

# RESEARCH BRIEF

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT UCLA



February 2016

## The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2015

*This research brief highlights findings from the 2015 CIRP Freshman Survey monograph; findings reflect analyses of data collected from 141,189 first-time, full-time freshmen attending 199 four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. Weights have been applied to these data to reflect the more than 1.5 million first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began college at 1,574 four-year colleges and universities across the U.S. in the fall of 2015. Consequently, differences of one percentage point in the results published here reflect the characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes of more than 15,000 first-year students nationally.*

Since 1966, the first year the survey was conducted, more than 15 million students at 1,900 colleges and universities have completed CIRP surveys. The CIRP Freshman Survey is the largest and longest running survey of American college students, and the 2015 administration marked its 50th year.

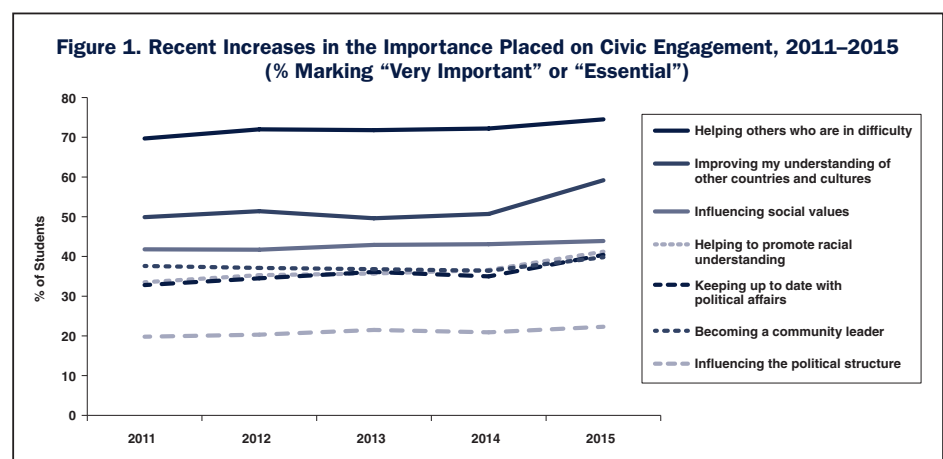
### STUDENTS' INTEREST IN POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT REACH 50-YEAR HIGHS

The incoming freshman class of 2015 began college at a time when student activism on college campuses and in communities was on the rise. Many of these protests and demonstrations have occurred in response to local incidents of bias and discrimination and in solidarity with broader, national movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter).

Perhaps connected to the increased activism among college and high school students over the past year, first-time, full-time college students in 2015 report substantially greater likelihood of participating in student protests and demonstrations while in college compared to their peers who entered last year. In 2014, 5.6% of incoming freshmen indicated a “very good chance” that they would participate in student protests while in college; in 2015, that figure has increased to 8.5%, which is the highest level recorded for this item since its inception in 1967. Black students are by far the most likely to believe they

have a “very good chance” of participating in student protests while in college, as 16% expect to do so.

Incoming college students not only demonstrate stronger inclinations toward activism via intentions to join protests while in college but they also report substantially stronger commitments to engaging with their communities. Nearly three-quarters (74.6%) of freshmen in 2015 consider helping others in difficulty to be a “very important” or “essential” personal objective. As shown in Figure 1, students in recent years have increasingly



rated helping others in difficulty as an important goal, and, in 2015, the item has achieved its greatest level of support since we first began asking it in 1966.

Two other items have reached all-time highs with the 2015 administration. More students than ever before indicate that becoming a community leader represents either a “very important” or “essential” life objective (39.8%), up 3.4 percentage points over 2014. Students in 2015 also express strong commitment toward improving their understanding of other countries and cultures. Representing the greatest level of support for this item since we added it to the survey in 2002, nearly three in five (59.2%) rate this goal as “very important” or “essential,” jumping 8.4 percentage points compared to 2014.

