

RESEARCH BRIEF

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT UCLA



May 2019

2018 COLLEGE SENIOR SURVEY

By: Sidronio Jacobo and Diana Lopez

Now marking its 26th administration, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) has overseen the College Senior Survey (CSS) since 1993. The CSS, generally administered to graduating seniors as an “exit” survey, is designed to connect academic, civic, and diversity outcomes with a comprehensive set of college experiences to capture the impact of higher education. When used as a follow-up instrument to other CIRP surveys, such as the Freshman Survey (TFS), the CSS can provide longitudinal findings on college students’ cognitive and psychological development.

This research brief reports on a set of experiences and outcomes, such as satisfaction with the college experience, values, attitudes, goals, degree aspirations, and career and other post-college plans, by different social identities and demographics. This brief highlights data from 12,825 seniors graduating from 64 four-year colleges and universities across the United States.

SOCIAL VIEWS

Each year, college seniors are asked to share their views on several social issues, domestic public policies, and global affairs. In 2018, the CSS asked seniors to share their views on affirmative consent, global climate change, the death penalty, meritocracy, federal military spending, and other topics. Entering the 2018 midterm elections, a majority of students characterized their political views as “middle-of-the-road” (36.7%), “liberal” (35.5%), or “conservative” (21.2%). Students were least likely to identify as “far right” (1.0%) or “far left” (5.5%). However, students generally had progressive social views on most topics.

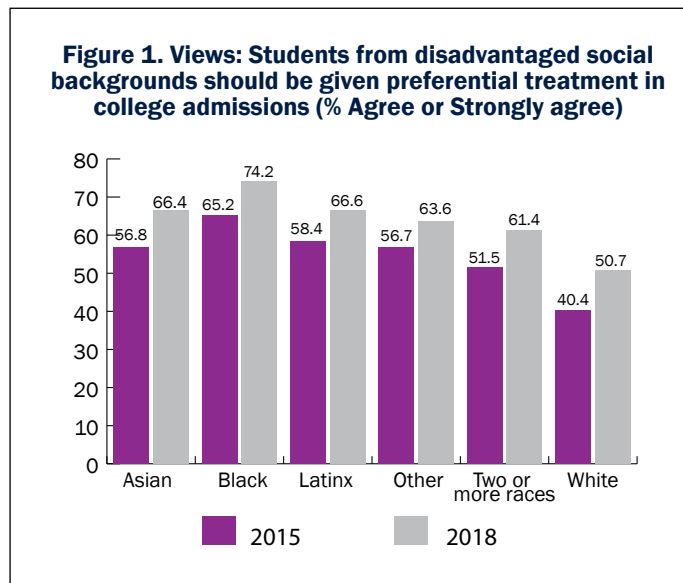
When graduating seniors were asked their opinion about whether racial discrimination is no longer a problem in the United States today, 12.4% of students “agreed somewhat” or “strongly agreed.” Nearly nine in ten students (87.6%) disagreed with the statement. Additionally, we observed minimal difference across self-reported gender and racial/ethnic identities. In terms of gender breakdown, 91.5% of women, 89.3% of genderqueer/gender non-conforming students, and 80.0% of men believed racial discrimination was still prevalent in present-day United States. Similarly, a majority of students, across all racial groups, would not categorize racial discrimination as a thing of the past. Out of the twelve Native American students who responded to

this item, all of them believed issues of racial discrimination remained unresolved. Comparatively, 91.7% of Black students, 89.8% of mixed-raced students, 89.6% of Latinx, 88.2% of Asian students, 86.9% of white students, and 80.0% of students who selected “Other” believe racism persists. While Black (83.3%) and Latinx students (73.7%) had the highest proportion who “strongly disagreed,” white students (58.7%) had the lowest percentage of students who “strongly disagreed.” Overall, these findings highlight that as students leave college, they are aware of the pervasiveness of racial discrimination in contemporary America.

