

May 2012

Class of 2011: Findings from the College Senior Survey

The College Senior Survey (CSS) has been administered to college seniors by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) every year since 1993. This year marked the survey's nineteenth administration, and it contains data from 21,157 seniors graduating from 219 colleges and universities across the United States.

PLANS AFTER COLLEGE

Out of the 21,157 graduating seniors responding to the 2011 CSS, the majority (65%) reported that they plan on working full time after graduation. With a national unemployment rate at over 9%, many had yet to confirm job placement. In fact, more than half (52%) of the respondents who reported planning to work full time after college reported they were still looking for a job. Among those planning to work full time, only 1 in 4 (26%) reported having accepted an employment offer. Another 11% were considering a tendered offer.

Twenty-eight percent reported planning to continue their studies and enroll in graduate or professional school by the following fall. At the time, only 58% had been accepted into a program, while 19% were hoping for acceptances at the time of the survey. Several, 15%, planned on applying in the fall of 2011 to begin study that term but had not yet done so.

STUDENT LOAN DEBT AND CAREER CONSIDERATIONS

With the U.S. economy still struggling to recover, the graduating class of 2011 had faced tuition hikes

during college and encountered high unemployment rates that affected their future plans. Approximately 3 out of 4 (76%) graduating seniors left college with debt. While just over a third (35%) owed less than \$10,000, 52% reported owing as much as \$20,000 or more.

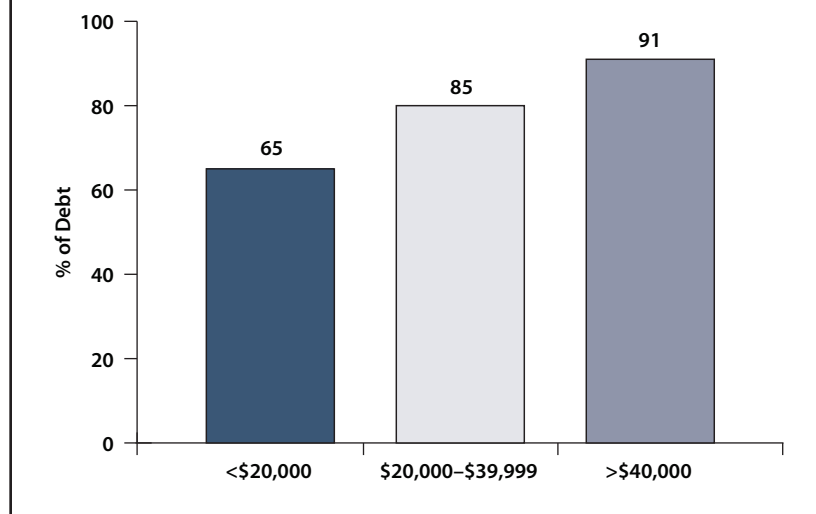
The higher student debt is at graduation, the more significantly it factors into career decisions. As they consider their careers, 73% of graduates reported that the ability to pay off debt was “very important” or “essential.” Those owing less than \$20,000 were less likely

to see this as important, with 64% reporting the ability to pay off their debt as “very important” or “essential.” Those with \$20,000 or more of debt were much more likely to be concerned about paying off debt: at 88% with \$20,000–\$39,000 and 91% with \$40,000 or more (see Figure 1).

Work/life balance and having a stable, secure future were additional considerations for these graduating seniors. Almost all, 90%, reported work/life balance as “very important” or “essential” when considering their career, and 87% felt a stable and secure future were just as crucial. Social recognition, or status, actually ranked lowest on respondents’ priorities when considering

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**Figure 1. Important Consideration in Choosing Career:
Ability to Pay Down Debt**



careers, with only 37% reporting it as “very important” or “essential.”

CAREER CHOICES

As in previous years, the most popular targeted career area was business, with almost 20% planning to pursue a career in the business field. About 15% plan to enter medicine (as doctors, nurses or other health professionals), 10% education, 7% art, and 4% engineering. Those entering the business and engineering fields have had the most success in securing employment prior to graduation. While about a third of the graduates in business (36%) and engineering (32%) had already accepted offers of employment at the time the CSS was administered, this is almost twice the 17% placement rate of those with career plans in education or nursing.

