

Findings from the 2015 Your First College Year Survey

October 2015

INTRODUCTION

Developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and the Policy Center on the First Year of College in 2000, the Your First College Year survey (YFCY) is administered annually through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the University of California, Los Angeles. The YFCY was the first national survey designed specifically to measure student development in the first year of college, and it is distributed to students at the end of their first year of college. The YFCY was administered for the 16th time in the Spring of 2015, when 11,267 students at 46 institutions participated in the survey.

FINANCES CAN WEIGH ON FIRST-YEARS

With rising college costs and increasing debt loads among college students, affordability has become an important concern. Thus, finances can weigh heavily on incoming college students and their families, potentially influencing many of their decisions. They may be taking out large loans or working part-time to help pay for their education, all while adjusting to college during the first year. While the majority of students (81.1%) were able to secure grants or scholarships to help with expenses, almost six out of ten (58.0%) students still took out loans to cover the first year of college. About one in five (21.3%) students took out \$10,000 or more in loans, and over the course of four or more years of college this debt can add up quickly, potentially impacting life after college.

Students who took out loans during the first year were more likely to be concerned about paying for college, especially compared to those receiving financial support from their family, as shown in Table 1. Of the students who took out at least \$10,000 in loans, 35.4% had “major” and 55.8% had “some” concerns about their ability to finance their college education. Students who took out no loans or less than \$10,000 in loans were less likely to share this sentiment, with fewer than a quarter (22.4%) of students who took out \$1–\$9,999

Table 1. First-Year Students with “Major” Concerns About Paying for College, by Financial Resource (N=10,230)

Financial Resource	None (%)	Amount	
		\$1–\$9,999 (%)	\$10,000 or more (%)
Loans	9.3	22.4	35.4
Scholarships/Grants	10.3	23.4	20.7
Familial Support	32.3	25.6	11.5

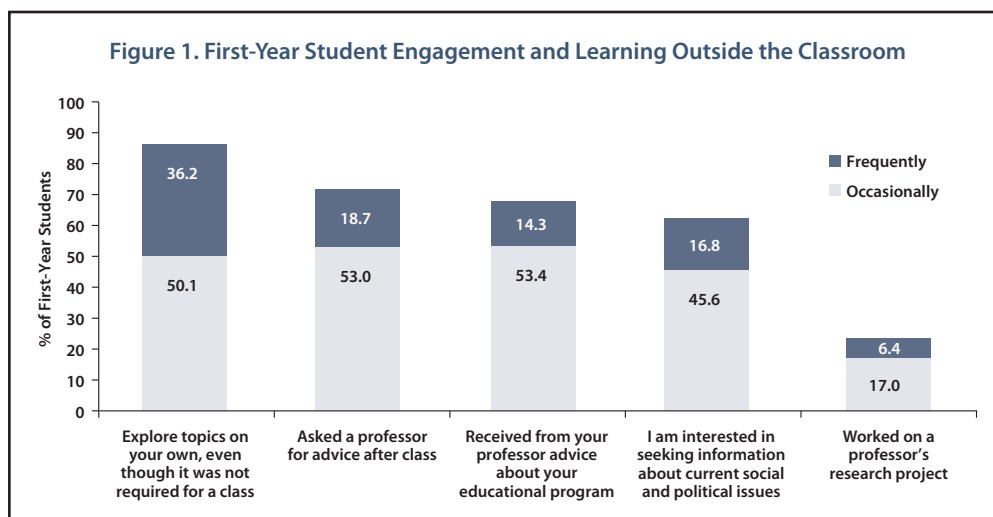
in loans and only 9.3% of students who did not take out any loans having “major” concerns. Many students (42.8%) took advantage of financial aid advising. Of the first-year students who utilized financial aid advising, about six out of ten were satisfied with the financial aid office (60.2%) and their financial aid package (59.0%).

