

# RESEARCH BRIEF

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT UCLA



July 2020

## The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019

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*The results reported here are derived from 95,505 first-time, full-time (FTFT) freshmen entering 148 baccalaureate institutions. Weights have been applied to these data to reflect the more than 1.5 million FTFT undergraduate students who began college at 1,427 four-year colleges and universities across the U.S. in the fall of 2019. Within this brief, we address the importance of academic reputation of the intended major as a reason students choose their particular institution. We also highlight students' social and political engagement, including past and forthcoming behaviors and their future goals.*

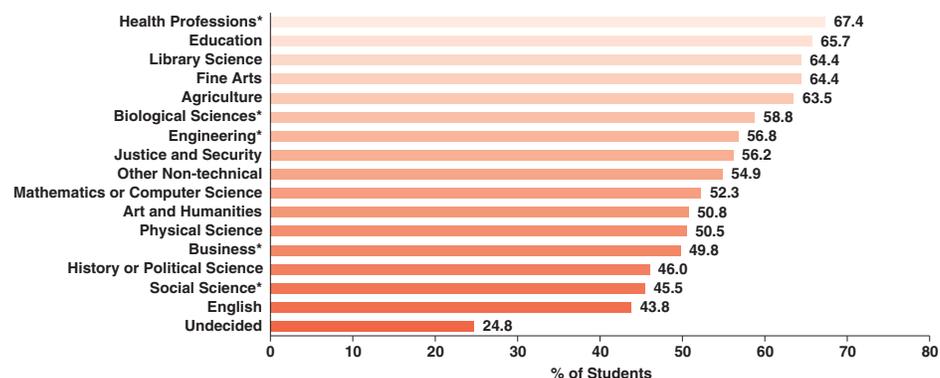
### NEW ITEMS: REASONS FOR CHOOSING CURRENT INSTITUTION

The CIRP Freshman Survey has been asking students about reasons why they selected their particular institution since the 1970s. Items such as rankings, academic reputation, and finances are popular in the mainstream media, as well as of relevance to institutions when considering how to appeal to incoming students. In 2019, we added “the academic reputation of my intended major” and “communication with a professor” as reasons that might have influenced their decision to attend their particular institution in an effort to analyze how more explicit reasons might differ from some of the general reasons in this set of survey items. Differences emerged by gender, with 57.2% of women citing the academic reputation of their major as a very important reason, which was nearly 10 percentage points greater than it was for men (49.4%). This difference between men and women aligns overall with women being more likely than men to rate a variety of reasons in selecting their current institution as very important while men tend to be more neutral (Stolzenberg, et al., 2019). Communication with a professor was not as salient overall but still showed some variation.

### Academic reputation of intended major most important for students in health professions, particularly nursing; those aspiring to graduate/professional degrees

The academic reputation of the intended major as a very important reason in selecting their current institution varied by students' probable field of study (see Figure 1). Amongst the five most popular major fields (biological sciences, business, health professions, engineering, and social science), students interested in the health professions were the most likely to consider the academic reputation of their major as a very important reason in selecting their current institution (67.4%), nearly a full 10 percentage

**Figure 1. Importance of Academic Reputation of Intended Major in College Choice, by Major Field (% Very important)**



\*Most common fields for incoming freshmen

points higher than students planning on majoring in biological sciences (58.8%) or engineering (56.8%). Less than half of students planning to major in business or social sciences considered the academic reputation of their major as a very important reason in selecting their current institution (49.8% and 45.5%, respectively). Looking more closely, we see a lot of variation by major within academic fields. For example, in the Health Professions, students interested in majoring in Nursing (75.3%), Pharmacy (72.8%), and Health Technology (71.2%) were most likely to consider the academic reputation of the major as a very important factor in their choice of institution. In fact, of all the largest individual majors, Nursing had the highest proportion of students who considered the academic reputation of the major as very important in their college choice. The other fields showed variation as well. Within the Biological Sciences, students selecting Other Biological Science (70.0%); Molecular, Cellular, & Developmental Biology (68.8%); Neurobiology/Neuroscience (60.4%); or Microbiology (60.2%) were most likely to consider the academic reputation of the major as a very important factor in their college choice.

