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Findings From The 2014 College Senior Survey

INTRODUCTION

The College Senior Survey (CSS) has been administered by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) since 1993. This year marked the survey's 22nd administration; it contains data from 13,301 seniors graduating from 74 colleges and universities across the United States.

CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

College graduates are entering a workforce where employers seek to hire students with well-developed critical thinking and problem-solving skills (AAC&U, 2013). Despite growing concerns that students graduate without properly developing these skills, a majority of college seniors feel confident in their intellectual capacity and abilities. When asked to consider their critical thinking skills, 45.5% of graduating seniors rate them as "a major strength" with another 39.9% report feeling "somewhat strong." In reporting on their problem-solving skills, students responded at nearly identical rates.

In examining students' critical thinking skills by gender, male students rated themselves more highly than their female counterparts, with 53.4% of men indicating their critical thinking is "a major strength" compared to 41.9% of female students. An 11 percentage point difference between men and women was also observed in self-rated problem-solving abilities.

Differences in students' self-reported critical thinking skills also appear by academic major. For example, 60.4% of engineering majors, 51.3% of humanities majors, 47.0% of social science majors, 46.1% of biological sciences majors, and 39.1% of business majors rated their critical thinking skills as "a major strength." Interestingly, business majors reported feeling less confident in their abilities compared to their peers in the sciences and engineering, as well as the humanities and social sciences.

STUDENTS' EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND PREPARATION

As the economy continues to recover from the Great Recession, students' employment opportunities have slightly improved. While the percentage of students seeking full-time work remained similar to the cohort who graduated in 2009, a slightly larger percentage had success in securing employment. Among the current senior class, approximately 41.4% of students planning to work full time had received an employment offer before graduation, compared to 36.7% of seniors from the class of 2009. While these figures are slowly improving, large percentages of college seniors continue to graduate without having received a job offer.

Among students who plan to work full time, 62.4% participated in an internship program, with participation varying by academic major (see Table 1). Graduating seniors who participated in an internship program were more likely to have secured an offer of employment at the time of college graduation. For students who plan to work full time and who participated in an internship program, 48.1% already had a job offer compared to 30.1% who want to work full time but who did not have an internship. Thus, internship programs may provide students with important training experiences and create

Table 1. Participation in an Internship Program Among Students Planning Full-Time Work (n=6,383)

College Major	% Participated in Internship
Biological Sciences	56.0
Business	72.7
Engineering	74.8
Humanities	57.4
Social Sciences	66.7

pathways to future employment opportunities.

Students' academic studies and internship opportunities both contribute to their preparation for post-college employment. Among students planning to work full time, 35.7% of students rate their preparedness for employment as "a major strength," 37.2% rate it "somewhat strong," and 20.8% rate it "average." Men and women's self-ratings are not as divergent in this category. For instance, 37.8% of men and 34.7% of women who anticipate working full time rate their preparation for post-college employment as "a major strength."

Not all students are interested in seeking employment at the time of graduation. In the class of 2014, 21.2% of students had plans to enroll in graduate or professional school on a full-time basis, with important distinctions between majors (see Table 2). Such differences demonstrate how departments face different challenges in preparing their students for their post-college plans. Some majors, such as the physical sciences, have an equal balance of graduates planning employment and graduate school, whereas business and engineering students skew more heavily towards immediate employment.

Table 2. Plans for Full-Time Employment and Graduate Studies, by Major (n=10,550)

College Major	% Planning full-time employment	% Planning full-time graduate school
Biological Sciences	43.7	34.0
Business	79.6	10.6
Engineering	69.6	22.3
Humanities	55.3	17.9
Physical Sciences	43.5	41.2
Social Sciences	53.6	24.2

CAREER-RELATED SERVICES AND SUPPORT

In addition to students' major field of study, career centers provide important support services and opportunities for students in their job search. In this sample of graduating seniors who were able to rate their satisfaction with the institution's career-related resources and support, 59.9% reported feeling satisfied. Disaggregating satisfaction levels by major yielded varying results (see Table 3).

