

January 2010

## The American Freshman

### National Norms Fall 2009

The 2009 freshman norms are based on the responses of 219,864 first-time, full-time, first-year students at 297 of the nation's baccalaureate colleges and universities. The data have been statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.4 million first-time, full-time students entering four-year colleges and universities as first-year students in 2009.

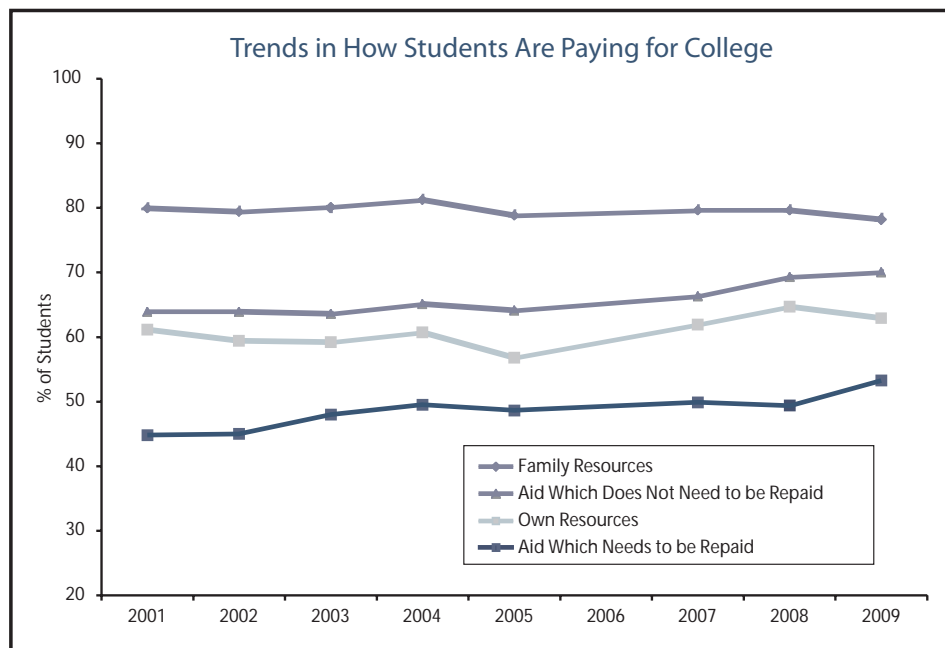
#### FINANCIAL CONCERNS DOMINATE

Today more incoming first-year students are concerned with their ability to finance their college education, with two out of three students reporting "some" (55.4%) or "major" (11.3%) concerns. Although the percentage with "major" concerns did not change appreciably from 2008, those with "some" concerns moved up 2.2 percentage points and continued to climb to its highest level since 1971.

Most students (78.2%) still plan on funding their first year of college through family resources (such as parents), a figure that has been fairly stable since 2001, when we revised the response categories for this set of questions. In our 2008 monograph we reported that more students were looking towards using their own resources from working and personal savings and in aid that need not be repaid, such as grants. We also reported that the percentage of first-year students taking out loans to pay for college in 2008 had not moved appreciably. As the economic downturn expanded in 2009 the

percentage of first-year students using funds from sources that need not be repaid continued to climb (now at 70.0%, the highest in this nine-year period). We now also find, however, that incoming students are more likely to turn to loans, with 53.3% reporting using loans, up 3.9 percentage points from 49.4% in 2008 and at the highest point in this nine-year period. Most of these loans were in the range of \$3,000 to \$6,000, according to responses on the survey.

Although in our study the overall figure of those in 2009 using aid that need not be repaid inched up only slightly (from 69.3% in 2008 to 70.0% in 2009), more students are receiving grants for higher amounts. Those who report receiving aid of \$10,000 or more moved from 24.1% in 2008 to 26.1% in 2009.



College choice continues to be influenced by the economy. Last year saw all-time highs in the importance of cost and financial aid, and those trends continued this year, breaking all such records. “The cost of attending this college” was a “very important” factor in determining where to attend for 41.6% of students, the highest it has ever been since this question was added to the survey. An offer of financial aid was a “very important” determining factor for 44.7% of incoming college students in 2009, up from 43.0% in 2008 and 39.4% in 2007. Not being offered aid by their first choice was a “very important” reason for choosing their current college for 8.9% of incoming first-years, and the highest this figure has been since the question was first asked in 1984. Given the rising amount of debt burden, it is not surprising that the “graduates get good jobs” reason for choosing a college increased in importance in 2009 to 56.5%, the highest level seen since this question was introduced in 1983. With the job outlook for recent graduates diminishing, however, colleges will need to be able to deal with increasingly anxious students and monitor how such anxieties impact college experiences that may affect retention and degree attainment.

