

RESEARCH BRIEF

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT UCLA



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2017 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. Thirty institutions participated in the 18th administration of the YFCY in the Spring of 2017. The sample consists of 8,264 first-time, full-time students at these institutions.

EDUCATIONAL RISKS AND COMPLEX THINKING

The college classroom is a space for first-year students to tackle new educational challenges and experiences. Students are exposed to concepts and modes of learning that may not have been present in their high school classrooms. Survey data suggests that students are rising to the occasion, such as the 41.1% who reported frequently taking on a challenge that scared them. Students also recognize that learning is not equated with perfect performance in the classroom. Well over half (61.7%) said they frequently accepted mistakes as part of the learning process.

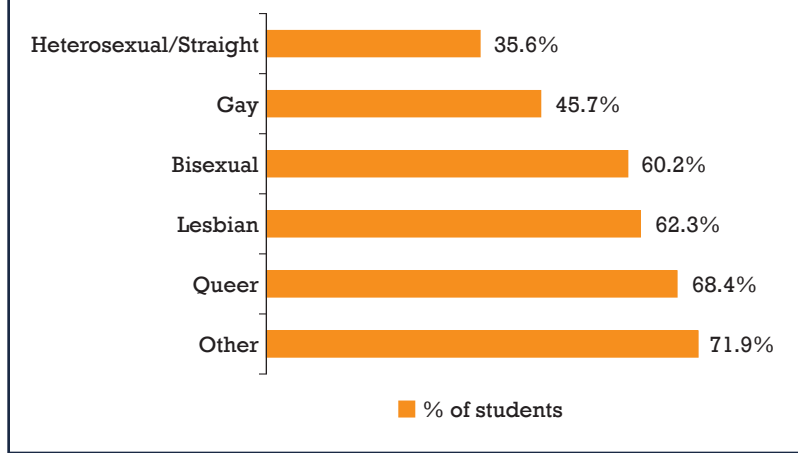
Students are also engaging in complex thinking. For example, 55.0% said that they frequently analyzed multiple sources of information before coming to a conclusion. This is especially encouraging given current conversations about the importance of evaluating the credibility of news sources. Additionally, 61.8% of students frequently supported their opinions with a logical argument, and 47.3% frequently sought alternative solutions to problems. When examining these complex thinking areas by grouping students in STEM majors versus students in non-STEM majors, students in each group report roughly the same level of frequent engagement in these activities. For example, 53.1% of students in STEM majors report that they frequently analyzed multiple sources of information before coming to a conclusion compared to 55.5% of students in non-STEM majors. Taken in total, these findings demonstrate that students are already engaging in sophisticated, high-level thinking during their first year of college. These habits appear to be serving students well, as 46.8% reported that their overall grade average as of their most recently completed academic term was an A+, A, or A-.

WELLNESS

While first-year students' openness to challenging themselves in the classroom is encouraging, wellness is an area of concern. These findings present themselves in students' daily habits as well as their overall perceptions of themselves. Only one-quarter (25.2%) of students reported that they frequently maintained a healthy diet. Relatedly, nearly one in five students (19.1%) shared that they never had adequate sleep since entering college. This is significant because a healthy diet and adequate sleep are crucial components of overall wellness and success in school. Students who reported major concerns about their ability to finance their education frequently maintained a healthy diet at lower rates (16.8%) than students with no concerns (31.5%). Similarly, students with major financial concerns report never having adequate sleep since entering college at more than twice the rate (29.7%) of students with no concerns (14.0%). Additionally, 23.1% of students reported below average or extremely low emotional health. Of the students who reported low emotional health, only 41.0% indicated that they sought personal counseling since entering college. This raises serious concerns about the status of students' mental health.

The 2017 YFCY added a question about anxiety, which appears to be a pervasive problem for first-year students, with 38.6% reporting that they frequently felt anxious. Upon closer examination, various student populations report frequent anxiety at different rates. For example, students who identify as transgender report frequently feeling anxious (68.6%) at higher rates than students who do not identify as transgender (38.4%). Although transgender students comprise a relatively small

Figure 1. Percent of Students Who Frequently Felt Anxious by Sexual Orientation



proportion of the overall student population (0.7%), their high rates of anxiety are nonetheless striking. There is also a noticeable gap in anxiety between female students and male students, with 45.3% of female students reporting frequently feeling anxious versus only 26.6% of male students.

