The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2012

Prepared by the Staff of the
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The past year saw intensified discussion about almost everything connected with higher education, but especially the increasing cost of attending college and the worth of a college degree, graduation rates, what the impact of the massive open online course (MOOC) will be, and various takes on "disruption." While many differing viewpoints are espoused, one certainty is that well-conducted and relevant educational research is necessary. The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) is a leading source of such information, and the past year saw a variety of research published using CIRP data, some of which we highlight below.

The 2011 HERI Faculty Survey results were released this year in our monograph entitled "Undergraduate Teaching Faculty: The 2010-2011 HERI Faculty Survey." This was the first year in which stress related to economic issues, such as institutional budget cuts and personal finances, rivaled top sources of stress (self-imposed expectations and lack of personal time) from past HERI Faculty Surveys. The report also examined the role of part-time faculty on campus, showing that many feel they lack access to key institutional resources. We also addressed student-centered teaching methods, such as cooperative learning and student presentations, which continue to be used at an increasing rate, but differ in their use by discipline and other factors. Planning is currently underway for the 2013-2014 HERI Faculty Survey.

The Spring 2012 issue of AAC&U's Liberal Education focused on diversity and civic learning, including an article by HERI Director Sylvia Hurtado and CIRP Assistant Director for Research Linda DeAngelo that used multiple CIRP datasets. In one instance, combining CIRP Freshman Survey data with matched data from the Your First College Year (YFCY) Survey, the authors looked at two CIRP Constructs: Habits of Mind (traits associated with academic success) and Pluralistic Orientation as outcomes in the first year of college. The article provides evidence of the impact of college programs and student experiences on academic, diversity, and civic outcomes taken from a series of research projects at HERI. Along the way it demonstrated the ability of CIRP surveys to be powerful tools to assess progress along multiple areas that matter to colleges and universities.

Extending HERI's previous studies on graduation rates, in a white paper commission by the Gates Foundation, Pryor and Hurtado (2012) examined the incoming characteristics of "mobile completers": those students who graduate with a bachelor's degree, but not at the institution at which they first started college. The authors found that "mobile completers" were similar to those students who completed degrees at their initial college ("stayer completers") in many areas, but were similar to those that left and did not obtain a degree anywhere else in terms of considering the cost of attending college as an important factor. They were also more likely to have chosen first institutions that had a larger percentage of students who intended, upon entry, to transfer to another institution.
Gayles, Rockenbach, and Davis (2012) combined 2000 CIRP Freshman Survey data with the follow-up 2003 College Students Beliefs and Values Survey (CSBV) in a study of 3,680 students at 46 institutions. The CSBV was part of a larger multi-year longitudinal project at HERI that led to the recent book, “Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives” (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). Gayles et al. used structural equation modeling to look longitudinally at student-athletes’ social activism goals and charitable involvement. The authors found that student-athletes were not statistically different from non-student-athletes in their goals to help promote racial understanding and to become community leaders, among other survey items used to measure social activism goals. Student-athletes, however, have greater time constraints which may inhibit their abilities to enact those goals, as they were found to be less involved in charitable activities such as volunteering.

Chang, Eagan, Lin, and Hurtado (2011) examined racial stigmas and persistence of underrepresented minorities in the biomedical and behavioral sciences, using matched data from the CIRP Freshman Survey and the Your First College Year Survey. They found that underrepresented minority first-year students who experienced higher levels of negative interactions were less likely to persist in the biomedical and behavioral sciences.

Looking at 2005 Freshman Survey data, Sax, Riggers, and Eagan (2013) used multilevel modeling to measure levels of academic engagement of an incoming cohort of women students, taking into account the type of high school these women attended. They found that women who had attended single-sex high schools versus schools that are coeducational were more likely to be academically engaged, measured by actions such as interactions with teachers, tutoring other students, and being involved in student organizations.