**POST-ELECTION CHANGES IN POLITICAL ORIENTATION, POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT, AND POLITICAL VIEWS**

Although a drop in the percentage of first-year students identifying as liberal might at first seem like a reaction to President Obama’s first year in office, it actually follows a pattern seen in CIRP Freshman Survey data since President Carter was elected in 1976. As we reported last year, the 2008 first-year class contained the highest percentage of liberals since 1973, at 31.0%. In 2009, this dropped two percentage points to 29.0%, returning to pre-election levels (29.3% in 2007). Following a political party change in the White House, regardless of the political party in the White House, in

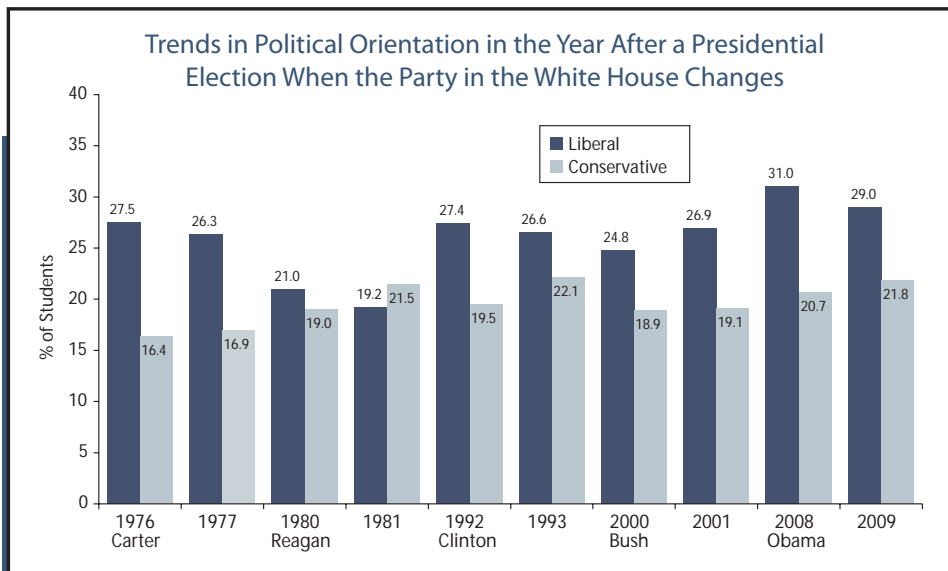
the next year there is a slight drop in the percentage of liberal students and a slight increase in the percentage of conservative students. The exception to this rule is for George W. Bush in 2001, when the percentages of liberal students increased (up 2.1 percentage points) and conservative students remained fairly stable (a change of 0.2 percentage points) in the year following the election.

The percentage of first-year students reporting that keeping up to date with political affairs is “very important” or “essential” dropped also this year to 36.0% from 39.5% in 2008. This drop is consistent with drops in this personal goal among first-year students in the year after the election of a new president going back to President Reagan, but again we see an exception in the year after the 2000 election. In 2001 the percentage of students reporting that keeping up to date with political affairs was “very important” or “essential” grew to 31.4% from 28.1% rather than declined.

The percentage indicating that helping to promote racial understanding was “very important” or “essential” dropped this year, perhaps as a result of the historic election of our first African American president. In 2008, just prior to electing President Obama, 37.3% of incoming first-year students indicated that helping to promote racial understanding was personally “very important” or “essential” compared to 33.1% in 2009, a drop of 4.2 percentage points. Drops were seen across all racial groups.

The drop in the importance of helping to promote racial understanding, however, must be taken in context of the other items in this section of the survey on personal goals and values, many of which showed

corresponding drops. Developing a meaningful philosophy of life dropped 3.4 percentage points. Influencing social values dropped 2.6 percentage points. The top goal for the second year in a row is being well off financially, at 78.1%, the highest this figure has been since first asked in 1966. The importance of raising a family is now the second-most-prevalent goal, at 74.7%. Thus, perhaps in a reaction to the economic downturn, in some students there is focusing inward towards achieving financial security and a corresponding drop in goals more in line with social agency.



**VOLUNTEERING HITS RECORD HIGH**

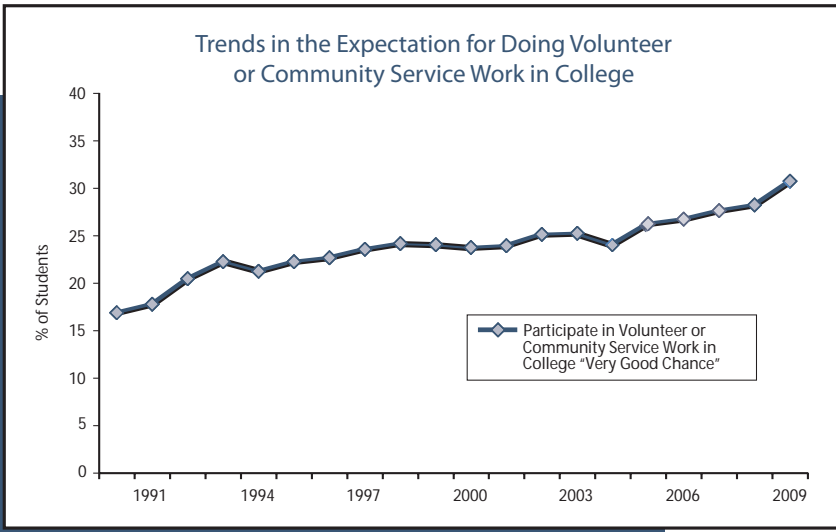
This year, a record number of incoming first-year students expect to participate in community service or volunteer work during college, with 30.8% indicating that there is a “very good chance” they plan to engage civically in this manner. An additional 41.3% of freshmen in 2009 indicate that there is “some chance” they will volunteer during college, and less than 10 percent (6.3%) stated they have no intention of volunteering while they are in college. When this question was introduced to the CIRP Freshman Survey in 1990, only 16.9% of students indicated that there was

they will continue in this fashion. Evidence from CIRP follow-up surveys also indicates that students who expect to volunteer in college actually do volunteer.