There are also notable differences when examining anxiety across sexual orientation. As demonstrated in Figure 1, students who identify as heterosexual/straight report anxiety at far lower levels than students who identify as a sexual minority. Well over half of queer, lesbian, bisexual, and other-identifying students also report frequent anxiety. Although students who are considered a sexual minority constitute a small proportion of the overall student population, it is clear that they feel frequently anxious at higher rates than students who are heterosexual/straight.

There are also differences in reports of frequently feeling anxious when disaggregating students by race/ethnicity, as shown in Figure 2, though these differences are not as stark as they are within other demographic characteristics. Students who are biracial/multiracial or Hispanic report the highest rates of frequent anxiety at over 40%. Asian students report the lowest levels of frequent anxiety at 33.5%.

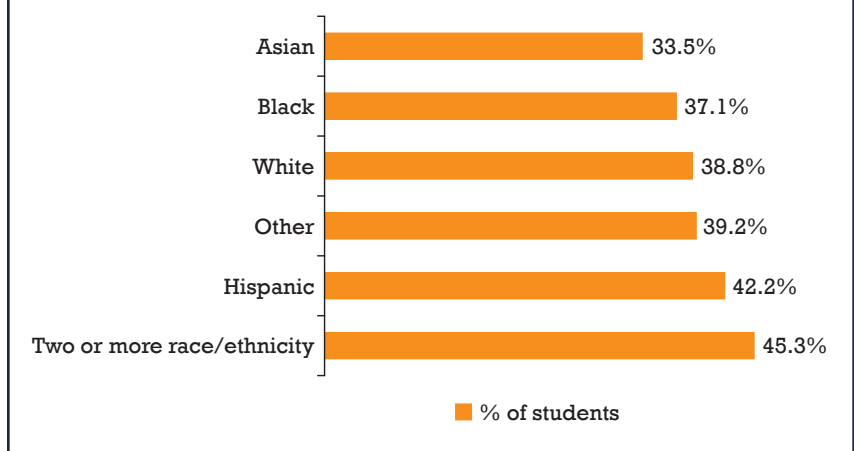
It is clear from these findings that first-year students struggle with maintaining wellness. Further, there are notable differences in rates of anxiety when disaggregating data. This suggests that while the overall student population experiences a high degree of anxiety, certain student populations, such as transgender students, experience anxiety at even higher rates.

RELATING TO OTHERS

The 2017 YFCY reintroduced a question asking students to rate their level of compassion in comparison to their peers. Nearly three-quarters (70.1%) of respondents believe they have above average levels of compassion compared to their peers. One-quarter (25.2%) of respondents report average levels of compassion and 4.7% of respondents believe they possess below average levels of compassion. Interestingly, compassion ratings appear to be linked to other specific behaviors captured in the YFCY. For example, 68.2% of those who rated themselves the most highly in compassion said that they frequently or occasionally performed volunteer work. Meanwhile, only 57.5% of students who reported an average level of compassion performed volunteer work. Finally, only 48.9% of students who reported below average levels of compassion

performed volunteer work. This pattern also emerges when students report interacting with a racial/ethnic group other than their own. Of students who reported high levels of compassion, 52.3% said they shared personal feelings or problems with a racial/ethnic group other than their own often or very often, compared to 40.3% of students with an average level of compassion and 37.3% of students with below average levels of compassion. Similarly, 55.6% of students who rated themselves highly in compassion reported that they often or very often had intellectual discussions outside of class with students from a racial/ethnic group other than their own versus only 41.4% of students who reported an average level of compassion. Interestingly, 48.4% of students who report below average levels of compassion have intellectual

Figure 2. Percent of Students Who Frequently Felt Anxious by Race/Ethnicity



Note: "Other" includes Native American due to low cell counts

discussions outside of class with students from a racial/ethnic group other than their own, a rate slightly higher than that of students with average levels of compassion.