Additionally, the survey asked students about their stance on college admissions practices that provide preferential treatment for students from disadvantaged social backgrounds. Historically, such college admission practices have been associated with Affirmative Action policies and programs that emerged during the Civil Rights Era (Harris, 2001). At their core, these programs were designed to increase the recruitment and retention of students from historically marginalized groups on college and university campuses to help ameliorate past injustices, including race-based and gender-based discrimination (Harris, 2001). However, today the constitutionality of Affirmative Action programs is continually challenged through rhetoric that such admissions practices provide “preferential treatment”

to applicants who may be less qualified.

On the 2018 CSS, more than half of the respondents (55.0%) believed that students from disadvantaged social backgrounds should receive preferential treatment in college admissions. When disaggregating student responses by race/ethnicity, we notice a more substantial proportion of Black (74.2%), Asian (66.5%), Latinx (66.5%), and mixed-race (61.4%) students agreed that students from disadvantaged social backgrounds should be uniquely considered in the admissions process, than white students did (47.2%). As Figure 1 highlights, when this question

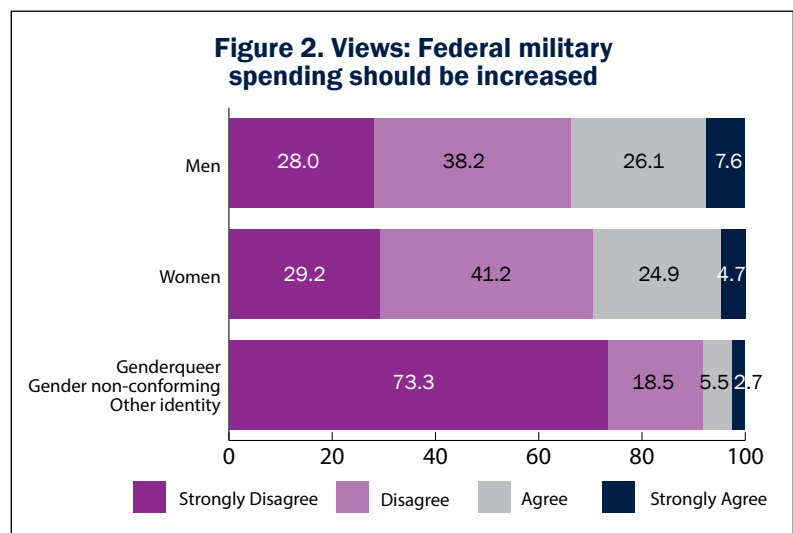


appeared on the 2015 CSS, findings revealed that students of color (Asian, 56.8%; Black 65.2%; Latinx, 58.4%; mixed-race, 51.5%) were also more likely to agree that students from disadvantaged backgrounds should receive preferential treatment in college admission than white students (40.4%). Nonetheless, it is essential to note a higher proportion of students across all racial groups agreed that students from marginalized backgrounds should receive preferential treatment in 2018 in comparison to 2015.

While the organization Students for Fair Admissions, under the direction of Edward Blum, recently claimed Harvard’s holistic admissions practices negatively impacted Asian American student applicants, reports have found that a majority of Asian ethnic groups favored programs like Affirmative Action (Harvard, 2019; Wong, Lee, Tran, 2018). When we explored

students’ attitudes on ‘preferential treatment’ policies across different Asian ethnicities, we found similar patterns. With the exception of students who identified as “other Asian” (54.7%), there were minimal differences amongst the various Asian ethnic subgroups. In fact, 70.7% of “South Asian (e.g., Indian, Pakistani, Nepalese, Sri Lankan)” students, 67.6% of “Southeast Asian (e.g., Cambodian, Vietnamese, Hmong)” students, 65.4% of “Filipino” students, and 62.2% of “East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Taiwanese)” students agreed that disadvantaged students should receive preferential treatment in college admissions. Such findings provide a nuanced perspective by acknowledging the heterogeneity of the “Asian” racial category and their views on this political issue. Given that in the last couple of years the legality of particular college admission practices has been at the forefront of newscast cycles, we observed students divided on this issue.