**MORE STUDENTS TAKING AP CLASSES AND EXAMS, RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP DIFFERENCES STILL EVIDENT**

Since 2006 there have been slight increases in the number of incoming first-year students who report taking Advance Placement (AP) classes and exams in high school. Today more than two-thirds (67.9%) of all first-time, full-time entering students report taking at least one AP course in high school. While fewer students follow through to take AP examinations, the percentage taking at least one exam went up almost 10 percentage points from slightly over half, 50.9%, to 60.3% in the last five years.

Despite these increases, we continue to see differences between racial/ethnic groups in AP experiences. Opportunities in high schools often determine if students gain access to AP courses. While only 5.4% of entering first-year students at four-year institutions reported attending a school where no AP courses were offered, this percentage was much higher among American Indian (9.1%) and African American (6.8%) students compared with White (5.3%) and Hispanic (3.6%) students. Hispanic students (at 54.3%) compare very favorably relative to other groups who report taking between 1 to 4 AP classes in high school (49.9% for White, 50.0% for multiracial students, 45.3% for African American students, and a low of 39.1% for American Indian students). However, Asian American students are more than twice as likely to take between 5 to 9 AP courses in high school compared to White students (33.8% and 15.4%, respectively). Asian American students are also four times more likely (6.4%) to report taking between 10 to 14 AP courses in high school compared with White students (1.5%). This pattern by race/ethnicity is similar for AP exam-taking, albeit with lower percentages.



a “very good chance” they would engage in volunteer or community service work during college, an increase of 82.2% in just under 20 years. Though this rise has been steady since the early 90s, increases in this expectation picked up steam in the end of this decade, rising 27.8% just since 2004.

Volunteer participation in high school predisposes students to volunteering and community service while in college. As the frequency of volunteering in the year prior to college increases so does the expectation for volunteering and community service in college. Most students who volunteered “frequently” in their last year of high school (56.9%) indicated that there was a “very good chance” they would continue volunteering in college. Of those students who did not volunteer in high school only a very small minority, 8.2%, expect to volunteer in college. Further, very few students (1.7%) who previously volunteered “frequently” reverse this trend and have no expectation that they will continue in college, whereas one out of five students (20.9%) who did not volunteer previously expects that

Number of AP Courses Taken in High School, by Race and Ethnicity (percentages)

Race/Ethnicity	Not offered at my High School	None	1 to 4	5 to 9	10 to 14
American Indian	9.1	41.0	39.1	9.2	0.8
Asian	5.8	11.0	42.5	33.8	6.4
Black	6.8	39.2	45.3	7.6	0.8
Hispanic	3.6	21.0	54.3	18.9	1.9
White	5.3	27.8	49.9	15.4	1.5
Multi-Racial	4.9	24.8	50.0	17.8	2.0
Other	7.8	24.7	47.6	17.1	2.5

## SUMMARY

The global economic downturn is having an impact on the characteristics, attitudes, and beliefs of incoming first-time students at four-year institutions. They are more concerned about finances, more likely to take out loans and need grants in higher amounts. They will likely be graduating with higher debts and have shifted majors and career aspirations away from business fields. Although the values of these students coming into college show a slight retrenching towards financial security and less towards social agency, there is hope that their increased desire for volunteering and community service will foster an increase in such attitudes during their college careers.

Although more first-year students are taking AP classes and exams, we also see an increase in students who feel that they will need special tutoring or remedial work in college. Disparity in the opportunities to take AP classes in high school persists among American Indian and African American students. At the same time that colleges and universities need to accommodate such a wide range of abilities, from more remediation to more incoming students placing into higher level courses, they are under tremendous financial burdens. These burdens often lead more towards cuts in course offerings rather than expansions, and have potential to lead towards disappointment and frustration among both faculty and students.

The 2009 monograph includes an expanded section on the impact of the economy on incoming freshmen and the connection between volunteering and personal and social responsibility. It also includes sections on student needs for remedial and special tutoring, and veterans entering as first-time, full-time students.

The data reported in this monograph are weighted to provide a normative profile of the American freshman population for use by individuals engaged in policy analysis, educational research, college administration, human resource planning and guidance and counseling. The data are also useful to the general community of current and future college students, their parents, and college faculty. The full report with expanded tables provides data separately for men and women, and for 26 different institutional groupings.

*Please contact the Higher Education Research Institute for more information or to order your copy of the 2009 Freshman National Norms monograph.*

## Source:

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