

RESEARCH BRIEF

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT UCLA



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2016 YOUR FIRST COLLEGE YEAR SURVEY

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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. Fifty-four institutions participated in the 17th administration of the YFCY in the Spring of 2016. The sample consists of 18,529 students at these institutions, in addition to a supplemental sample.

TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

For many institutions the shaping of the first-year class begins during student orientation. This all but universal practice has received positive reviews from students as nearly two-thirds (63.3%) of first-year students were satisfied with their orientation experience. An additional method of creating a unified class was the introduction of common book programs, in which all incoming students read the same book before arriving on campus. In fact, 30% of students indicated that they participated in a common book or summer reading program. However, when we examine the types of institutions these students attended, we see that religious institutions are more likely to offer a common book or summer reading program than their nonsectarian peer institutions. Specifically, students who attend Catholic four-year colleges were the most likely to participate in a common book program (57.4%). Contrast that with public four-year colleges, where only one-tenth of the students (10.6%) had participated in such a program.

To support students on campus during their freshman year, many campuses offer some type of first-year programming, designed to facilitate smooth adjustment to college, both academically and emotionally. Some examples of first-year programming include first-year seminars, learning communities, and linked courses. For the cohort completing their freshman year in Spring of 2016, around half of the students indicated that they had taken a first-year seminar designed to: help students adjust to college life (51.4%), connect faculty and students in academic inquiry (48.8%), or help students adjust to college-level academics (52.2%).

Despite efforts to help students acclimate, first-years also reported struggles in terms of adjusting both academically and emotionally. The challenge to adapt to the new demands of being a college student was a significant

concern for numerous first-years. While the majority of students said this transition to college academics was “somewhat” or “very easy”, more than a third (35.1%) of students suggested this was a difficult process for them. For instance, some students indicated that it was “somewhat” or “very difficult” to manage their time effectively (47.2%), develop effective study skills (35.7%), and understand what the professors expect (16.4%).

Table 1. Students' Participation in Common Summer Reading Programs, by Institution Type

Institution Type	% Students at each Institution Type
Catholic 4-year Colleges	57.4
Other Religious 4-year Colleges	41.7
Nonsectarian 4-year Colleges	29.3
Public Universities	21.2
Private Universities	20.0
Private 2-year Colleges	16.3
Public 4-year Colleges	10.6

When further examining these adjustment measures, certain groups had a more difficult time adjusting than others. For example, 43.6% of Black and 39.8% of Hispanic students found it “somewhat” or “very difficult” to develop effective study skills. In contrast, only 31.9% of their White peers indicated this same level of difficulty. Similarly, over half of the Black and Hispanic students (51.9% and 53.8%, respectively) reported that it was “somewhat” or “very difficult” to manage their time effectively, compared with only 43.3% of White students.

Students expressed some difficulty emotionally in



adjusting to college life as well, as their first year in higher education brought feelings of loneliness and isolation. Specifically, almost three-quarters (71.4%) reported that they “occasionally” or “frequently” felt lonely or homesick and over half (56.7%) said that they “occasionally” or “frequently” felt isolated from campus life. The great majority of students also indicated that they felt overwhelmed by all they had to do, with 94.5% feeling this way “occasionally” or “frequently.” Moreover, students also expressed that since they entered college, they have “occasionally” or “frequently” felt depressed (63.5%).

As we further examine the college transition in terms of emotional adjustment, we find that more students who identified as racially “other” (19.9%), two or more races (20.3%), and Black (20.2%) “frequently” felt lonely or homesick than their White (16.2%) and Hispanic (17.4%) peers.