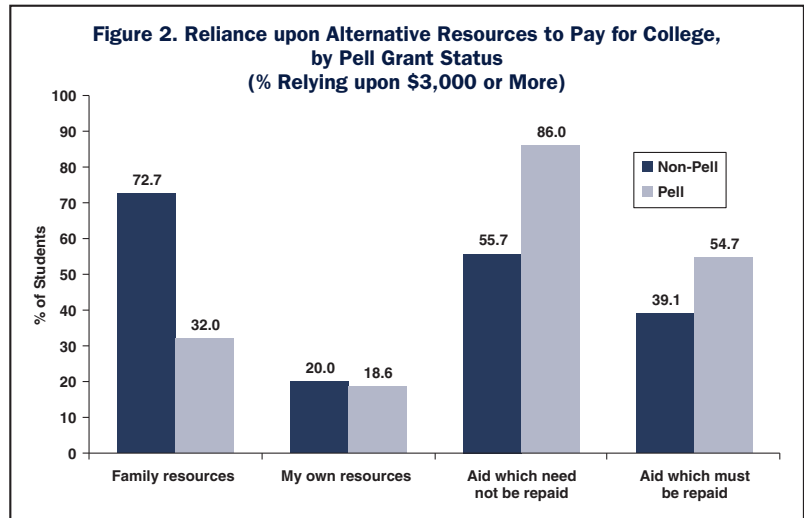
Several other life objectives exhibit substantial increases over previous years yet fall short of achieving all-time highs. For example, students in 2015 place greater emphasis on wanting to help promote racial understanding (41.2% rating “very important” or “essential”) and wanting to influence social values (43.9% rating “very important” or “essential”). Students also seem to be substantially more committed to political engagement, as 22.3% report influencing the political structure as a “very important” or “essential” life objective. Roughly four in 10 students (40.4%) also indicate that keeping up-to-date with political affairs represents a “very important” or “essential” objective.

We expect new forms of student activism to take place throughout 2016 given the presidential elections and the myriad national issues that matter to U.S. college students (e.g., gun violence, racism and discrimination, immigration, college accessibility and affordability), and college students could play a vital role in upcoming federal, state, and local elections. At the very least, it seems clear that the entering college class of 2015 expects to be more involved with and committed to these issues than those who came before them.

**PELL GRANT RECIPIENTS FACE SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES IN PAYING FOR COLLEGE**

The ways in which students finance their college education persists as a perennial policy concern, particularly with respect to individuals from low-income backgrounds. The 2015 CIRP Freshman Survey includes a new bank of items about specific types of financial aid students rely upon to fund college expenses, including work-study, military benefits, and Pell grants. Pell grants provide low-income college students with funds that do not have to be repaid. Just over one-quarter of first-time, full-time freshmen (26.6%) self-identify as having received a Pell grant.

For most low-income students attending a four-year college or university, the Pell grant represents a necessary but insufficient source of funding to pay for college given that the maximum



award for the Pell grant is \$5,775 for the 2015–16 academic year (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Thus, the Pell grant on its own may not cover the entire cost of attendance, including tuition, fees, room, board, and books (Gault, Reichlin, & Román, 2014). Many Pell grant recipients must therefore rely upon other forms of financial aid and income from employment to cover all of the various expenses incurred as a college student.

Figure 2 highlights the disparity between Pell recipients and non-recipients with respect to their reliance upon family resources to fund their first-year educational expenses. Less than one-third of Pell recipients (32%) anticipate utilizing \$3,000 or more in family resources to cover first-year educational expenses compared to nearly three-quarters (72.7%) of students who did not receive a Pell grant. Further, when looking solely at the highest value in the range of responses (\$15,000 or more), 40.2% of non-recipients expect this contribution from their family, compared to 5.2% of Pell recipients.