In addition to sharing their views on domestic issues, students reported their views on U.S. diplomatic affairs. During the administration of the 2018 CSS, the U.S. government was in the process of approving one the most massive military spending budgets in U.S. history, totaling billions of dollars (Stein, 2018). Coincidentally, students were asked to rate their support for greater military spending the same year and survey findings showed that about three in ten (30.8%) students agreed that military spending should increase. While percentages for students who identified as “man” and “woman” were similar (33.8% vs. 29.6%), the rate is considerably lower for students who do not identify within the man/woman sex binary (8.3%) (see Figure 2). Furthermore, when considering the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender identity, further variation emerged. Amongst males, white (36.0%) and Black (33.7%) students were more likely to support increased military spending



than Asian (23.3%), Latino (26.0%), mixed-race (28.8%), or students of “other” race(s) (28.6%). Amongst women, findings revealed similar trends as white (32.7%) and Black (29.7%) women were more likely to agree with increased federal spending than Asian (17.5%), Latina (20.5%), mixed-race (23.3%), or “other” race students (20.0%). Ultimately, Asian female students (17.5%) were the least likely to agree with increased military spending.

ACCESS TO STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS

While study abroad programs have long been a pinnacle of colleges and universities, today more students are studying abroad and for various purposes (Open Doors, 2018). Whether a student is pursuing a study abroad program for academic enrichment, new cultural experiences, or career development, a wide range of study abroad programs now allow students to select programs by destination, the language of study, program length, program structure and focus, housing arrangements, and student eligibility. For some schools, the diversity of study abroad programs are essential in attracting students from diverse backgrounds (e.g., first-generation, low-income, STEM majors) who are less likely to apply and enroll in study abroad programs (Open Doors, 2018). Based on longitudinal data of students who took the 2014 Freshman Survey and the 2018 College Senior Survey, there is a relationship between a student’s expectation to study abroad at the beginning of college and if they actually studied abroad by their senior year. The majority of students who anticipated that there was “no chance” (93.6%) or “very little chance” (85.1%) of studying abroad at college entry ultimately did not study abroad by their senior year. In contrast, about one in three students (31.4%) who reported there was “some chance” and 57.6% of students who reported there was a “very good chance” ended up studying abroad by their senior year. These findings suggest that if students are interested in studying abroad at college entry, they may be more likely to pursue study abroad opportunities during their undergraduate studies. In addition to being encouraged to explore social clubs and academic majors during their first year in college, college staff and student affairs practitioners should also discuss with students the possibilities afforded by study abroad programs.

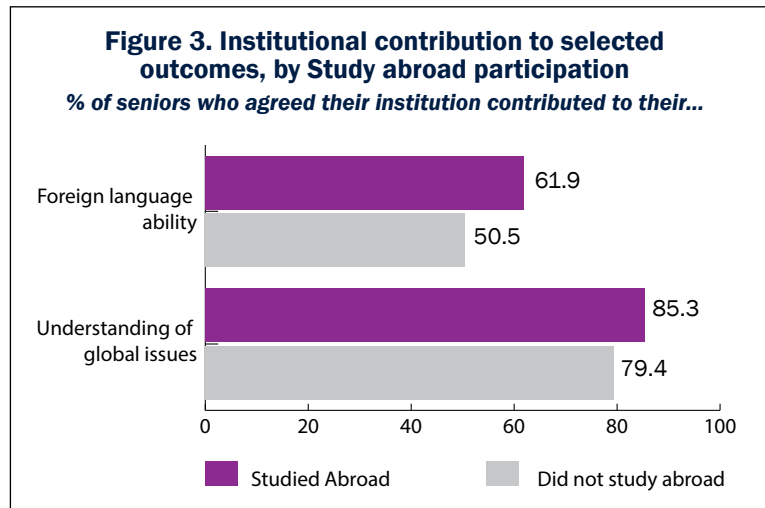
While it is imperative to provide more study abroad outreach services for incoming first-time first-year students, colleges and universities could support students with financial resources and scholarships to study abroad. Based on longitudinal data for students who participated in the TFS and CSS, we note differences in study abroad participation across family income and first-generation college-going status. Students from the highest income bracket were more

