

RESEARCH BRIEF

HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH INSTITUTE AT UCLA



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The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2016

This research brief highlights findings from the 2016 CIRP Freshman Survey monograph; findings reflect analyses of data collected from 137,456 first-time, full-time freshmen attending 184 four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. Weights have been applied to these data to reflect the more than 1.5 million first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began college at 1,568 four-year colleges and universities across the U.S. in the fall of 2016. Consequently, differences of one percentage point in the results published here reflect the characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes of more than 15,000 first-year students nationally.

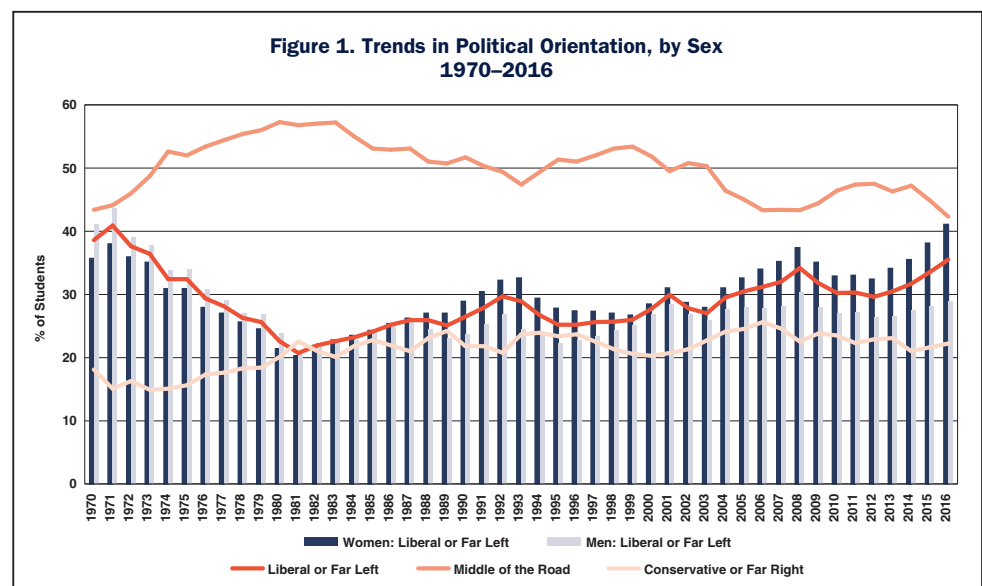
Since 1966, the first year the survey was conducted, more than 15 million students at 1,900 colleges and universities have completed CIRP surveys. The CIRP Freshman Survey is the largest and longest running survey of American college students, and the 2016 administration marked its 51st year.

POLITICAL ORIENTATION, POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT, AND POLITICAL VIEWS

First-time, full-time students who started college in the fall of 2016 began their undergraduate careers during one of the most contentious U.S. presidential campaigns in recent memory. From candidates' pronouncements about potential policies and positions on issues to the never-ending activity of fact-checking among journalists and engaged citizens, members of the entering class of 2016, many of whom would be first-time voters in the general election, likely considered their values, evaluated the reliability of information pertaining to candidates' policy proposals, and engaged in dialogue with friends and family about controversial issues in ultimately deciding which candidate received their vote.

Self-reported political orientation among college students typically grows more polarized

during U.S. presidential election years, but the fall 2016 entering cohort of first-time, full-time college students has the distinction as the *most* polarized cohort in the 51-year history of the Freshman Survey. As shown in Figure 1, fewer students than ever before (42.3%) categorize their political views as “middle of



the road,” reflecting a general political polarization within this demographic. Gender appears to play a role in this polarization. An all-time high of 41.1% of women self-identify as “liberal” or “far left” with respect to their political views compared to 28.9% of men, yielding the largest gender gap in self-reported liberalism to date (12.2 percentage points).

The record level of polarization of the 2016 entering freshman class comes at a time when these same students follow the recent trend of rising levels of civic engagement (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Bates, Aragon, Suchard, & Rios-Aguilar, 2016). Specifically, the 2016 entering cohort reports high levels of political engagement, perhaps in response to the presidential election season coinciding with their matriculation to college. More than one-quarter of first-time, full-time students (26.9%) rate the life goal of influencing the political structure as “very important” or “essential”—the largest proportion to date. Additionally, 46.0% of students report that keeping up with political affairs is similarly “very important” or “essential” to them personally, the largest such response since 1990. It is unclear, however, how these beliefs might have translated to students’ civic or political activities.

Increased political engagement coupled with growing differences in political views perhaps raises the question of whether students demonstrate any corresponding change in pluralistic orientation, or skills and dispositions appropriate for living and working with diverse others. Compared to 2015, this year’s first-time, full-time students report comparable levels of self-rated pluralistic orientation. However, as with political views, gender appears to be a contributing factor in students’ beliefs about themselves. Compared to women, men report higher levels of ability to discuss and negotiate controversial issues and openness to having their own views challenged, differences of 7.2 and 4.0 percentage points, respectively. Moreover, these gender differences were similarly large in 2015. While women report higher levels of other, perhaps less confrontational behaviors associated with pluralistic orientation, the gender differences for these measures are relatively small.