GROWTH AND CHANGE OVER TIME

A major advantage to administering CIRP surveys is the ability to use longitudinal analysis to study the growth and change of college students over time. Out of the 21,157 students responding to the 2011 CSS, we were able to match 9,222 back to their entering CIRP Freshman Survey (TFS) responses. This brief provides points for discussion of students’ changing abilities,

attitudes, perspectives and expectations during their college experience. We highlight some of the CIRP Constructs that can be used longitudinally between the TFS and the CSS, grouping their scores into three categories relative to the mean: high, average or low.

ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT

One of the main purposes of higher education includes developing students’ academic abilities. The CIRP *Academic Self-Concept* construct measures students’ beliefs about their academic abilities. Since both TFS and the CSS ask students to rate themselves on their academic ability, drive to achieve, mathematical ability and intellectual self-confidence, this construct allows us to assess change in academic self-concept during college.

Many students’ academic self-concept remained consistent throughout college. Those entering college as first-years in the low, average or high group remained in the same group as seniors (64%, 61% and 70%, respectively). These results suggest that when students enter college with a certain academic self-concept, it remains fairly stable. Most students with high academic self-concept scores upon college entry remained in the high group as graduating seniors, at 70%. When we did see change in this area, it showed a slightly larger percentage of men (20%) than women (13%) moving up from the low or average group as first-year students to the high group as seniors.

Various influences and experiences during college could affect academic self-concept. For example, there may be a relationship between academic self-concept and students’ interaction with faculty members. The CIRP *Faculty Interaction: Mentorship* construct on the CSS measures the extent to which students and faculty have mentoring relationships that foster support and guidance with respect to both academic and personal domains. Of the respondents who scored in the average or high group on the faculty interaction construct, 78% also scored in the average or high group of academic

self-concept. This suggests that students who have positive mentoring relationships with faculty members are more likely to have a positive academic self-concept. The CIRP *Faculty Interaction: Mentorship* construct on the CSS measures the extent to which students and faculty have mentoring relationships that foster support and guidance with respect to both academic and personal domains. Of the respondents who scored in the average or high group on the faculty interaction construct, 78% also scored in the average or high group of academic

self-concept on the CSS. These results suggest that establishing mentorships with faculty could be positively related to students' academic self-concept.

SOCIAL SELF-CONCEPT

During college, students grow socially as well as academically. The CIRP *Social Self-Concept* construct measures students' beliefs about their abilities and confidence in a more social realm, including self ratings of leadership ability, public speaking ability, social self-confidence and popularity.

CIRP *Social Self-Concept* scores increased during college. As first-years, 72% had scored in the average or high group, with the majority in the average group (44% scored average and 28% scored in the high group). By their senior year, a few more, up to 82%, scored in the average or high group; but, more important, the balance had shifted to reveal that just as many scored in the high group (41%) as the average group (41%). This was an overall increase of 13 percentage points from first year to senior year in the high group of social self-concept, suggesting that for a number of students social self-concept is bolstered by the college experience.