Additional articles recently published using CIRP data include Park and Eagan’s (2011) study looking at students who were more likely to enroll in college early due to early action and early decision admissions programs; and Bowman, Brandenberger, Hill, and Lapsley’s (2011) longitudinal study examined the effect of students’ engagement with racial/cultural diversity on personal growth. In addition, Santos, Hurtado, Sáenz, and Cabrera (in press) examine incoming Latina/o students' financial concerns and trends in access.

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In this year's CIRP Freshman Survey, the 47th annual administration, we see an increased impact of the global economic situation, most importantly on the benefits incoming students see of attending college and considerations in deciding which college to attend. Reflecting interests in increasing college graduation rates, the 2012 survey added new questions that provide interesting information on how incoming students understand and take account of such issues. In the wake of the federal elections, we compare political and social views of first-year students in 2012 with the cohort entering four years ago in 2008.

The results of this monograph are based upon data from 192,912 first-time, full-time students entering 283 four-year colleges and universities of varying levels of selectivity and type in the United States. These data have been statistically weighted to reflect the approximately 1.5 million first-time, full-time first-year students entering 1,613 four-year colleges and universities across the country in 2012. This means differences of one percentage point in the results published here reflect the characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes of roughly 15,000 first-year students nationally. A complete discussion of the CIRP Freshman Survey methodology, stratification scheme, and weighting procedures is presented in Appendix A.
Increased Impact of Economics
More students in 2012 believe that the current economic situation significantly affected their college choice, rising to 66.6% in 2012 from 62.1% two years earlier when we first asked the question.

Incoming students persist in putting a premium on job-related reasons to go to college. Continuing to rise is the importance of going to college in order to get a better job, which rose two percentage points this year to an all-time high of 87.9%, up from 85.9% in 2011 and considerably higher than its low of 67.8% in 1976 (see Figure 1). In the minds of today's college students, getting a better job continues to be the most prevalent reason to go to college.

Also at an all-time high as a reason to go to college is "to be able to make more money," moving from 71.7% in 2011 to 74.6% in 2012. This is now the fourth-ranked important reason to go to college, surpassing "to gain a general education and appreciation of ideas," which is now at 72.8%. A related finding is that is "being very well off financially" as a personal goal rose to an all-time high in 2012, with 81.0% of incoming students reporting this as a "very important" or "essential" personal goal, up from 79.6% in 2011.

In looking at specific important reasons for choosing the college they are attending, more students carefully considered "the cost of attending this college," which moved upwards in importance to 43.3%. This is an increase of 2.7 percentage points over the 2011 figure of

Figure 1. Trends of Reasons in Deciding to go to College (% Indicating "Very Important")

- To be able to get a better job
- To be able to make more money
- To gain a general education and appreciation of ideas
40.6%. It is also an all-time high for this item since first asked in 2004, when only 31.0% of incoming students thought that cost was "very important."

This year sees 13.4% of incoming first-year students reporting that not being able to afford their first choice was "very important" in deciding which institution to attend. This is the highest this percentage has been since we first introduced the item in 2006, when it was 9.4%.

The percentage of incoming students who report that not being offered aid by their first choice was a "very important" reason in choosing where to matriculate is at an all-time high of 9.5%. Although this is not markedly different from the 9.3% that we reported in 2011, this figure has more than doubled from the 4.4% who were not offered aid at their first choice in 1984, when we first asked the question.

In a related item, only 59.3% of incoming first-year students are attending their first choice institution. This is a significant change from the 1970s and 1980s, when approximately three out of four students were attending their first-choice institution. We continue to see a large gap between those who were accepted at their first choice, at 76.7%, and those who are attending their first choice institution, 59.3%, a gap of 17.4 percentage points.

The vast majority (84.3%) of incoming first-year students believe that they will graduate from college in four years. This will likely only come true for approximately half of them.

An additional 15.8% graduate by the fifth year, although only 8.6% of incoming students expect it would take five years to graduate from college. For the sixth year, although an additional 4.5% graduate in that time, only 2.7% of first year students think that it would take that long to graduate. Clearly there is a mismatch between reality and expectations. Despite efforts to publicize individual college graduation rates, many incoming students seem to be unaware that most college students are not graduating from the college they entered in a four-year period.

