

May 2013

Class of 2012: 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 twentieth administration, and it contains data from 20,747 seniors graduating from 98 colleges and universities across the United States.

PLANS AFTER COLLEGE

Out of the 20,747 graduating seniors responding to the 2012 CSS, the majority (67%) reported that they plan on working full time after graduation. With a national unemployment rate hovering around 8%, many had yet to confirm job placement. In fact, more than half (54%) of the respondents who reported planning to work full time after college reported that they were still looking for a job. Among those planning to work full time, less than 1 in 4 (23%) reported having accepted an employment offer. Another 11% were considering a tendered offer.

Twenty-six percent reported planning to continue their studies and enroll in graduate or professional school by the following fall. At the time, only 53% had been accepted into a program, while 19% were hoping for acceptances at the time of the survey. Several, 18%, planned on applying for graduate school in the fall of 2012.

STUDENT LOAN DEBT AND CAREER CONSIDERATIONS

With the U.S. economy still struggling to recover, the graduating class of 2012 had faced tuition hikes during college and encountered high unemployment

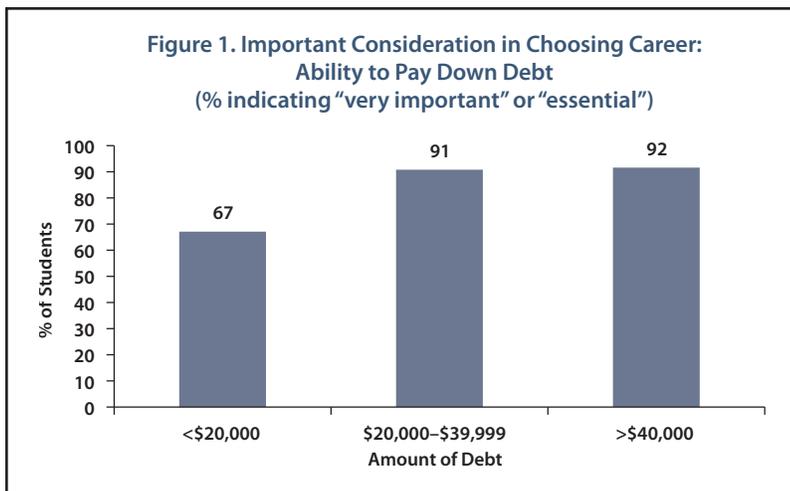
rates that impacted their future plans. Approximately 3 out of 4 (78%) graduating seniors left college with debt. Out of all responding students, just under a third (31%) owed less than \$10,000, 56% reported owing as much as \$20,000 or more. This is similar to national numbers, where a reported two-thirds of graduating seniors across the country owe an average of \$26,600 (Project on Student Debt, 2012).

The higher student debt is at graduation, the more significantly it factors into career decisions. As they consider their careers, 76% of graduates reported that their ability to pay off debt was "very important" or "essential." Those owing less than \$20,000 were less likely to see this as important, at 67%, compared to those with \$20,000 or more debt: at 91% with \$20,000–\$39,000 and at 92% 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 85% felt a stable and secure future were just as crucial. Social recognition, or status, actually ranked lowest on respondents' priorities when considering 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 18% planning to pursue a career in the business field. About 15% plan to enter medicine (as doctors, nurses or other health



professionals), 12% education, 9% art, and 3% engineering. Those entering the business and engineering fields have had the most success in securing employment prior to graduation. Almost a third of the graduates in business (30%) and over a quarter in engineering (27%) had already accepted offers of employment at the time the CSS was administered: significantly higher than the 14% placement rate of those with career plans in education or the 12% of those in nursing.

GROWTH AND CHANGE OVER TIME

A major advantage to administering the CIRP surveys is the ability to use longitudinal analysis to study the growth and change of college students over time. Out of the 20,747 graduating students responding to the 2012 CSS, we were able to match 10,913 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 CSS, grouping their scores into three categories relative to the mean: high, average, or low.

ACADEMIC SELF-CONCEPT

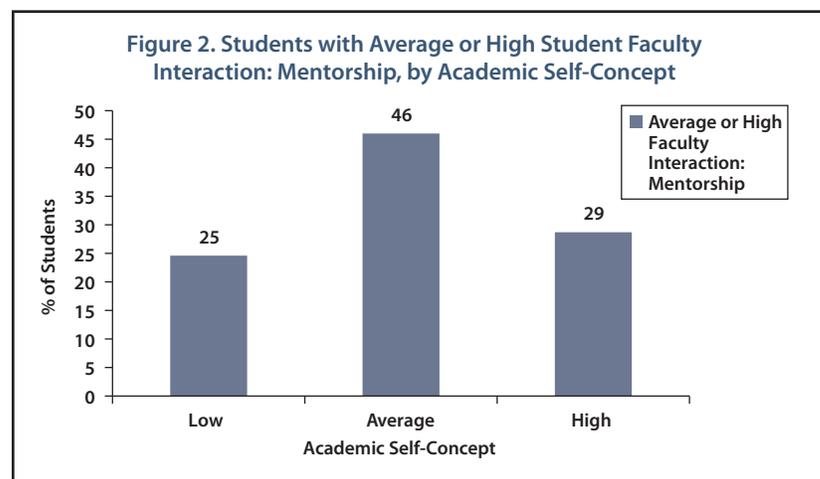
One of the main purposes of higher education includes developing students' academic abilities. The CIRP *Academic Self-Concept* construct measures students' beliefs about their academic abilities. Since