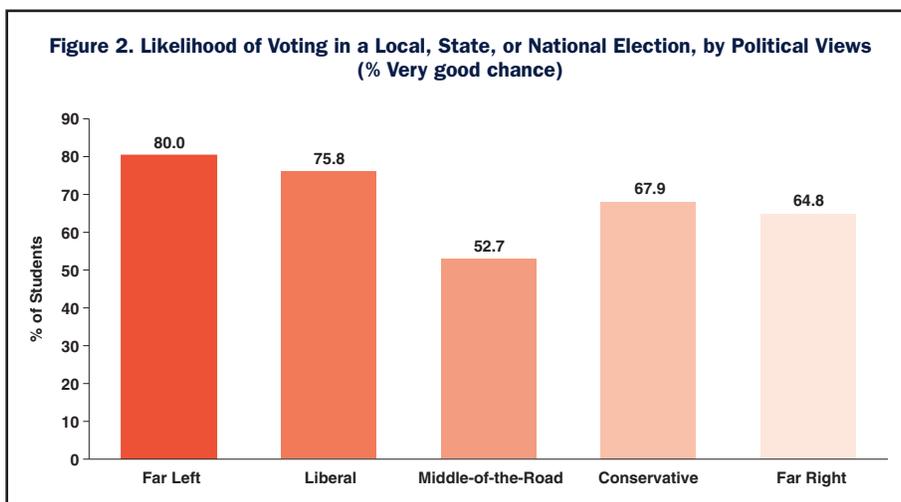
By contrast, in Engineering, those in Biomedical Engineering were most likely (62.9%), followed by Aerospace/Aeronautical/Astronautical Engineering (62.5%), and Biological/Agricultural Engineering (58.2%) to feel the same. Within Business fields, those in Finance (56.5%), Other Business (53.3%), Marketing (52.6%), or Accounting (51.5%) were most likely to consider the major's academic reputation very important, but none higher than 60 percent. It should be noted that other popular individual majors in which at least two-thirds of students considered the academic reputation of the major as a very important factor in their college choice include Music (72.2%) and Elementary Education (68.6%).

Nearly three-quarters of first-time, full-time students aspire to eventually earn a graduate or professional degree (70.0%). These students are more likely than those whose goal is a bachelor's degree to consider the academic reputation of their major as a very important reason for choosing their institution, perhaps indicating that entering students who aspire to a post-baccalaureate degree are already considering how their current institution might help prepare them for graduate school admission and success. While both are more likely than those who aspire to a bachelor's degree (48.4%), students who intend to pursue a master's degree are less likely to consider the academic reputation of their major as a very important reason in choosing their current institution (54.6%) compared to students aspiring to doctoral-level graduate degrees (58.0%).

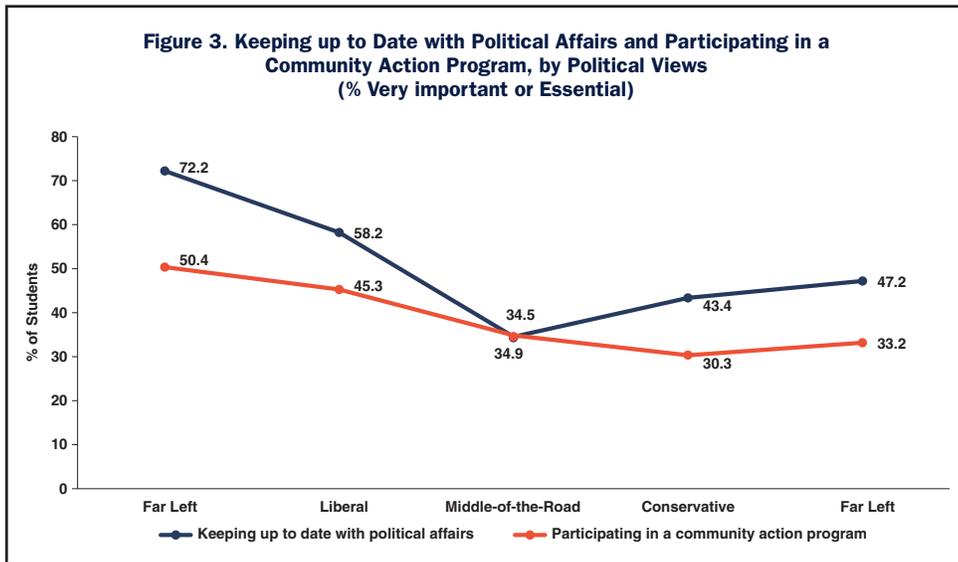
**SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: PAST BEHAVIOR, FUTURE BEHAVIOR, AND GOALS**