likely to study abroad. For example, a third of students (33.3%) with a family income of \$50,000 or less, 40.5% of students with family income between \$50,000 and \$99,999, and 27.5% of students with family income between \$100,000 and \$149,999 studied abroad. By contrast, more than half (52.2%) of students with family income higher than \$150,000 studied abroad. Furthermore, while less than one-third of first-generation college students studied abroad (27.1%), more than two in five (43.6%) non-first-generation college students studied abroad. Indeed, we note that U.S. citizenship and immigration status impacts students’ ability to study abroad. While 42.7% of U.S. citizens, 37.5% of U.S. permanent residents, and 34.3% of international students studied abroad, only 12.5% of students who selected “neither/none of the above” in the citizenship question studied abroad.

Higher education scholars have analyzed students’ socioeconomic status through variables such as family income, parental education, Pell-grant eligibility, and eligibility for other forms of aid. When observing the type of aid (e.g., grants, scholarship, loans, family support) students utilized during their senior year, we noticed differences in their participation in study abroad while in college. Students who received more financial support from family or took out less in loans were more likely to have studied abroad. For example, 22.2% of students without any family financial support during their senior year studied abroad compared to 44.4% who received at least \$15,000 in family support during their senior year. Lastly, 28.8% of students who took out more than \$15,000 of aid to be repaid during their senior year studied abroad in comparison to 38.1% of students who had not taken out loans during their senior year.

When examining loan debt accrued throughout college, students who had not taken out any loans had the highest proportion (35.1%) who studied abroad. In comparison, 30.4% of students who took out between \$1 to \$15,000 in loans and 33.8% of students who took out between \$15,000 and \$30,000 in loans studied abroad. Just over one-quarter (27.9%) of students who took out over \$30,000 in loans by graduation studied abroad. Based on these findings, it is evident that financial planning and budgeting can affect a student’s ability to study abroad. Given that study abroad programs have demonstrated success in improving students’ educational outcomes, it is imperative to ensure equitable access to such opportunities.

Research has shown that students who study abroad develop academically, personally, and culturally. Because the CSS does not ask students when they studied abroad, we cannot determine if attitudes or values were influenced by their



experiences abroad. However, students who studied abroad were more likely to value a sense of global awareness than students who had not studied abroad. For example, 39.0% of students who studied abroad reported that improving their understanding of other countries and cultures was an “essential” goal. In comparison, 26.8% of students who did not study abroad reported understanding of other countries and cultures as an “essential” goal. Additionally, as Figure 3 shows, students who studied abroad reported that their institutions contributed to their understanding of global issues and foreign language ability at higher rates than students who did not study abroad. For example, 61.5% of students who studied abroad believed their college contributed to their understanding of a foreign language in comparison to 50.5% of students who did not study abroad. Additionally, findings indicated that students who studied abroad (85.3%) were more likely to agree that their college contributed to their understanding of global issues than students who had not studied abroad (79.4%). In an ever-changing and interconnected global society, it has become easier and perhaps more necessary for students to be engaged locally and globally.

COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL CHANGE AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

In addition to reporting a heightened sense of social responsibility and global awareness, graduating seniors also demonstrated a commitment to social change and community development. When students were asked to rate factors that influenced their career path and future goals, factors relating to social justice were of high consideration for seniors. Nearly 9 out of 10 seniors (87.0%) felt working for social change was at least “somewhat important” when considering a career path. Moreover, 1 out of 5 students (19.8%) believed it “essential” to consider working for social

change when thinking about their career paths. Analyzing this item by race/ethnicity revealed that Black students were most likely to consider working for social change an “essential goal” (35.5%). Furthermore, a higher proportion of Native American (33.3%), Latinx (33.1%), and students of “other race” (33.7%) stated working for social change was an “essential goal” in comparison to Asian (19.2%), white (17.1%), and mixed-raced (24.0%) students. Such findings highlight that graduating seniors are considering more than financial gain in their future goal-planning.