Self-reported levels of compassion also relate to students' values, as 85.9% of respondents who rated themselves highly in compassion consider "helping others who are in difficulty" either essential or very important compared to 67.3% of students with an average level of compassion and 50.9% of students with below average levels of compassion. Additionally, 54.6% of students who rate themselves highly in compassion consider "helping to promote racial understanding" as essential or very important compared to only 40.1% of students who rated themselves with an average level of compassion and 31.6% of students with below average levels of compassion. Finally, 73.5% of students who rated themselves highly in compassion consider improving their understanding of other countries and cultures essential or very important versus 58.7% of students with average levels of compassion and 55.6% of students with below average levels of compassion.

Higher education plays a complex and multi-faceted role in student development. While its contribution to the intellectual development of students is considered a given, higher education also contributes to holistic development. Compassion serves as a valuable measure in examining how items related to pluralistic orientation develop during college. Since high levels of compassion appear to be linked to activities and personal values that promote service and pluralistic orientation, it also raises the question of how colleges can ensure that students are cultivating and expanding their personal levels of compassion.

ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSES

The 2017 YFCY added questions about student satisfaction with administrative responses to campus safety issues. The findings show that students are largely satisfied in this area. In fact, 23.3% of respondents reported that they were very satisfied with the administrative response to campus emergencies. Close to one-fifth (17.9%) were very satisfied with administrative response to incidents of discrimination. Finally, 18.1% of respondents said they were very satisfied with the administrative response to incidents of sexual assault. While it is encouraging that students appear to be largely satisfied with the administrative response to these incidents, it is important to note that student satisfaction differs across some student populations. For example, 20.5% of male students were very satisfied with administrative responses to incidents of sexual assault whereas only 16.8% of female students reported that they were very satisfied in this area. There were also differences in reporting by race/ethnicity regarding administrative responses to incidents of discrimination.

Amongst biracial/multiracial students, more reported that they were very satisfied, at 20.0%, than any other race/ethnicity. White students also reported relatively higher rates of being very satisfied at 19.1%. Hispanic students were not far behind at 17.7%. Black and Asian students were very satisfied at 15.9% and 14.0%, respectively. Finally, Native American and "Other" races (combined due to low cell counts) showed the lowest proportion of being "very satisfied" at 11.7%.

FOLLOWING UP ON 2016 ENTERING FRESHMEN

We have the ability to longitudinally track students during their first year in college by matching responses between the 2016 Freshman Survey with responses from the 2017 YFCY. There were a total of 4,667 first-year, first-time students who responded to both surveys. A major story from the 2016 TFS was that the entering cohort was the most politically polarized cohort in the history of the Freshman Survey (Eagan et al., 2016). Interestingly, this polarization seems to have increased even further after students' first year of college, which coincided with the 2016 presidential election. Of students who responded to both the Freshman Survey and Your First College Year, 40.5% reported "middle-of-the-road" political views on TFS compared to 37.3% of these same respondents in the YFCY. From TFS to YFCY, there is a slight decrease in students who identify as conservative or far right (18.9% to 18.0%) and an increase in students who identify as liberal or far left (40.7% to 44.7%). The 2016 TFS also highlighted increased levels of civic engagement from students and speculated how this could translate to civic or political activities during the first year. A quarter of students (25.5%) rated the life goal of influencing the political structure as "very important" or "essential" on TFS, and matched responses from the YFCY indicate that students are acting upon this goal. Nearly all students said that they discussed politics in the past year (89.8%). Over one-third of students helped raise money for a cause or campaign (37.5%) and 29.8% demonstrated for a cause (e.g., boycott, rally, protest). Finally, three-quarters of students (76.9%) said they were currently registered to vote. Students will undoubtedly continue to grow and evolve in their political views and civic engagement throughout their time in college, but it is clear from comparing TFS and YFCY responses that students are well on their way in only their first year.

REFERENCES

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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 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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