Pell recipients instead rely more heavily upon need- and merit-based aid, loans, and employment. More than half of Pell recipients (54.7%) report having taken out at least \$3,000 in loans to finance their first-year educational expenses compared to 39.1% of students who did not receive a Pell grant. In fact, more than one-third of Pell recipients (35.9%), compared to 27.1% of non-recipients, have taken out at least \$15,000 in loans to cover their first-year expenses. A greater proportion of Pell recipients also report receiving merit-based aid compared to non-recipients (60% v. 46%). Additionally, nearly half (45.4%) of Pell recipients report having received work-study funds—more than 30 percentage points higher than students without Pell grants (11.1%).

**GOOD JOBS AND GRADUATE SCHOOLS GAIN FAVOR IN THE COLLEGE CHOICE PROCESS**

In recent years, the percentage of students reporting economic and practical factors as “very important” in their choice of where to go to college has increased. Specifically, students now give more weight to post-college opportunities in their selection of

**Students now give more weight to post-college opportunities in their selection of a specific college.**

a specific college (see Table 1). The importance that students place on graduates’ ability to get good jobs and graduates’ admission to top graduate or professional schools has increased substantially since these questions first appeared on the CIRP Freshman Survey in 1983. While the ability of graduates to obtain good jobs has always weighed heavily as a factor

**EXAMINING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH**

The 2015 CIRP Freshman Survey has introduced several new items that aim to improve the instrument’s inclusivity. For the first time, students can identify their sexual orientation and indicate if they are transgender. Additionally, we have made an important change to questions about students’ parents. We decided to remove “mother” and “father” from the survey to be more inclusive of today’s families; prior to answering questions about parents’ education, careers, and religious affiliations, students are asked to mark the sex for “parent/guardian 1” and “parent/guardian 2.”

Of the students who provided an answer to the sexual orientation item (8.8% of respondents in the normed sample skipped this question), 93.2% of students identify as heterosexual/straight.

Distributions for the other categories are as follows: 3.2% identify as bisexual, 1.4% as “other,” 1.1% as gay, 0.6% as lesbian, and 0.5% as queer. Of those who provided a response to the question about transgender identity, 0.3% identify as transgender. Additionally, 0.6% of respondents indicate having same-sex parents/guardians. Below we provide some breakouts of the data by students’ sexual orientation.

Students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or “other” (LGBQ/other) more frequently have felt overwhelmed

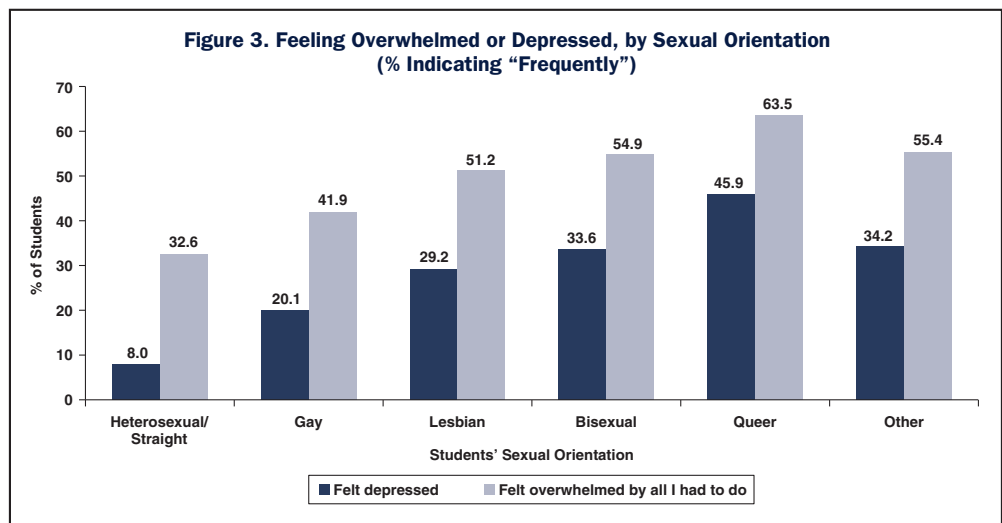
and depressed in the past year compared to their heterosexual/straight classmates. Figure 3 shows the proportion of students who report having felt “frequently” overwhelmed by all they had to do and “frequently” depressed in the past year broken out by their sexual orientation identity. Students identifying as queer are the most likely to have felt overwhelmed by all they had to do