Students also reported that they worked at least six hours a week on campus (16.1%) and/or off campus (14.8%). Working on campus may be more flexible when it comes to working around classes or schoolwork in addition to the convenience of being on campus. In fact, of the students who reported working six or more hours per week, those who worked off campus (25.8%) were more likely than those who worked on campus (13.2%) to “frequently” feel like their job responsibilities interfered with their schoolwork. In addition, many of these students who worked six or more hours a week either on campus (25.2%) or off campus (21.2%) are feeling the stress of paying for college and reported “major” concerns about financing their education.

LEARNING IN AND OUT OF THE CLASSROOM

First-year students are learning both in and out of the classroom. Inside the classroom, most students have asked questions (89.5%) or contributed to class discussions (95.7%). However, fewer students engage in these activities *frequently*. While almost all students stated that they have asked questions in class, only a third (32.3%) have done so “frequently” and about four

Figure 1. First-Year Student Engagement and Learning Outside the Classroom



out of ten (42.8%) first-year students had “frequently” contributed to class discussions.

It is important that faculty encourage students to engage in the classroom and create an environment conducive to active learning. Students who asked questions in class and participated in class discussions were also likely to be satisfied with the quality of instruction they were receiving. About eight out of ten students who “frequently” engaged in class by either asking questions (82.1%) or contributing to class discussions (83.1%) were either “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with the quality of instruction.

Faculty engage with students beyond in-class instruction (see Figure 1). Most first-year students (81.3%) have asked a professor for advice after class (although only 21.2% approached faculty “frequently”), and two-thirds (67.6%) have received advice or guidance about their educational program. Some students have already engaged with their professors in research, as almost a quarter (23.4%) of students worked on a professor’s research project during their first year of college. Many first-years (44.5%) took a course or seminar specifically designed to connect them with faculty. In fact, such first-year seminars may lead to conducting research with faculty. Of the students who have worked on a professor’s research project, almost half (48.7%) of them have also taken such a course.

In addition to research opportunities with faculty, students also sought out other opportunities to learn outside the classroom. When it came to exploring topics on their own, even though it was not required for a class, half (50.1%) of first-years did so “occasionally,” and roughly another third (36.2%) did so “frequently.” Signaling the importance of being a part of diverse communities, about six out of ten (62.5%) first-year students reported that they are interested in seeking

information about current social and political issues. And almost nine out of ten (88.3%) students agreed that their college experience has exposed them to diverse opinions, cultures, and values.

BALANCE AND WELL-BEING

The first year of college is a time of adjustment as students attempt to balance academic challenges with new levels of personal freedom and responsibility.

Exercise, diet, sleep, and socializing become more of a choice as students move away from home. With this newfound freedom, about two-thirds (65.1%) of first-year students reported that they found it “very easy” or “somewhat easy” to adjust to the academic demands of college and most (79.1%) agreed that they found a balance between academics and extracurricular activities. Looking more closely, however, only 13.9% of respondents “strongly agree” they have achieved this balance. Among students who “strongly agreed” they found balance, 40.9% also “frequently” received adequate sleep, about half (49%) “frequently” maintained a healthy diet, and nearly two-thirds (64.7%) rated themselves as “above average” or in the “highest 10%” compared to their peers in terms of physical health. Many of these students may be learning by trial and error but could be taught skills to help them achieve a healthier balance earlier on. Colleges may want to reexamine their first-year student orientations to determine if they can incorporate topics such as time management, diet, exercise, and proper sleep.

The first year of college can come with high academic demands. During the first year, more than two-thirds (69.5%) of students spent six or more hours per week studying. With much of the week spent on academics, either in the classroom or studying, exercising may become less of a priority for first-year college students. Less than one-third (30.6%) of students exercised six or more hours per week during their first year of college. Looking more closely, there was a significant gender gap with respect to time spent exercising: 40% of men exercised at least six hours per week compared to 25.5% of women.