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SAFETY ON CAMPUS

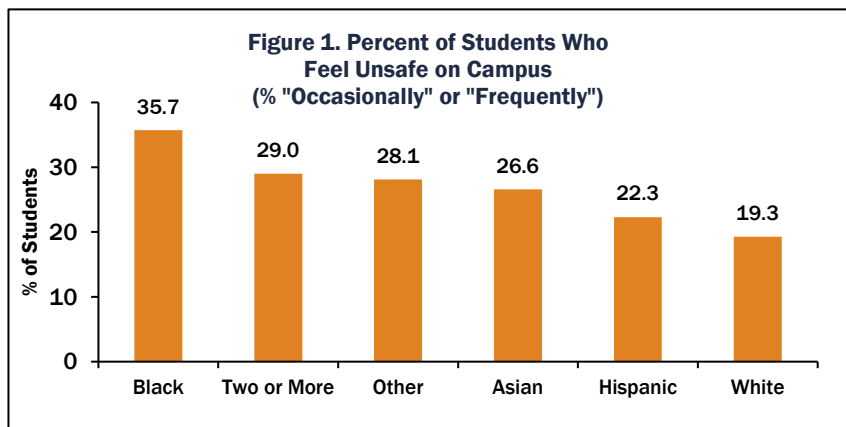
With increased attention being given to rising rates of violence on college campuses (e.g., sexual assault, mass shootings), it is important to better understand students’ perceptions of safety during their first year in college. While the majority of students in general feel safe on their campuses, there is still a significant proportion of students who are concerned about their safety. Nearly one-quarter (23.6%) of respondents indicated that they “occasionally” or “frequently” felt unsafe on their campus and one-quarter (24.9%) believe that sexual violence is prevalent on their campus as well.

These perceptions of safety are even more alarming when we look at the differences by sex. Female students were much more likely to feel unsafe (28.1%) and to believe that sexual violence is prevalent on campus (27.2%) than their male counterparts (15.5% and 20.9%, respectively). Looking at campus safety by racial distinctions reveals some differences as well. Black students are much more likely to be concerned with their safety on campus, with over one-third (35.7%) of them indicating that they “occasionally” or “frequently” felt unsafe, when compared to all the other racial groups (ranging from 19.3% to 29.0%). Black students (30.8%) and students who identified their ethnicity as “other” (29.5%) also had the highest percentages among all the racial groups when it came to their agreement with the opinion that sexual violence is prevalent on their campus (“agree” and “strongly agree”).

Students’ satisfaction with respect for the expression of diverse beliefs also correlated with student perceptions of safety. For instance, students who “frequently” felt unsafe were more likely (20.7%) to be “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with the respect for diverse beliefs, compared to

their peers who were not concerned about their safety (3.8%). Finally, students’ perceptions of safety also seemed to connect to whether or not they would re-enroll at their current institution if given the choice. Nearly half of the students who “frequently” felt unsafe on their campus said they would “probably not” or “definitely not” choose their current institution again (47.1%) compared to very few (13.5%) students who perceived their campus as a safe place.

Specifically, with regards to sexual violence, students who believed that this was a prevalent problem on campus also expressed dissatisfaction with certain components of the campus. For example, students who “strongly agreed” were more likely (12.3%) to be “dissatisfied” or “very dissatisfied” with the gender diversity of the faculty compared to students who did not believe (3.0%) that sexual violence was an issue on campus (“strongly disagree”).