While students may indicate dissatisfaction because of disappointing job search outcomes rather than dissatisfaction with resources and services, these data suggest that institutions continue to face challenges in diversifying career support across disciplines. In an in-

creasingly competitive and demanding job market, career services are simultaneously tasked with responding to employer demands and connecting all students, some of whom may not have clearly delineated post-college career paths, with career opportunities and job prospects. While career centers cannot be everything to everyone, they operate in an environment where employers and lawmakers are increasingly concerned with graduates' career success and other job metrics.

Table 3. Satisfaction with Career-Related Support and Services (n=11,041)

College Major	% "Very Satisfied" or "Satisfied"
Business	63.7
Engineering	63.6
English	51.4
Fine Arts	50.1
Humanities	55.3
Social Sciences	60.5

FACULTY AND STAFF CONTRIBUTE TO STUDENTS' WELL-BEING

Whether through formal mentorship programs, classroom interactions, or informal encounters, faculty and staff play an important role in students' academic, social, and personal growth. Among graduating seniors, 40.6% responded that faculty frequently provided them with emotional support and encouragement. Additionally, 45.5% of students "strongly agree[d]" that at least one faculty member took an interest in their development, while 83.2% of students "agree[d]" or "strongly agree[d]" that faculty showed concern about their progress.

A strong majority of graduating seniors in this sample (88.9%) were satisfied with the amount of contact they had with faculty, and nearly as many (79.5%) indicated they were satisfied with their ability to find a faculty or staff mentor. These results demonstrate the important role faculty members play not just in directing students' academic learning, but also in providing emotional support and encouragement via mentoring.

Staff members are also key agents who support students' personal and emotional development. A majority of graduating seniors (56.1%) "strongly agree[d]" that at least one staff member took an interest in their development, nearly 10 percentage points higher than their response regarding faculty members. In addition, 86.8% felt that staff recognized their achievements, while 74.1% of students reported that a staff member encour-

aged them to get involved on campus. In partnership with the faculty, staff provide important support and validation and contribute to students feeling recognized and included within the campus community.

GROWING NEED FOR PERSONAL SUPPORT SERVICES AND RESOURCES

Beyond the support students receive from faculty and staff mentors, campuses across the country are increasing personal counseling staff in order to address students' psychological and emotional needs. Despite this growth in staff support, student demand is increasing even faster, creating waitlists and delays that may be discouraging students from seeking the personal support they need (Misner, 2014). Among all graduating students in the sample, a majority of students reported feeling "overwhelmed by all I had to do" during their senior year. Differences between women and men are substantial for this indicator of emotional health and well-being. For example, 96% of women felt overwhelmed in their senior year, with 46.1% indicating that they felt "frequently" overwhelmed. While 87.2% of men felt overwhelmed at some point in their senior year, only 26.8% reported that they felt "frequently" overwhelmed.

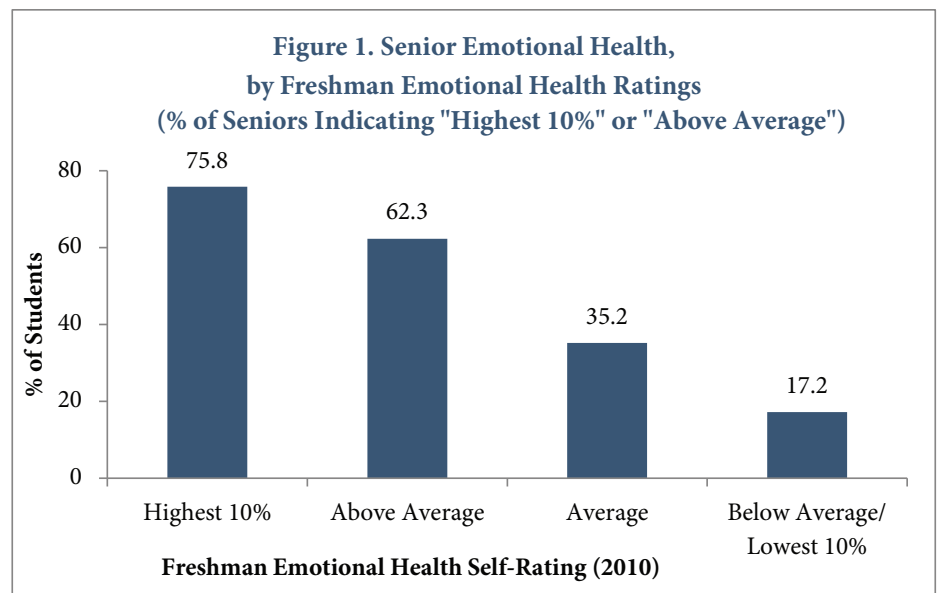
Though fewer students experienced feelings of depression, the data indicate that a majority of women (61.0%) and men (53.6%) still felt depressed at some point in their final year of college. In addition, approximately 1 in 10 seniors reported that they "frequently" felt depressed (11.4% of women and 9.6% of men) during their senior year. The percentage of graduating seniors in this sample who report feeling overwhelmed and depressed underscores some of the emotional health issues confronting students throughout their college years. Understanding specific issues students face can help pinpoint campus-level changes to support and promote students' emotional and personal well-being.