Students attending private universities are the most likely to expect a five-year time to graduation, at 15.0%, in contrast to 7.8% from public universities. Prospective engineering majors are
Support for same-sex couples having the right to legal marital status is widespread amongst first-year college students, and continues to show gains.

also more likely to expect a five-year path to graduation, with almost 1 in 5 (19.1%) anticipating the extra year. This is followed by prospective education majors, at 14.0%. No other major categories are over ten percent for this item.

To further examine the relationship between college graduation rates and college choice, we introduced a new response category into the set of items that investigate how important certain reasons are in determining which college to attend. Only 30.4% of students report that “the percentage of students that graduate from this college” was “very important” in their decision to attend that college. Given the economic realities of adding an extra year of college, and that 66.6% report that the current economic situation significantly affected their college choice, there seems to be a gap in understanding the realities of the time to college completion by a fair amount of incoming students.

Increasing Support of Same-sex Marriage

Support for same-sex couples having the right to legal marital status is widespread amongst first-year college students, and continues to show gains. In 2012, three quarters (75.0%) of all incoming first-year students support same-sex marriage, up 3.7 percentage points from 71.3% in 2011. Support has increased tremendously since the question was first introduced on the survey in 1997 when only half (50.9%) of all first-year students supported same-sex marriage. Of the ten social and political issue questions we asked on the 2012 survey, support for legalizing same-sex marriage has the highest rate of agreement among incoming college students.

As we have discussed in previous reports, there are differential levels of support between students who identify either as liberal or conservative supporting same-sex marriage, with almost twice as many liberal students expressing support compared to conservative students. Nine out of ten liberal first-year students (91.5%) support legalization of same-sex marriage while just under half (47.0%) of conservative first-year students are in support. Although the gap persists, incoming conservative first-year students continue to shift towards favoring the legalization of same-sex marriage at a fast rate, moving from 42.8% just last year to 47.0% in 2012.

As of the most recent election, nine states have legalized same-sex marriages, most of which are in the more liberal-leaning northeast part of the United States. Accordingly, students attending colleges in the New England region are the most supportive of same-sex marriage, at 85.3%. This is twenty percentage points higher than in the Southeast, where a significantly fewer (but still a majority) 65.3% of incoming first-year students support same-sex marriage.

Changes in Students’ Political Views and Orientation between 2008 and 2012

In the 2011 Freshman Survey report we examined student support for several political and social issues. Given that the U.S. just had
another presidential election in November of 2012, we can now compare political and social views across two recent election years: 2008 and 2012.

We ask students both to identify their political orientation on the survey as well as to agree or disagree with specific social and political views. In one significant point of comparison, students moved towards the center in self-perceived political orientation, with the "middle-of-the-road" category growing from 43.3% in 2008 to 47.5% in 2012.

Figure 2 shows the change in political orientation for men and women from 2008 to 2012 in detail. Neither men nor women changed appreciably in identifying as "conservative" or "far right" in 2012, as roughly a quarter of incoming first-year men and one fifth of first-year women marked "conservative" or "far right" in both 2008 and 2012. By contrast, fewer men and women identified as "liberal" or "far left" in 2012 compared with 2008. The proportion of left-leaning men dropped by nearly four percentage points from 2008 to 2012 (30.3% in 2008 vs. 26.4% in 2012) while the percentage of women identifying as liberal or far left dropped by approximately five percentage points (37.4% in 2008 vs. 32.3% in 2012).

The consistency in the proportion of conservative-leaning students and the drop in the percentage of left-leaning students resulted in this increase of students identifying as "middle-of-the-road."

When we look at changing views regarding specific issues, however, the findings are somewhat mixed. Figure 3 shows changes in support for four political or social issues. While higher proportions of incoming students in 2012 endorsed more liberal positions in two areas (abortion and preferential treatment for disadvantaged students in college admissions), more incoming students supported a more conservative opinion in two other areas (racial discrimination and the necessity of a national healthcare plan).