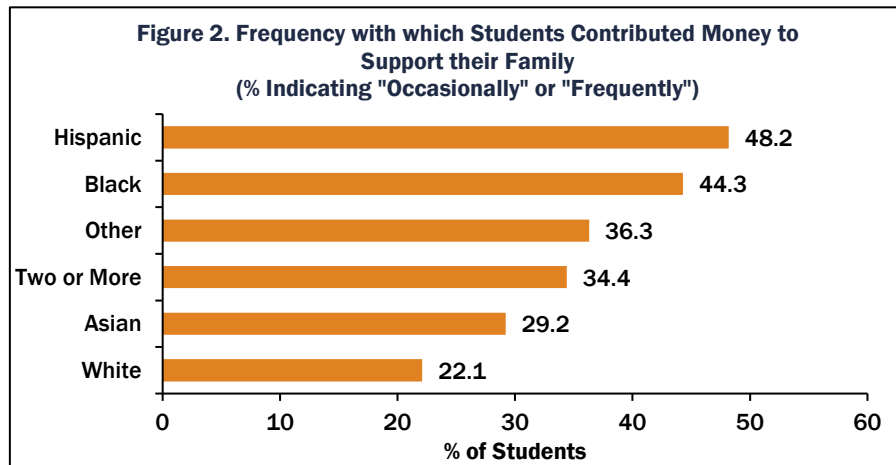


CONNECTIONS TO FAMILY

Leaving home to go away to college can be a stressful part of the first-year experience for many students. Fortunately for today’s students, going away to college does not mean that they lose contact with their families. Accordingly, 35.9% of students maintained daily contact with their parents or guardians and 23.8% interacted with their siblings or extended family on a daily basis. While connecting via email, Skype, or phone is a popular way to stay in touch, approximately one in five first-year students (19.7%) frequently went home for the weekend.

For many students the physical act of being at home and remaining in daily communication with their family was a regular part of their life. For a similar percentage of students, helping support their family financially was commonplace. Nearly a quarter (22.4%) of students reported that they “occasionally” contributed money to help support their family, while 6.5% “frequently” did so. These proportions are significantly more pronounced for underrepresented racial minorities. Hispanic students contributed at the highest rate, as nearly half (48.2%) reported they had contributed to their families, while 44.3% of African American students contributed money to help support their families. These proportions mark a stark contrast from Asian and White students who reported contributing to their families at lower rates (29.2% and 22.1%, respectively).

Supporting one’s family or remaining in frequent contact with family while in college may be a necessity for some students and families, but such responsibilities could interfere with students’ schoolwork. According to survey



respondents, over a third of first-year students (34.1%) felt their family responsibilities interfered with their schoolwork. This stressor was felt at higher rates for students who frequently went home for the weekend, as 50.4% felt that their responsibilities interfered with their school work. Similarly, 60.1% of students who worked a full-time job and 64.4% of students who frequently contributed money to their family felt that their family responsibilities interfered with their schoolwork. The importance of familial relations in college cannot be understated, but the aforementioned findings may suggest that family can be both a source of support and stress for first-year college students.

SEXUALITY

In 2015, CIRP made it possible for respondents to identify their sexual orientation across all the student surveys. This offered an incredible opportunity to understand more about populations that have been frequently overlooked. Of students who identified their sexuality at the conclusion of their first year, 87.3% identified as heterosexual/straight, 5.8% as bisexual, 2.5% as other, 1.9% as gay, 1.6% as queer, and 1.0% as lesbian.

Among both males and females, the vast majority identify as heterosexual/straight (89.9% and 85.9%, respectively). However, when we look at bisexual, queer, and other, more females identify with these sexual orientations. For example, females were over twice as likely to identify as bisexual than males (7.4% and 3.1%, respectively). Females (2.0%) were two-and-a-half times more likely to identify as queer than males (0.8%). The same pattern holds for “other” as a sexual orientation as well, where females (3.1%) identified as “other” at more than twice the rate of males (1.3%).

Connecting to the new campus community is an important process for students in their first year of college. However, data from this 2016 iteration of the YFCY indicate that establishing this connection is more difficult for students who identify as a sexual minority. For instance,

queer students were twice as likely to express that they have “frequently” felt isolated from campus life as heterosexual/straight students (31.8% and 14.6%, respectively). Additionally, students who identify as “other” reported that it was “somewhat” or “very difficult” for them to develop close friendships with other students at higher rates (40.9%) than their heterosexual/straight peers (26.8%). Finally, although only 1.0% of all respondents, lesbian students reported that since entering college they “frequently” felt depressed at nearly three times (41.5%) the rate of heterosexual/straight students (15.8%).