both the TFS and the CSS ask students to rate themselves on the items that make up *Academic Self Concept* (academic ability, drive to achieve, mathematical ability and intellectual self-confidence) this 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 (65%, 61% and 68%, 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. When we did see change in this area it showed a slightly larger percentage of men (18%) than women (12%) moving up from the low or average group to the high group as seniors.

Various influences and experiences during college could affect academic self-concept. For example, the relationship between academic self-concept and students' interaction with faculty. 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 *Faculty Interaction: Mentorship*, most also scored in the average (46%) or high (29%) group of academic self-concept on the CSS, as shown in Figure 2. 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.

Students' social self-concept scores increased during college. As first-years, 70% had scored in the average or high group, with the majority in the average group (44% scored average and 26% scored in the high group). By their senior year, a few more, 81%, scored in the average or high group; but more importantly, nearly as many scored in the high group (38%) as the average group (42%). This was an overall increase of over 10 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 (41%) than those who did not (28%). Both groups however, made similar progress during college: but 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 28% of the students who participated in student clubs or groups during college entered college already in the high social self-concept group, this was slightly higher than the 20% of those who did not. 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 entered college scoring higher on social self-concept than women. Most, 86% of men who entered college scoring high on social self-concept remained in the high group as graduating seniors, compared to 81% of women. In addition, fewer women (19%) than men (30%) 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 were higher than 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 2012 greatly increased commitments to social and political involvement during their years in college. While only 31% of respondents entering college scored high in social agency, 41% of respondents did so as exiting seniors, a 10 percentage point increase. More than 1 in 4 respondents (29%) 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. Sixty-two 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, 34% 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: 23% 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.

CHANGING MAJORS

The majority of students who responded to both the TFS and CSS surveys indicated a probable major on

the Freshman Survey (87%). Out of those students who indicated a probable major on the TFS, over half (54%) switched major choice in college indicating a different major on the CSS.

About three-quarters (76%) of first-year students who marked a probable major of general business administration switched by senior year. Of those students who switched out of general business administration, 56% switched to more specialized business-related fields. These included marketing (17%), accounting (15%), management (11%), and finance (6%). Outside of business, other popular major choices for these students were economics (9%) and communications (7%).

General biology was another major that several students switched out of (about half—51%), and similar to business students, many chose to remain in a related field. Specifically, out of the students who changed from general biology, 9% switched to biochemistry or biophysics, and 11% selected other biological sciences. The most popular choice for these students was by far, however, psychology, with 17% of the students moving out of general biology and choosing this social science. Other fields these students moved to included nursing (5%), chemistry (5%), and economics (4%).

GOALS

As first-year students, 27% thought that helping others who are in difficulty was either “not important” or only “somewhat important.” By senior year however, almost two-thirds (61%) of those students changed to

responding that it was “very important” or “essential” to help others who are in difficulty.

Students’ goals to keep up with political affairs also increased by their senior year. Over half (58%) of first-year students responded that keeping up to date with political affairs was either “not important” or “somewhat important,” but by senior year almost a third (28%) of those students changed their responses to “very important” or “essential.” This could be due to the pending 2012 November presidential election.

SATISFACTION WITH THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

Graduating seniors 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.

REFERENCE

The project on student debt (2012). *Student debt and the class of 2011*. The Institute for College Access & Success.

 **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.

Research Directors

Sylvia Hurtado, HERI Director
John H. Pryor, CIRP Director
Laura Palucki Blake, CIRP Assistant Director
Kevin Eagan, HERI Assistant Director for Research
Matthew Case, Senior Data Manager

Affiliated Scholars

Walter R. Allen, Allan Murray Cartter Professor of Higher Education
Alexander W. Astin, Founding Director and Senior Scholar
Helen S. Astin, Senior Scholar
Mitchell J. Chang, Professor
Kevin Eagan, Assistant Professor in Residence
Patricia M. McDonough, Professor
José Luis Santos, Assistant Professor
Linda J. Sax, Professor
Rick Wagoner, Assistant Professor
Victor B. Sáenz, Assistant Professor, University of Texas at Austin