Support for the position that abortion should be legal increased by 2.9 percentage points in 2012 compared to 2008, with 61.1% of incoming first-year students endorsing the legality of abortion. Much of the increase in support of abortion came from students identifying as "far right" or "conservative." Whereas 31.8% of incoming conservative students in 2008 "agreed somewhat" or "agreed strongly" that abortion should be legal, that figure jumped to 38.5% in 2012. Students in 2012 who identified as "middle-of-the-road" also increased their support for abortion by nearly five percentage
points over their peers in 2008 (56.7% in 2008 vs. 61.1% in 2012). Liberal students continued to support the legality of abortion at high rates (77.8% in 2008 vs. 79.2% in 2012).

Support for giving preferential treatment in college admissions to students from disadvantaged backgrounds increased from 2008 to 2012. Over forty percent of incoming students endorsed this position in 2012 (41.9%), a 2.4 percentage point increase over 2008 (39.5%). Middle-of-the-road (39.5% in 2008 vs. 42.4% in 2012) and left-leaning students (44.6% in 2008 vs. 50.0% in 2012) increased in their support of this issue while right-leaning students’ support remained relatively stable (31.1% in 2008 vs. 30.1% in 2012).

A smaller proportion of incoming students in 2012 agreed that the country needed a national healthcare plan to cover everybody’s medical costs. Specifically, support for a national healthcare plan dropped by 7.6 percentage points between 2008 (70.3%) and 2012 (62.7%). The change was most dramatic among conservative students: although 44.8% supported national health care in 2008, this plummeted to 30.4% in 2012. Support among middle-of-the-road students dropped as well, but at a much lower rate, from 71.1% in 2008 to 64.2% in 2012. Liberal students remained largely unchanged in their high levels of support during this time period (85.3% in 2008 vs. 84.7% in 2012).

Students’ views on racial discrimination became slightly more conservative between 2008 and 2012. In 2008, 20.1% of incoming first-year students agreed that racial discrimination was no longer a problem, and that figure increased by 2.9 percentage points in 2012 to 23.0%. Right-leaning students were mostly unchanged between 2008 and 2012 in their endorsement of this position (30.1% in 2008 vs. 30.9% in 2012). Both middle-of-the-road (20.3% in 2008 vs. 23.2% in 2012) and left-leaning (13.3% in 2008 vs. 16.5% in 2012) became more supportive of this position over the last four years.

One of the primary issues of the 2012 presidential campaign and a contentious issue after the
election focused on the so-called “fiscal cliff” and tax reform, and Figure 4 highlights changes in students’ support for the position that the wealthy should pay more taxes. Overall, support for this perspective increased by 4.2 percentage points between 2008 and 2012 (60.4% in 2008 vs. 64.6% in 2012). Across students’ political orientation, the changes moved in different directions. Students who identified as “far right” or “conservative” declined in their support for increasing taxes on the wealthy (41.0% in 2008 vs. 38.1% in 2012). By contrast, this issue gained support among both middle-of-the-road and left-leaning. Specifically, roughly two-thirds (66.4%) of students who identified themselves as middle-of-the-road agreed that the wealthy should pay more taxes, which represented a 6.5 percentage point increase for the same group in 2008. Additionally, more than four-in-five (82.4%) left-leaning students in 2012 thought the wealthy should pay more taxes—an 8.7 percentage point increase over their left-leaning peers in 2008 (73.7%).

Thus, although nearly half of all incoming students consider themselves as “middle-of-the-road,” these middle-of-the-road students have decidedly more progressive or liberal perspectives when asked about specific social and political issues.

A final note as we discuss political orientation. A number of studies using CIRP data have pointed out that some students become more liberal in their political orientation during college (see Astin & Denson, 2009; Dey, 1996, 1997; Mariani & Hewitt, 2008). Study after study concludes that any change in the political orientation that occurs among students during college is predominantly influenced by the political orientation of their fellow students, and the overall campus climate perpetuated by their peers, not by the political orientation of the faculty.