

# Student Life Research

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## Insight Gained on 2002 Freshmen

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The Student Life Research area is a new addition to the Center for Campus Life in the Division of Student Affairs. The goal of Student Life Research Newsletter will be to provide information about the contemporary American college student. This newsletter highlights several trends emerging from recent research studies.

### Grade Inflation Persists from High School

The Cooperative Institution Research Program (CIRP) is an annual research study of incoming freshman administered out of University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). The 2002 study included 282,549 students from 439 baccalaureate colleges and universities. This study found that entering freshman students reported 33% studying or doing homework six or more hours per week during their senior year in high school, down from 35% in 2001. This finding contrasts with the increasing use of personal computers and the Internet. Frequent use of computers moved up to 84% in 2002 from 82% in 2001. Using the Internet for research or homework as seniors in high school also increased to 78% up from 74% in 2001. Although time spent doing schoolwork declined, high school student grade point averages (GPA) increased, with 46% of the entering freshman reportedly earning "A" averages in high school, as compared to 44% in 2001. Grade inflation among incoming freshmen is a trend witnessed within all institutional types. High school GPA's are reflected in freshmen self-perceptions of their academic abilities with 69% of CIRP

participants viewing themselves as "above average" or "highest 10 percent" as compared to other students their age.

### Students Use Competitive Actions To Gain Admission To College

A number of actions have been initiated in recent years to help students succeed in being accepted into college. Activities such as early admission programs, use of popular media, and college websites have impacted incoming freshman. Continued competitiveness in college admissions motivates high school seniors to use "early action" and "early decision" programs to help their chances of being admitted to their first choice college. National magazines and information from individual college websites were "very important" to the incoming 2002 freshman class with 13% reportedly using early admissions programs, up from 11 percent in 2001. How decisions are made about which college prospective students may select has shown the increasing influence of popular magazines and use of college websites. When asked, incoming freshman indicated that the rankings in national magazines were influential in their decision to attend a certain college, up from 10% in 2000 to 14% in 2002. Websites for colleges also played an important role in the decision making process from 7% of CIRP participants viewing sites in 2000 to 11% in 2002.

### Accepted College Students Struggle for Timely Completion

Incoming students are taking courses for credit at community colleges after graduating from high school to enhance college prepara-

tion and to assist them in keeping the college completion time to four years. Even with the extra preparation, few college students are able to complete programs in four years than were able to 10 years ago. About 36% were able to graduate with bachelor's degrees within four years, as compared to 40% ten years ago, and 47% in the late 1960s. Graduation rates continue to increase when time is added to complete; 59% graduated after six years of college and increases to 62% for those who are still enrolled after six years.

Gender and racial group membership are also a part of the pattern and percentages of college graduation rates. Asian (39%) and white (38%) students have the highest completion rates. Lower rates occur among the minority groups: African Americans (29%), Mexican-Americans (21%), and American Indians (21%). Gender influences show an increase of 20-25% for each racial group; six year completion rates are higher for women than for men in all of the individual racial groups, with the exception of American Indians, where the rate for men at 44% is slightly higher than for women at 41%.

According to a study of 262 baccalaureate-granting institutions by Astin & Oseguera (2002), the type of academic institution attended plays a part in students completing with graduation rates from private institutions consistently higher than public colleges and universities. However, the study also found that graduation and completion rates have more to do with the characteristics of the students enrolling rather than with the actual institution and type of retention programs in place. One

of the key factors in projecting the success of incoming college students is high school grade point average (GPA). Using GPA, four-year completion rates were 58% and six-year completion rates 77% for students with an "A or A+" average, as compared to completion rates of 8% in four-years and 20% in six-years for students with "C" averages. This information indicates that it may be unrealistic to compare the graduation rates of private universities to state and public colleges based on the reported number of graduates each year.

### Psychological Health Improving- Gender Still Plays A Part

Psychological issues can be cause for concern with overall student success in college. When a question about stress was first asked in the 1985 CIRP survey, 18% of the freshman surveyed had concerns about depression and feelings of being overwhelmed with all that they had to do. In 1999 the survey participant response rates peaked with 31% reportedly having psychological stress and depression. In 2002 student response indicated that stress levels were declining at 27%, down from 28% in 2001, and continuing a three-year downturn in the overall percentages. Female students were more likely than males to actually report frequent feelings of being overwhelmed (35%) as compared to men (16%). Similar findings are shown by the declining

rate of frequent depression with 7% reported in 2002 as compared to 11% in 1988. Feelings of depression reported by women were slightly higher (8%) as compared to men (6%).

### Second Semester Freshman at Greater Risk

A study at University of Southern California-Santa Cruz by Margarita Azmitia, a professor of psychology specializing in educational transitions, found that bolstering outreach to second semester freshman could prevent more vulnerable students from floundering. This finding may be important to diverse student populations that may be at-risk. According to preliminary results found by Azmitia: "freshman report high levels of satisfaction in the fall semester, challenges in the winter months, and a sense of accomplishment in the spring" (p.3). Homesickness, rather than academic struggle was cited as a challenge in the freshman second

semester research study. Some factors that could be at play with freshman students is the ability to connect within the campus community.

Information from the "2002 Your First College Year" or YFCY research study from UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute and Brevard College's Policy Center on the First Year included 25,000 freshmen at 105 four-year campuses. The YFCY annual survey has found that some students feel disconnected on campus. The study indicated that 53% of the students believed they had successfully developed close peer relationships, and that 70% were satisfied with their campuses sense of community. A percentage of students still remain unconnected, however, and 30% felt intimidated by their college professors, with slightly less than that number having met with an instructor during office hours. More than 25% of the freshman had "never" interacted with other college personnel, and 30% felt isolated from campus life.

#### Resources

Astin, A.W. & Oseguera, L. (2002). *Degree attainment rates at american colleges and universities*. Higher Education Research Institute, Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, University of California Los Angeles.

Sax, L., Lindholm, J., Astin, A., Korn, W., Mahoney, K. (2002). *The american freshman national norms for fall 2002*. Higher Education Research Institute, Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, University of California Los Angeles.

Some freshman go it alone, survey finds. *National on-campus report*, 31(1) 3, January, 2003.

What's it like to be a freshman today? *National on-campus report*, 31(1) 7, April, 2003.



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