As institutions have increased the availability of counseling staff and resources in response to growing student mental health needs, they have also worked to ensure students connect with campus resources and support services. One way to assess whether students are accessing resources is through the

frequency with which students seek personal counseling. Among all graduating students in the sample, 29.9% of men and 36.6% of women sought personal counseling during their senior year. Among those students who reported feeling "frequently" depressed in their senior year, a greater percentage sought personal counseling, with 54.7% of men and 69.2% of women having done so. Thus, it is important for campuses to recognize that not only do male students seek counseling at lower rates than their female peers, men who "frequently" feel depressed are even less likely to seek counseling. Thus, college campuses will be challenged to address both increasing student demand for counseling services as well as any disparities that may arise in students' accessing and using such services.

EMOTIONAL HEALTH OVER FOUR YEARS

Part of what is driving the changes in student needs and campus support is students' incoming levels of emotional health and well-being. The fall 2010 entering cohort of college freshmen had the lowest self-ratings of emotional health since CIRP first asked the question in 1985 (Pryor et al., 2010). A matched sample reveals that the higher students' initial self-ratings on the 2010 CIRP Freshman Survey, the more likely they were to report high levels of emotional health four years later on the 2014 College Senior Survey. Only a small percentage of students who began college reporting "below average" or "lowest 10%" in terms of emotional health graduated from college with "above average" or "highest 10%" ratings (see Figure 1). Given that students' self-ratings do not dramatically change while in college, it is important



to consider how their incoming perceptions of emotional health affect college experiences. In addition, students' reported emotional health levels at college entry may help institutions design and offer support services and resources.

As anticipated, students reporting low levels of emotional health at the time of college entry were less satisfied with their college experience as graduating seniors. Whereas 81.8% of incoming students indicating low levels were satisfied with their overall college experience, 89.5% of students indicating high levels were satisfied. When examining students' perceptions of other aspects of their college experiences, there are even greater differences when compared by entering self-rated emotional health. Among students who initially reported low levels of emotional health, 77.7% felt valued at the institution in their senior year compared to 89.9% of their peers who entered with high self-ratings. Similarly, 73.8% of students reporting low emotional health felt a sense of belonging as college seniors compared to 88.0% of students reporting high self-ratings at the time of college entry.

Students' initial emotional self-ratings suggest that as college seniors, they may feel less connected to the institution and less satisfied with their college experience. In addition, since students in the matched sample all persisted and were on track to graduate in four years, it is possible that those in the full 2010 Freshman Survey sample with lower levels of emotional health may not have persisted, thus masking another important way incoming emotional health levels affect students' college experiences.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The population of college seniors responding to the 2014 CSS demonstrates both vulnerability and resiliency. The majority report feeling overwhelmed and are very concerned about their ability to find jobs; in addition, they are less than fully confident in their preparation for post-college careers. This is underscored by their employment prospects being largely still in flux at the time of the survey, even among those who had participated in an internship program. However, respondents perceive themselves as self-confident in the skills employers are looking for, such as critical thinking and problem-solving skills. At the same time, there is a growing demand for campus support services and resources that provide important forms of emotional health and personal counseling for students throughout their college years. The duality of their responses seems to mirror an uncertain national mood.

More information on the CSS can be found at: <http://www.heri.ucla.edu/cssoverview.php>

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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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