Academic adjustment was also more difficult for students who identified as a sexual minority. For example, queer students were more likely to admit that developing effective study skills was “difficult” or “very difficult” (46.5%) compared to their heterosexual/straight peers (34.8%). Similarly, lesbian students reported that adjusting to the academic demands of college was “difficult” or “very difficult” for them (40.9%). Comparatively, fewer heterosexual/straight students expressed that this was difficult for them (35.2%) and even fewer gay students shared this belief as well (27.7%). Time management was a struggle for all students, but was especially prevalent for students who identified as bisexual. For this group of students, over half (55.0%) indicated that managing their time effectively was “difficult” or “very difficult” for them. This is nearly ten percentage points higher than students who identified as heterosexual/straight (46.4%).

SUMMER PLANS

Questions about summer plans are a more recent addition to the YFCY and gave students the option to “mark all that apply.” The data reveal that students take advantage of multiple opportunities during the summer. For first-year college students with summer plans, holding a job during the summer was the most frequent response with 84.0% answering that they planned to work for pay. The next most frequent responses were to travel (71.6%), volunteer work (53.8%), obtaining an internship (34.0%), taking a course at another institution (20.8%), and taking a course at their current institution (17.2%).

Black and Asian students are far more likely to participate in an internship after their first year in college than the other racial groups. Specifically, 41.2% of Black students and 43.8% of Asian students indicated that they would be participating in an internship, yet only 32.1% of Hispanic students and 30.2% of White students had this same plan. In terms of taking courses at another institution over the summer, students of color were more likely to plan to do this, with approximately one-quarter of the students in each racial group indicating they had this plan. In contrast, only 17.4% of White students planned to take courses at another institution. Finally, while most students planned to

travel over the summer, Hispanic students had this plan less frequently (60.3%) compared to all other racial groups, in which nearly three-quarters of the students in each group indicated that they planned to engage in summer travel.

With an increased number of employers looking for students who have had relevant internships in college, the career services office has become an important department on many campuses. For a great number of students, the summer after freshman year is the first opportunity to participate in an internship, yet just over a third (34.0%) of students even plan to have an internship that summer. Regardless of how important the career services office may be in securing an internship, over three-fifths (61.0%) of students have “never” utilized career services. However, for those who plan to have an internship, over half (50.9%) used the career services office compared to the 32.8% of students who did not plan to intern during their summer break.

Students’ summer plans are also related to the extent to which students believe their institution has given them certain skills. For example, 40.1% of students who are participating in a summer internship indicate that they “strongly agree” that their institution contributed to their intellectual and practical skills. Similarly, students who plan to volunteer over the summer are more likely to say that their institution contributed to their understanding of problems in their community (26.5%) compared to students who do not plan to volunteer (19.7%). These same students who plan to volunteer also credited their institution with contributing to their ability to work as part of a team at higher rates (30.7%) than students who were not intending to volunteer (23.7%).

FOLLOWING UP ON 2015 ENTERING FRESHMEN

Pairing the 2015 Freshman Survey (TFS) with the 2016 YFCY provides us with the ability to longitudinally measure students throughout their first year of college. There were 9,331 students that took both the TFS and the YFCY.

Historically high rates of students engaged in or

passionate about student activism was a lead story from the 2015 TFS (Eagan et al., 2015). Of first-year students who responded to both the TFS and YFCY, 11.6% responded that there was a “very good chance” that they would participate in a protest, while only 21.2% said there was “no chance.” The TFS asked students if they would participate in a protest at any point during their college career, and data suggest that students are already fulfilling that expectation. Over three-fifths (60.8%) of students who reported that there was a “very good chance” that they would participate in a protest and over one-third (34.9%) of students who said there was “some chance” did participate in a protest during their first year. What is perhaps even more interesting is that 16.6% of students who initially reported there was “very little chance” and 11.1% of students who responded there was “no chance” that they would participate in a protest, had in fact done so in their first year of college. These students still have the majority of their college career to get involved in social causes that they care about, but it appears that many are already off to an active start.

A significant proportion of students who reported that they were interested in participating in a protest in their college career had already done so in their first year of college.

REFERENCES

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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