**Table 1. Recent Increases in Importance of Practical and Economic Factors in Students’ College Choice Process, 2012–2015**

(% Indicating “Very Important”)	2012	2013	2014	2015
This college has a very good academic reputation	63.8	64.0	65.4	69.7
This college’s graduates gain admission to top graduate/professional schools	32.8	33.0	32.9	37.6
This college’s graduates get good jobs	55.9	53.1	53.4	60.1

in students’ college decision-making process, 60.1% of students indicate this consideration as a “very important” factor in 2015, representing an all-time high for this item.

Similarly, even though admission to graduate school has been an important consideration for about a third of college freshmen every year, it has increased to 37.6% in 2015, which may correspond to students’ increasing aspirations for advanced degrees (Eagan et al., 2014). Since the item first appeared on the survey, the good academic reputation of the institution has maintained its status as the factor considered “very important” for the greatest proportion of students. In 2015, 69.7% of students rated this factor as “very important,” representing a 4.3 percentage-point increase from 2014 and the highest level of importance this item has ever achieved.



(63.5% frequently) and to have felt depressed (45.9% frequently) in the past year. Similarly, more than half of bisexual students have felt overwhelmed by all they had to do (54.9% frequently) while about one-third of bisexual students have felt depressed (33.6% frequently) in the past year. By contrast, heterosexual/straight students are far less likely to report “frequently” feeling overwhelmed or depressed (32.6% and 8%, respectively) in the past year. Rates of “frequently” feeling overwhelmed for LGBTQ/other students exceed those of heterosexual/straight students by 9.3 to 30.9 percentage points; the gaps for “frequently” feeling depressed range from 12 to 37.9 percentage points.

### INCOMING FRESHMEN CONTINUE DRIFTING LEFT POLITICALLY

The CIRP Freshman Survey provides several data points that might be instructive as the 2016 election approaches. For the past several years, greater proportions of students have identified as either “liberal” or “far left.” Roughly one-third of the students (33.5%) who entered a four-year institution in the fall of 2015 identify as “liberal” or “far left,” 1.8 percentage points higher than in 2014 and 3.9 points higher than in 2012. This figure represents the highest proportion of left-leaning students since 36.4% of students identified as liberal or far left in 1973. About one in five students (21.6%) identify as “conservative” or “far right,” which was similar to 2014 when 21% of students did the same.

In addition to students’ political orientations, their political views seem increasingly aligned with progressive or liberal platforms. More than half of incoming freshmen (52.3%) agree that students from disadvantaged social backgrounds should be given preferential treatment in the college admissions process, which is up 10.4 percentage points above the level reported in 2012—before the Supreme Court initially weighed in on the first iteration of the *Fisher v. University of Texas* case.

The statement that women should receive the same salary and opportunities for advancement as men in comparable positions

has near universal support with 95.4% of incoming freshmen endorsing this view. Support for the legalization of marijuana has also garnered greater favor with this year’s entering cohort, as 56.4% of students support legalizing marijuana—7.3 percentage points higher than when we last asked it on the 2011 instrument. Additionally, nearly two-thirds of respondents (63.5%) believe that abortion should be legal.

Finally, just over half (50.3%) of students reported their chances of voting in a local, state, or national election were “very good.” This year, 59.8% of students think that they are very likely to vote in an election while in college. Students who entered four-year colleges for the first time in 2015 are sending signals that they expect to be incredibly committed to political and civic engagement, and findings pertaining to students’ expectations to participate in elections further underscore that point.


### SOURCE:

Eagan, K., Stolzenberg, E. B., Bates, A. K., Aragon, M. C., Suchard, M. R., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2015). *The American freshman: National norms fall 2015*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

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