Gearing up for the 2020 presidential campaign season, just over two in five (43.6%) students entering college in 2019 identified as politically middle-of-the-road. Left of center, nearly one-third (32.2%) identified as liberal and 4.5% as far left. Finally, 17.8% identify as conservative while the remaining 1.9% identify as far right. When asked about their likelihood of voting in a future local, state, or national election, students politically on the left are most likely to anticipate a very good chance of doing so (see Figure 2). For example, students who identify as far left politically are most likely (80.0% responding very good chance), followed by those who are liberal (75.8%). It is interesting to note that students on the far right (64.8%) are less likely to believe there is a very good chance that they will vote than those who identify as conservative (67.9%), the reverse relationship as those on the left. Incoming students who identify as being politically in the middle are least likely to anticipate a very good chance that they will vote (52.7%).

Students on the left politically are more than three times as likely as those on the right to have demonstrated for a cause (e.g. boycott, rally, protest) at least occasionally during their last year in high school. For example, only 14.3% of conservative students and 17.6% of far-right students demonstrated for a cause, compared to 47.3% of students who identify as liberal and 59.4% of those on the far left.



Incoming students are asked about the importance of a series of political and social goals, including keeping up to date with political affairs and participating in a community action program. Analyzing these goals by students' political views revealed significant differences across the political spectrum (see Figure 3). When asked about the importance of the goal of keeping up to date with political affairs, there was a 25 percentage-point difference between the far left (72.2% considering the goal very important or essential) and the far right (47.2%). Though consistent differences



emerge between the left and right, the extremes were each higher than their respective option one step toward the middle, though the difference between conservative (43.4%) and far right (47.2%) is less than 4 percentage points. By contrast, the difference between liberals (58.2%) and those on the far left (72.2%) is 14 percentage points. Students who identify as politically in the center (34.5%) were least likely to consider keeping up to date with political affairs a very important or essential goal compared with those on the left and right.

Finally, a slightly different pattern emerges with respect to the importance of the goal of participating in a community action program. Students on the far left (50.4%) and liberals (45.3%) are more likely than conservatives (least likely overall at 30.3%) or those identifying as far right (33.2%) to consider participating in a community action program very important or essential. However, with this goal, students who identify as middle-of-the-road (34.9%) are slightly more likely to consider it important than those on the right.