Finding time and motivation to exercise can be challenging to first-year students, but doing so contributes to a healthy lifestyle. In fact, only 45.0% of all first-years

reported their physical health to be “above average” or in the “highest 10%” compared to their peers. Further, men (59%) were much more likely than women (37.3%) to rate themselves as “above average” or in the “highest 10%” on physical health, more than a 20-point gap. Likewise, more than half (50.4%) of female first-year students “occasionally” or “frequently” worried about their health, significantly higher than the rate for men (40.5%). Noting the importance of time management and its role in living a healthy lifestyle, 57.1% of first-years who found managing their time effectively “very easy” also rated themselves “above average” or in the “highest 10%” in physical health. Once again, colleges can offer workshops and discussions during orientations that emphasize the importance of regular exercise, highlight campus facilities and opportunities, and stress the importance of integrating time for exercise into personal calendars and time management tools.

SUPPORT NETWORKS

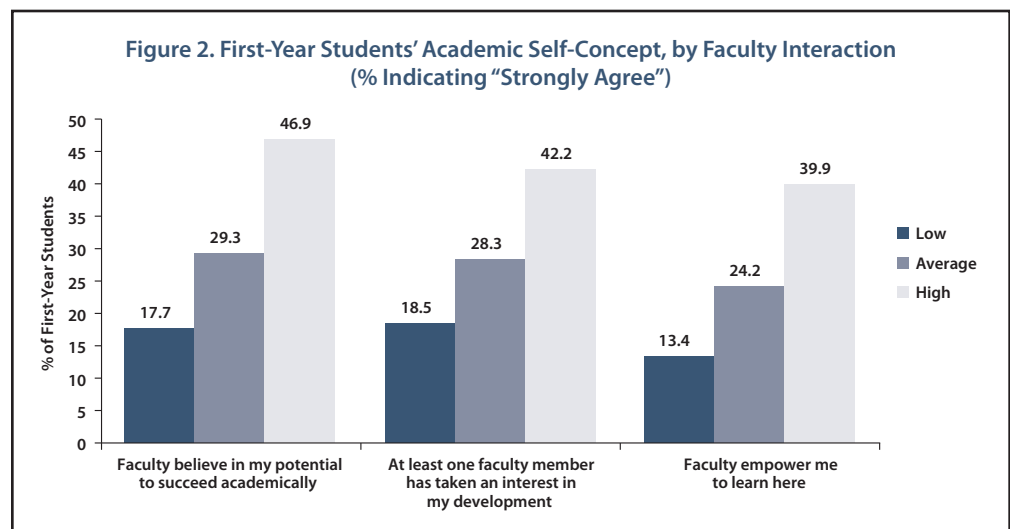
Between adjusting to college academics, taking on new financial responsibilities, and balancing it all with social activities and a healthy lifestyle, it is important for students to connect with others, forming networks of support. This support can come from family, other students, faculty and staff, or other resources available on campus. Family, in particular, seems to be a source of support for most students; 58.4% “frequently” and 31.4% “occasionally” felt support from their family to succeed. Turning to other students was also common among first-year students. In fact, three-quarters (75.5%) of students received advice or counseling from their peers.

Professors play an important role in supporting students academically. To this point, the majority of first-year students “agreed” or “agreed strongly” that their professors empower them to learn (87.7%) and believe in their potential to succeed academically (89.2%). As shown in Figure 2, first-years who have a higher academic self-concept are more likely to “strongly agree” (46.9%) that their professors believe in their potential to succeed compared to students with average (29.3%) or low (17.7%) academic self-concept. And showing that mentoring relationships

between professors and students begin early in college, most students (83.5%) “agreed” or “agreed strongly” that at least one faculty member had taken an interest in their development. But again, it is the students who have a high academic self-concept (or rate themselves high on academic and math ability, drive to achieve, and intellectual self-confidence) who are most likely to “strongly agree” (42.2%) that faculty have taken an interest in their development. By comparison, students who rate themselves as “average” (28.3%) or “below average” (18.5%) on academic self-concept are less likely to agree that faculty take an interest in their development. This can be problematic, as students who feel less confident academically may also feel the least supported by their professors.

