

# First in My Family:

A Profile of First-Generation College Students at  
Four-Year Institutions Since 1971

## *Executive Summary*



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## Executive Summary: First-Generation College Students

As part of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA—in partnership with the Foundation for Independent Higher Education—proudly offers this important new report on the first-generation college student. This report explores 35 years of trends on first-generation college students and their peers with college-educated parents, utilizing survey data collected through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) Freshman Survey from 1971 to 2005. The trends results yield important insights on first-generation college students. In particular, examining survey trends over time for this critical population of entering college students both confirms previous research and also reveals previously unknown or unanticipated pre-college behaviors, college-going motivations, and career-oriented values and objectives.

The report begins with a review of existing research on first-generation college students, followed by an overview of the changing demographic profile of first-generation students within the CIRP Freshman Survey trends sample, including a special focus on gender, racial/ethnic, and institutional differences. The key contribution of this report is in its review of CIRP trends on such issues as the importance of parental encouragement, students' reasons and motivations for going to college, students' financial concerns and considerations while in college, the influence of home in the college choice process, students' pre-college academic preparation, as well as students' goals and values at college entry.

Among the key findings:

### *Demographic Characteristics*

- The proportion of first-generation students within the overall population of first-time, full-time entering college freshman at four-year institutions has steadily declined since 1971, reflecting increasing levels of education among the U.S. population.
- However, differences between racial/ethnic groups are cause for concern. Specifically, since 1975, African Americans show the greatest decline in their representation of first-generation college students—a declining rate that is of concern because it is faster than the relative proportion of African American adults without a college education as well as the decline of first-generation students in other racial/ethnic groups. Hispanics remain the least educated group (69.1 percent of Hispanic adults lacked a college education in 2005) and have the

highest proportion of first-generation college students (38.2 percent) at four-year colleges of any racial/ethnic group.

#### *Parental Encouragement*

- Contrary to the notion that the parents of first-generation college students can be a deterrent to college access, over the last 15 years, these students are now more likely to report than their peers with college-educated parents that the reason why they went to college was because their parents wanted them to go. While both groups' reports of parental encouragement increased, the trend has more than doubled for first-generation college students since 1971.

#### *Work Experiences and Financial Considerations*

- Over the years, higher percentages of first-generation college students than their peers worked 20+ hours per week in their final year of high school, and well over half (55 percent) now expect to get a job to pay for college expenses—a gap that has widened between these students and their peers since 1987.
- Given their typically low socioeconomic status, it is not surprising to find that attending college to “make more money” was more likely to be cited as an important reason for first-generation students relative to their peers (76.4 percent vs. 69.8 percent).
- Between 1972 and 2003, more first-generation college students than their peers considered financial factors very important to their choice of specific colleges and at college entry they are twice more likely than peers to report having a major concern about financing college.

#### *Influence of Home in the College Choice Process*

- Not only have greater proportions of first-generation students than their peers attended higher education institutions within 50 miles from home, but these students considered the close proximity of the institution to their home a very important reason for choosing their institution.
- Over the years, first-generation students have consistently been less likely relative to their counterparts to expect to live on campus in their freshmen year, a factor which portends for differences in college academic and social integration outcomes.

#### *College Selection*

- First-generation students were more likely to rely on the advice of high school guidance counselors and relatives in deciding to attend a particular institution.
- Non-first-generation students were most influenced by the academic reputation of the university, likelihood of gaining entry to professional/graduate program and the institutions national ranking. By 2005, however, both groups of students were equally likely to report that preparation for graduate school was a very important reason for attending college.

#### *Academic Preparation and Leadership Ability at College Entry*

- A consistent gap between first-generation students and their peers has been demonstrated in the amount of time spent studying in high school, average grade in high school, academic self-confidence, and a widening gap is evident in the self-ratings of math and writing ability.

- Although there remains a slight disparity in the measure of social self-confidence, the gap is consistently larger for the self-rating of leadership ability, with first-generation students rating themselves lower.

#### *Degree Objectives*

- First-generation students tend to have lower educational aspirations than non-first-generation students. This may be explained by students' lack of information about degrees, college progress, availability of resources and their academic preparation.
- Over the last three decades, however, the data reflects rising degree aspirations for both groups of students. This portends a positive outlook for the expansion of graduate education.

#### *Changing Student Values*

- Financial considerations, including future earnings, have become a much stronger motivation for all students attending college over the last 35 years. In particular, first-generation students are more likely to report "being well off financially" as a very important or essential personal goal (81 percent vs. 73 percent).
- During this same time period, the desire to develop "a meaningful philosophy of life" (which is consistently higher among peers with college-educated parents) has declined in importance.

#### *First-Generation Students at Private Institutions*

- While public institutions have typically had higher proportions of first-generation college students compared to private institutions, the differences between institution types have narrowed since 1971.
- First-generation students attending private institutions were more likely to have families with annual incomes over \$40,000, more likely to have attended a private high school (religious or non-denominational), and more likely to have earned an A or better while in high school than their first-generation peers at public institutions.
- First-generation college students are more likely to choose to attend private colleges for reasons of size and because they received financial assistance. They are also more likely to live on campus than first-generation college students who elected to attend public institutions. These factors portend well for student engagement and retention in college.

## About the Authors

Dr. Victor B. Saenz is the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) Research Manager, responsible for managing research and reporting activities for the range of surveys conducted under the CIRP umbrella at the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). Dr. Saenz has worked at HERI for over five years in various capacities, including as a research analyst, a postdoctoral scholar, and as Director of Follow-up Surveys. He currently holds a joint academic appointment with the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies as a Visiting Assistant Professor. Dr. Saenz is a former Spencer Foundation Fellow, and his research interests include: assessing the educational benefits of racial diversity on college campuses; desegregation issues; exploring the leakages in the Education pipeline for underrepresented students; and, chronicling the policy impacts of changing affirmative action and remedial education policies in higher education.

Dr. Sylvia Hurtado is Professor and Director of the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA in the Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences. Dr. Hurtado has published numerous articles and books related to her primary interest in student educational outcomes, campus climates, college impact on student development, and diversity in higher education. She obtained her Ph.D. in Education from UCLA, Ed.M. from Harvard Graduate School of Education, and A.B. from Princeton University in Sociology. Dr. Hurtado is completing a project on how colleges are preparing students to achieve the cognitive, social, and democratic skills to participate in a diverse democracy. She is also engaged in a National Institutes of Health project on the preparation of underrepresented students for biomedical and behavioral science research careers.

Doug Barrera is a doctoral student in the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA and a research assistant at the Higher Education Research Institute, where he assists in the development and administration of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's Freshman Survey, Your First College Year Survey, and the College Senior Survey. His research interests include community/campus partnerships, service learning, and the role of higher education in the expansion of democratic activity. He is currently conducting a study of sustainable community partnerships formed through service learning courses and the impact such partnerships have on the communities served.

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