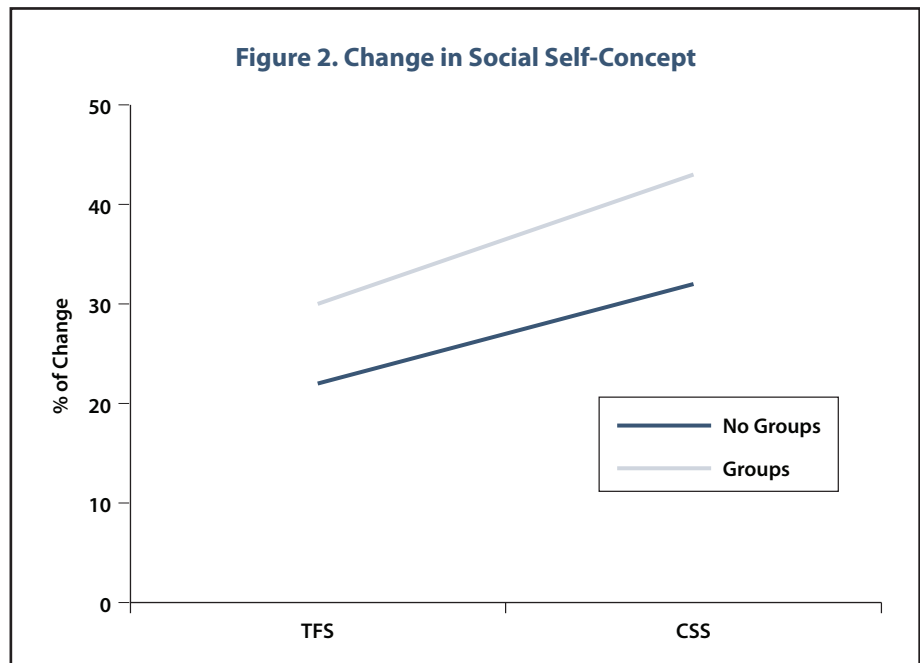
Graduating seniors who had participated in student clubs or groups during college tended to be more likely to graduate in the high social self-concept group (43%) than those who did not participate (32%). Both groups, however, made similar progress during college: it's just that those students who did not participate in clubs in college had already entered college with a lower likelihood of being in the high scoring group. While 30% of the students who participated in student clubs or groups during college entered college already in the high social self-concept group, this was much higher than the 22% of those who did not (see Figure 2). So it seems likely that the overall increase in social

self-concept cannot be largely attributed to participation in groups during college.

Similar to the findings related to academic self-concept, more men tended to enter college scoring higher on social self-concept than women, a trend that continued into senior year. For example, 87% of men who entered college scoring high on social self-concept remained in the high group as graduating seniors, compared to 79% of women. In addition, fewer women (21%) than men (31%) moved from the low or average group as first-years to the high group as seniors. These results suggest that men's perceptions of their academic and social abilities exceed women's upon entering college, and that difference is sustained through graduation.

SOCIAL AGENCY

The CIRP *Social Agency* construct measures the extent to which students value political and social involvement as a personal goal. This trait may be increasingly important to monitor as colleges stress social and personal responsibility within their curricular and co-curricular experiences. This construct is made up of student ratings of the importance to them personally of keeping up to date with political affairs, participating in a community action program,



influencing social values, becoming a community leader, helping others in difficulty and helping to promote racial understanding.

The Class of 2011 greatly increased commitments to social and political involvement during their years in college. While only 30% of respondents entering college scored high in social agency, 41% of respondents did so as exiting seniors, an 11 percentage point increase. More than 1 in 4 (29%) of respondents who scored low or average in their first year moved into the high group senior year, showing a substantial increase in social agency during college. Some of the increase may be attributed to college courses that include community service as part of the course work. Fifty-nine percent of graduating seniors reported that they “frequently” or “occasionally” performed community service as part of a class and almost half of those students (47%) scored in the high group of social agency in their senior year. More important, 23% of seniors who engaged in community service as part of a class moved from scoring low or average in social agency as first-years to high as seniors. This and other research using CIRP surveys show that community service participation increases social agency during college.

Such experiences in college also can have lifelong effects: 21% of respondents who reported “frequently” or “occasionally” performing community service as part of a class reported that they also plan to do volunteer work after finishing college.

SATISFACTION WITH THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

When looking longitudinally at college satisfaction using the 9,222 matched responses from TFS and CSS, we can compare students’ satisfaction with their first-year expectations. The results showed that students responded overwhelmingly positively with regard to their satisfaction with college. Almost all of the graduating seniors, 98%, had, as entering first-year students, expected “some chance” or a “very good chance” to be satisfied with their college experience. As graduating seniors, 88% of them reported on the CSS that they had been “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their college experience.

In addition to most respondents’ expressing satisfaction with their college experience, 83% also reported that if they could make their college choice over, they would either “probably” or “definitely” choose to enroll in their college again.



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 administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. CIRP is the oldest and most established study of American higher education, consisting of data on over 15 million students from more than 1,900 colleges and universities. CIRP continues to advance understanding of student learning and development in college through numerous books and publications and is the most comprehensive source of information on college students.

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