Making connections to staff on campus also adds to the varied support network for students. About three-quarters of first-year students believed that staff had encouraged them to get involved in campus activities (76.9%) and had also recognized them for their achievements (75.8%). While critics of higher education raise concerns about rising costs of staff and administration, it is important to note that staff often provide students with important support services, whether in the residence halls, through academic or student club advising, or administrative support, such as the financial aid office.

Counselors are also critical in creating a supportive network for students during college, as counseling centers are safe places for students to go when they need support and guidance. The first year can be very stressful and bring a lot of change. During the first year, about one in five (22.1%) students utilized psychological services. And of those students, almost two-thirds (62.9%) were satisfied with the psychological services on campus.



SUMMER PLANS

A new question added to the Your First College Year Survey in 2015 asked students about their plans for the upcoming summer. The majority of students (83.7%) reported that they planned on working for pay over the summer. Although 30.0% of respondents planned on participating in an internship, men (34.5%) were more likely to take on an internship than women (27.5%). Students who took out \$10,000 or more in loans were less likely to anticipate having an internship after the first year (24.3%) than students who received \$10,000 or more in grants and scholarships (29.9%). In fact, nine out of ten (90.0%) students who borrowed at least \$10,000 planned on working for pay during the summer months. Many students planned on forgoing a total break from college over the summer, as 17.7% intended to take a summer course at their current institution and more than one-quarter (25.9%) planned to take a summer course at another institution. To show that summer is not all work and school, two-thirds (66.1%) of students planned on traveling during the summer after completing their first-year of college.

FOLLOWING UP ON 2014 ENTERING FRESHMEN

Connecting the YFCY Survey to the CIRP Freshman Survey allows us to match students longitudinally and track their growth over time. More than 6,500 (n=6,547) took both the 2014 Freshman Survey at college entry and the 2015 Your First College Year Survey at the end of the initial year.

The 2014 *American Freshman* (Eagan et al., 2014) highlighted a decrease in self-rated spirituality among incoming freshmen from 1996 (44.0% rated themselves

as “above average” or “highest 10%”) to 2014 (only 35.7% did so). Of the students who rated themselves as “above average” or “highest 10%” in spirituality at college entry, 42.7% maintained those self-ratings, and 56.1% reported that they had strengthened their religious beliefs during the first year. By contrast, 15.7% of first-year students who entered college with a “below average” or “lowest 10%” self-rated spirituality felt that they had strengthened their religious beliefs.

Incoming freshmen also socialized with friends less frequently in 2014. Whereas in 1987, 37.9% of freshmen reported socializing 16 or more hours per week, only 18.1% spent that much time socializing in 2014. This continues to decline during the first year. Among those students who reported socializing 16 or more hours during the year prior to college enrollment, 39.3% continued socializing with friends at the same rate and another 43.0% reduced that time to 6–15 hours per week.

The first year of college presents a transitional time for students. Financial concerns and physical and emotional well-being can weigh on students as they adjust to the academic and social demands of college. Fortunately, students also seem to be accessing the suite of programs and services offered by their institutions to assist with this transition.

REFERENCES

Eagan, M. K., Stolzenberg, E. B., Ramirez, J. J., Aragon, M. C., Suchard, M. R., & Hurtado, S. (2014). *The American freshman: National norms fall 2014*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute.



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.



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 more than 15 million students from some 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.

Research Directors

Cecilia Rios-Aguilar, HERI Director
Kevin Eagan, CIRP Director
Ellen B. Stolzenberg, CIRP Assistant Director

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
Sylvia Hurtado, Professor
Patricia M. McDonough, Professor
Linda J. Sax, Professor
Victor B. Sáenz, Associate Professor, University of Texas at Austin