Furthermore, 84.0% of seniors considered becoming a community leader as an important goal. Black students also reported the highest levels of considering becoming a community leader an essential goal (34.2%). Similarly, 30.7% of “Other” race students reported becoming a community leader as an essential goal. Comparatively, a lower percentage of seniors (67.1%) considered influencing the political structure as at least a somewhat important goal. White students reported the lowest level of any racial/ethnic group (65.6%) when asked about the importance of personally influencing the political structure while Native American students indicated the highest rate of importance on influencing politics (84.6%). While there is noticeable variation in student goals such as these, disaggregating by subgroup can help us understand both differences and similarities.

Graduating seniors not only plan for careers with societal benefits and have aspirations to contribute to their communities, but they also demonstrated their commitment to these paths and cultivated the skills to move toward such goals during their time in college. Over half of students (55.4%) helped raise money for a cause or campaign since entering college. While only 29.5% of students demonstrated for a cause, students showed their commitment in other ways, as 3 out of 5 students (59.7%) held a leadership position in an organization and 72.0% voted in an election. Throughout the country, college seniors are eager to put into action the skills they have learned in college.

CONCLUSION

In 2018, college seniors expressed their political views during a midterm election year. Overall, the majority of seniors agreed that racial discrimination is still an issue in the U.S. and that federal military spending should not increase. When it came down to preferential treatment in college admissions practices, students were more divided. Given that Affirmative Action debates have been central to discussions across college campuses, this brief explored

intra- and intergroup racial differences amongst student respondents. Furthermore, findings suggest that seniors felt confident in their language abilities and their global awareness, especially amongst students who studied abroad. Furthermore, our findings suggest that students from lower socioeconomic status and students who took out more loans were less likely to study abroad. While students from historically marginalized groups are accessing opportunities abroad, colleges and universities can benefit from providing additional support for these student populations. Lastly, our findings indicate that graduating seniors aspired to be active agents of change after college. In conclusion, with an increasingly divisive political climate, domestically and globally, graduating seniors are expressing their views and commitments towards positive social change.

REFERENCES

- Harvard University (2019). Harvard Admission Lawsuit. Retrieved from <https://admissionscase.harvard.edu/lawsuit>
- Harris, C. I. (2001). *Critical race studies: An introduction*. UCLA L. Rev., 49, 1215.
- Institute for International Education (2018, November 12). *Number of International Students in the United States Reaches New High of 1.09 Million*. Retrieved from <https://www.iie.org/Why-IIE/Announcements/2018/11/2018-11-13-Number-of-International-Students-Reaches-New-High>
- Stein, J. (2018, June 19). *U.S. military budget inches closer to \$1 trillion mark, as concerns over federal deficit grow*. The Washington Post. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/06/19/u-s-military-budget-inches-closer-to-1-trillion-mark-as-concerns-over-federal-deficit-grow/>
- Wong, J., Lee, J., & Tran, V. (2018, October 01). *Asian Americans' Attitudes toward Affirmative Action: Framing Matters*. Retrieved from <http://aapidata.com/blog/aa-attitudes-affirmative-action/>



The Higher Education Research Institute

(HERI) is one of the premier research and policy organizations on postsecondary education in the country. Housed in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, the institute is an interdisciplinary center for research, evaluation, information, policy studies, and research training in postsecondary education.

HERI administers the national Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) surveys, including the CIRP Freshman Survey, Your First College Year survey, Diverse Learning Environments survey, College Senior Survey, Staff Climate Survey, and the triennial HERI Faculty Survey. CIRP has collected data on over 15 million college students from more than 1,900 colleges and universities since 1966.

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE (HERI)

Directors

M. Kevin Eagan, Jr., Assistant Professor, HERI Director
Ellen Bara Stolzenberg, Assistant Director for Research
Melissa Aragon, Assistant Director of Operations
Nathaniel Kang, Assistant Director for Data Management

Affiliated Scholars

Walter R. Allen, Allan Murray Cartter Professor of Higher Education
Alexander W. Astin, Founding Director and Senior Scholar
Mitchell J. Chang, Professor
Jessica Harris, Assistant Professor
Sylvia Hurtado, Professor
Ozan Jaquette, Assistant Professor
Patricia M. McDonough, Professor
Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, Professor
Linda J. Sax, Professor
Victor B. Sáenz, Associate Professor (University of Texas at Austin)