

## **VOLUNTEERING AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT DECLINES AFTER STUDENTS LEAVE COLLEGE**

Engagement with the community declines sharply during the years immediately after students graduate from college, according to a new national survey of former college students. Compared to their college days, college alumni not only are less likely to engage in volunteer service, but also show less interest in community issues and in helping others.

These findings are part of a national study of 8634 former undergraduates who had been surveyed as they completed college in 1998 and who completed a follow up survey six years later in 2004. Since these same students were also surveyed in the fall of 1994 when they first entered college as freshmen, the study covers a ten-year span of time.

Although annual surveys of entering freshmen conducted in recent years have revealed increasing levels of engagement in community service during the senior year in high school, the current study shows decreasing service participation *during* and *after* college. Thus, while 80.3 percent of the students surveyed had participated in community service in the year prior to entering college, this figure declined to 74.4 percent by the senior year of college and to 68.1 percent six years after completing college. “These results,” say principal investigator Alexander W. Astin, “suggest that the demands of college and of post-college life make it difficult for students to sustain their high-school level of engagement in community service.

These declines are paralleled by a number of post-college changes in students’ values. Compared to when they were completing college in 1998, fewer alumni in 2004 embraced the values of “helping others in difficulty” (from 68.7 to 57.3 percent), “participating in a community action program” (26.9 to 14.0 percent), “becoming a community leader” (from 31.9 to 15.5 percent), or “influencing social values” (from 45.7 to 38.0 percent). There was also a substantial decline in agreement with the proposition that “people should not obey laws that violate their personal values” (from 31.4 percent at the time of college

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entry to 26.6 percent at college graduation and only 15.9 percent six years after leaving college).

“Though participation in community service falls off in the post-college years, these alumni believe their work makes a contribution to the greater good, and many employers appear to be offering opportunities to volunteer,” according to Lori Vogelgesang, the study project director. Two-thirds (66.2%) of the study participants are satisfied or very satisfied with the opportunities to contribute to society through their job, and more than half (57.7%) report participating in volunteer service opportunities through their employer.

Half (50.2 percent) of the alumni have attended graduate or professional school, and nearly one-third (32.0 percent) have already earned postgraduate degrees. One-fourth (24.8 percent) hold masters’ degrees, 3 percent law degrees, 2.8 percent medical degrees, and 1.4 percent PhDs. These figures are considerably higher among graduates of private universities: 41.8 percent graduate degrees, 6.6 percent law degrees, 7.4 percent medical degrees, and 3.1 percent PhDs.

Even though 37.2 percent of the alumni are still enrolled in graduate or professional school, more than four in five (83.7 percent) are working full time, and more than one in three (35.9 percent) are making \$50,000 a year or more. Four percent are making over \$100,000 per year. More than one in five (21.1 percent) reports working 50 or more hours per week. Better than half (55.4 percent) report carrying a significant balance on their credit cards, and one in five (19.4 percent) carries such a balance “frequently.”

The alumni report highly varying lifestyles. Although 30.6 percent exercise or play sports at least six hours per week, this represents a substantial decline since high school, when the figure was 55.7 percent. “Socializing with friends” has also decreased dramatically, from more than half (52.2 percent) reporting socializing at least 11 hours per week in high school to only 21.3 percent six years after completing college. Television viewing, on the other hand, has been steadily increasing: Whereas only 28.4 percent of the alumni watched television at least six hours per week in high school, this figure increased to 32.5 percent during college and now stands at 51.2 percent six years after completing college. And, as would be expected from the fact that over half of the alumni (55.0 percent) are either married or have domestic partners and more than one in five have children, the

number spending at least three hours per week doing domestic work or childcare has doubled since college: from 27.5 to 55.0 percent.

This cohort entered college just when owning a personal computer was becoming common. Ten years later, computer use is almost universal among these college alumni. Fully 97.8 percent report using personal computers at least one hour per week, more than half (50.2 percent) use them 2 or more hours per day, and better than 2 in 5 (42.5 percent) use them at least three hours per day.

While 86.8 percent of the students attended religious services during high school, attendance had dropped to 73.0 percent by the senior year in college. During the six years since college graduation the figure has risen only slightly, to 74.9 percent. However, the data reveal a steadily increasing endorsement of the value of “developing a meaningful philosophy of life: from 45.1 percent as entering freshmen, to 56.7 percent as graduating seniors, to 63.3 percent six years after college.

When it comes to their political identification, the alumni show a slight preference for “conservative” or “far right” (32.0 percent) over “liberal” or “far left” (29.5 percent). This represents a small shift to the right since leaving college, when preferences for right and left labels were almost identical (28.0 versus 28.1, respectively). While alumni of Roman Catholic colleges show an equal preference for the right versus the left side of the political spectrum (27.0 versus 26.2 percent, respectively), alumni of other church-related colleges (mostly Protestant-affiliated) show a distinct tilt toward the right (47.4 versus 19.5 percent, respectively). Alumni of private universities are most likely to prefer the left over the right (33.5 versus 29.1 percent).

However, when it comes to most political *issues*, the alumni are decidedly on the liberal side, with clear majorities supporting ideas such as “the federal government is not doing enough to control environmental pollution (74.9 percent), “a national health care plan is needed to cover everybody’s medical costs” (63.5 percent), “The federal government should do more to discourage energy consumption” (73.6 percent), and “wealthy people should pay a larger share of the taxes than they do now” (58.8 percent). Support for these propositions has shown little change since the alumni graduated from college.

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By contrast, only a minority of alumni agree that “I am satisfied with the general direction in which our country is going” (42.2 percent), and fewer than one in four (23.2 percent) believes that “individuals who organize or participate in anti-government protests are unpatriotic.”

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