%) who thought there was a "very good chance" they he or she would discuss course content with other students outside of class did so during his or her first year. The same is true for socializing with someone of another race/ethnicity (97.8%) and being satisfied with the overall college experience (84.6%). It was

not only the students who expected to engage in these activities who ended up doing so; however, well over half of students who thought there was "no chance" that they would have any of the aforementioned experiences actually did have them – 88.5% of the "no chance" students discussed course content with other students outside of class, 76.0% socialized with someone of another race/ethnicity, and 57.1% were satisfied with college. Similarly, 85.6% of students who indicated there was a "very good chance" that they would communicate regularly with their professors actually did so, as did 60.8% of those who felt there was "no chance."

This group of first-year students was ushered into higher education just as an economic recession was declared. Concerns about financing college increased over the course of their first year in college. Fewer students marked their concern about college financing as "none" (from 33.5% on the TFS to 22.6% on the YFCY, or a 10.9 percentage point decrease), while more students indicated "major" concerns (from 10.1% on the TFS to 19.3% on the YFCY, or a 9.2 percentage point increase).

For more information about the YFCY, including a look at the 2010 survey instrument, details about registration and administration, and to view examples of how to use YFCY survey data, visit our website: www.heri.ucla.edu/yfcyoverview.php



The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) is based in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. The Institute serves as an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in postsecondary education.



The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) is a national longitudinal study of the American higher education system. It is regarded as the most comprehensive source of information on college students. Established in 1966 at the American Council on Education, the CIRP is the nation's largest and oldest empirical study of higher education, involving data on some 1,900 institutions and over 15 million college students. The Higher Education Research Institute has administered the CIRP since 1973. The CIRP longitudinal program consists of The Freshman Survey, Your First College Year Survey, the College Senior Survey, and the triennial Faculty Survey. Information on the CIRP Freshman Survey, research and publications based on these data, and other research projects conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute can be found on the HERI website at: www.heri.ucla.edu

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