

Kathy Wyer, wyer@gseis.ucla.edu
(310) 206-0513

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More College Freshmen Now Show Interest in Politics, UCLA Survey Reveals

Survey shows increased political discourse and a move away from political center

(Note to Editors: To reach the Higher Education Research Institute, call 310-825-1925)

This year's entering college freshmen are discussing politics more frequently than at any point in the past 40 years and are becoming less moderate in their political views, according to the results of UCLA's annual survey of the nation's entering undergraduates. The Freshman Survey is part of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program administered by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA's Graduate School of Education & Information Studies.

"This bodes well for fostering democratic citizenship during college," says Sylvia Hurtado, director of the Higher Education Research Institute, who has studied how colleges prepare students for a diverse democracy. "Colleges are responsible for educating the next generation of leaders, and it's exciting that students are entering with greater political and civic awareness. This often means students will seek more information, ask questions and interact more around issues that affect American society."

As more freshmen report that they discussed politics frequently as high school seniors — 33.8 percent in 2006, up from 25.5 percent in 2004 — 43.1 percent identified themselves as "middle-of-the-road," the lowest mark since first measured by the research program in 1970. Additionally, the percentage of students identifying as "liberal" (28.4 percent) is at its highest level since 1975 (30.7 percent), and those identifying as "conservative" (23.9 percent) is at its highest level in the history of the Freshman Survey, now in its 40th year.

In addition to being asked about their political ideology, incoming freshmen were queried about their views on a number of social and political topics, where an expanding divide is apparent between liberals and conservatives on some hot-button issues, including gay marriage and abortion.

"Given the increased interest in political discussions and the increasing polarization of student political orientation, I expect that college campuses will see an accompanying increase in political debate across varying platforms, such as college newspapers and student blogs," said John H. Pryor, director of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program. "Where the issues

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also divide the student body, as with gay rights and abortion, we will likely see more controversy in those discussions.”

Initiated in 1966, the UCLA survey is the nation’s longest-running and most comprehensive assessment of student attitudes and plans for college; it is administered annually by the Higher Education Research Institute, which serves as a resource for higher education researchers throughout the world. The survey offers an opportunity to examine long-term changes in higher education.

Liberals and Conservatives Divide on Gay Rights, but Not on Affirmative Action

An issue that most divides conservative and liberal freshmen is whether or not “same-sex couples should have the right to legal marital status.” While 4 out of 5 liberals (83.7 percent) agree that same-sex couples should have this right, only 30.4 percent of conservatives believe the same.

Abortion is another polarizing issue. While 78.4 percent of liberal freshmen support legalized abortion, only 31.8 percent of conservative students do. Middle-of-the-road freshmen come in at 56.3 percent.

Yet there is not a great difference between liberals and conservatives on the issue of affirmative action in college admissions. A small majority — 52.7 percent — of conservative freshmen say that affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished, while 44.6 percent of liberals agree.

“The lines are not drawn as liberal or conservative around issues of affirmative action,” Pryor said. “Liberal and conservative freshmen are divided by two of the current pressing social issues — gay rights and abortion. Middle-of-the-road students are somewhat more liberal in their actual viewpoints. So some issues have been taken up as the core of liberal or conservative beliefs, while others have not.”

Sharp differences among liberals and conservatives show up on other heated social issues. For example, 48 percent of liberals believe the death penalty should be abolished, versus 22.5 percent of conservatives; 52.5 percent of liberals favor legalizing marijuana, compared with only 23.5 percent of conservatives; and 83.9 percent of liberals would vote for a national health plan, versus 57 percent of conservatives.

College Finances

A majority of freshmen indicate that they have financial concerns when it comes to paying for college. Two out of three students (64.1 percent) say that they have “some” or “major” concerns about their ability to finance the costs of their college education. And almost half of freshmen attending a second-choice institution had also been accepted to their first-choice college but were swayed by offers of financial assistance and the cost of the college they ultimately chose.

“Low-income and middle-income students are more likely to be choosing colleges based on financial issues, since rising college costs and increasing dependency on loans make it a huge

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investment for these families,” Pryor said. “Students who come from families that make less than \$50,000 a year are more than seven times more likely to have major concerns about college finances than those who come from families with more than \$100,000 in income. With affordability a key issue in the debate on college access, this will continue to be a key issue for many colleges.”

As in previous years, aid for the first year of college from “parents, other relatives, or friends” is a substantial source, with 82.2 percent of freshmen reporting that they received at least some aid from these sources.

Racial/Ethnic Differences in AP Course-taking and Exams

The number of black students who reported taking one or more AP (Advanced Placement) courses in high school (49.8 percent) was less than any other single racial or ethnic group. Asian students held the majority at 73.1 percent, while white students were at 61.1 percent. Black students also were more likely than other groups to report that their high school did not offer AP courses (7.4 percent).

“While African Americans are more likely to attend schools that do not offer AP classes, or they may be unaware of these opportunities, these data also suggest that even those who attend the better high schools are not gaining access to AP classes at the same rate as other racial/ethnic groups,” Hurtado said. “Fewer AP classes ensure that African American students will not have the advantages associated with access to the most competitive colleges.”

The 2006 freshman norms are based on the responses of 271,441 first-time, full-time students at 393 of the nation’s baccalaureate colleges and universities. The data have been statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.3 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year colleges and universities as freshmen in 2006.

For a summary of the survey, see <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html> and click on “Recent Findings.” To order copies of “The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2006” (Pryor, Hurtado, V. B. Saenz, J. S. Korn, J. S. Santos and W. S. Korn), click on “Publications.”

Additional analyses using the 2006 Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey and funded by the Templeton Foundation examine the connection between religious and political beliefs. These analyses are available through the Higher Education Research Institute. Visit <http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/news/index.html>.