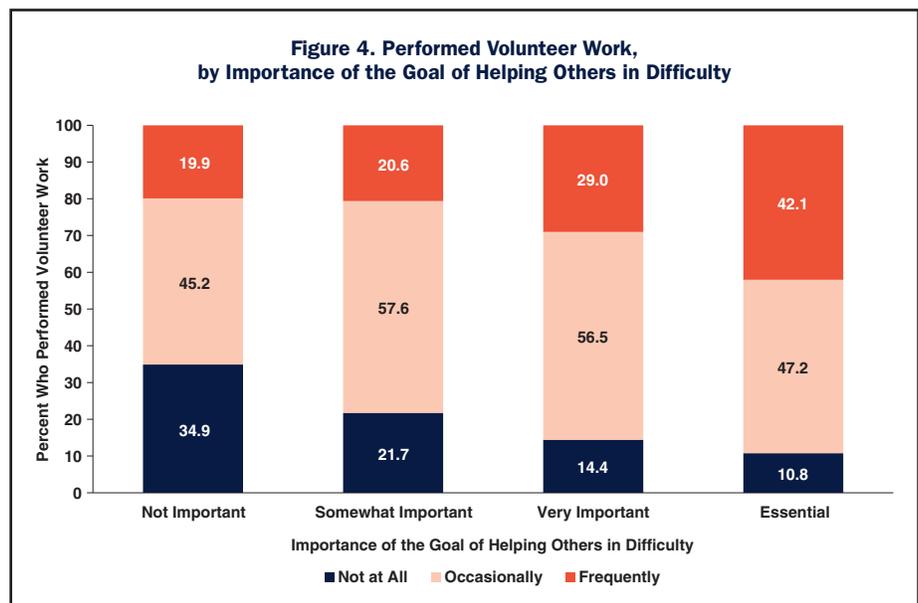
**Goal of helping others in difficulty linked to past and future volunteer/community service work**

While the majority of students across the political spectrum consider helping others in difficulty important, students who enter college identifying as politically on the far left (85.7%) or liberal (84.3%) are more likely than their middle-of-the-road (78.4%), conservative (75.2%), and far-right (72.5%) peers

to consider this a very important or essential goal. Comparing the goal of helping others in difficulty to past helping behavior (performing volunteer work during the last year of high school) reveals that as the importance of the goal decreases, past volunteer work also decreases (see Figure 4). Of those who consider helping others in difficulty to be an essential goal, 42.1% frequently performed volunteer work and nearly 9 out of 10 (89.2%) did so at least occasionally. By contrast, only 65.1% of those who consider helping others in difficulty as not important at all frequently (19.9%) or occasionally (45.2%) performed

volunteer work during their last year in high school.

Similar patterns emerge when comparing the importance of the goal of helping others in difficulty and likelihood of participating in volunteer or community service while in college. Incoming students who consider helping others in difficulty to be an essential goal are more than three times as likely (51.2%) to believe there is a very good chance they will participate in volunteer or community service work while in college than those who do not consider it an important goal at all (16.1%). Further, less than one-third (29.6%) who consider helping others very important predict a very good chance they will volunteer during college, a difference of nearly 22 percentage points between the top two importance response options.



### **Students with goals of community leadership more likely to demonstrate for a cause and vote in the future**

Students who identify as politically in the middle are least likely to consider becoming a community leader as a very important or somewhat important goal (39.7%) compared with students on either end of the political spectrum. Next likely to give importance to the goal of becoming a community leader are students on either side of middle-of-the-road (43.8% of conservatives and 46.1% of liberals). Finally, 46.5% of students who identify as far right and just over half (50.2%) of those who identify as far left are most likely to consider becoming a community leader a very important or essential goal. It is interesting to note that although far-right voters are much less likely to vote in the future than liberals or those on the far left, they have similar goals with respect to having the goal of becoming a community leader as those who identify as politically left of center.

As the importance of the goal of being a community leader increased, students were more likely to have demonstrated for a

cause during their last year in high school. Just 17.5% of students who consider this goal not important at all demonstrated for a cause during their last year in high school. By contrast, nearly half (44.0%) of those who consider becoming a community leader an essential goal did the same. A similar pattern, though with much higher values, emerges with respect to students' likelihood of voting in future local, state, or national elections. More than three-quarters (77.2%) of incoming students who consider becoming a community leader an essential goal believe there is a very good chance they will vote in an election during college, followed by those who consider the goal very important (67.1%), somewhat important (59.8%), and not important at all (55.2%).

### **SOURCE**

Stolzenberg, E. B., Aragon, M. C., Romo, E., Couch, V., McLennan, D., Eagan, M. K., & Kang, N. (2020). *The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2019*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.



### **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.

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