Responses to these same items disaggregated by political orientation reveal even larger disparities. Just over two-thirds (68.1%) of right-of-center students rated their tolerance of others with different beliefs as “strong” or “somewhat strong” compared to 82.0% of “middle of the road” students and 86.6% of left-of-center students. More left-leaning students perceive their ability to see the world from someone else’s perspective as strong (83.6%) compared to students in the center (76.5%) and on the right (68.8%). Based on these findings, institutions might consider implementing or expanding activities such as intergroup dialogue in order to help students develop their ability to engage in productive conversations about their political views with peers or others who might hold dissimilar views or values.

AMPLIFYING EMERGING VOICES: CHARACTERISTICS AND EXPERIENCES OF INCREASINGLY DIVERSE COLLEGE STUDENTS

In the past few years, the Freshman Survey has incorporated new items that enable campuses to learn more about differences in students’ gender identities and experiences with the foster care system. In the following sections, we explore the characteristics and pre-college experiences of students who identify as transgender and those who report having lived in foster care or as a dependent of the court.

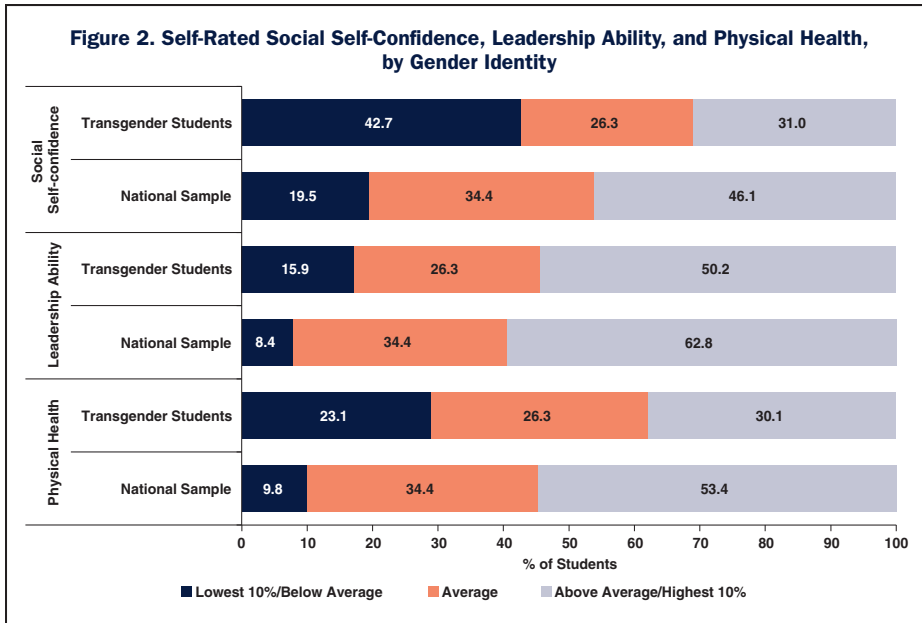
Breaking the binary: Creativity, confidence, and community engagement among transgender college students

For the first time in its 50-year history, the Freshman Survey in 2015 introduced an item inviting students to share their gender identity. The 2016 administration included responses from 702 incoming freshmen identifying as transgender from 182 different institutions. In this report, we analyze the responses from the unweighted sample of transgender students and compare those findings to the nationally normed sample of first-time, full-time students. The normed sample includes representation from transgender students who comprise about one-half of one percent of all first-time, full-time students enrolling in four-year nonprofit U.S. colleges and universities in the fall of 2016.

Differences in self-rated confidence between transgender students and the normed sample vary considerably based upon the skill or trait under examination. Compared to the nationally normed sample, students identifying as transgender have far greater confidence in their artistic ability (52.0% vs. 30.7% rating “highest 10%” or “above average”) and creativity (64.0% vs. 52.6% rating “highest 10%” or “above average”). By contrast, transgender students rate themselves lower than the general sample of first-time, full-time (FTFT) freshmen in the areas of social self-confidence, leadership ability, and physical health. As shown in Figure 2, nearly half (46.1%) of FTFT freshmen rated their social self-confidence as above average compared to 31.0% of transgender first-year students. The largest gap between all FTFT freshmen and transgender students appears in their self-ratings of physical health. Less than one-third of transgender students in this sample (30.1%) assess their physical health as above average compared to more than half of all FTFT first-year college students (53.4%). Similarly, there is a 12.6 percentage-point gap between the proportions of all FTFT freshmen (62.8%) and of transgender students (50.2%) who rate their leadership ability as above average. As college students increasingly explore, embrace, and express their gender identities, colleges and universities have an obligation to support and celebrate the ways in which these students contribute to campus and society.

The fall 2016 entering cohort of first-time, full-time college students has the distinction of being the most polarized cohort in the 51-year history of the Freshman Survey.

Figure 2. Self-Rated Social Self-Confidence, Leadership Ability, and Physical Health, by Gender Identity



compared to all FTFT incoming students (81.5%). Further, just over one-quarter (27.5%) of former foster care youth report relying on \$10,000 or more from family resources, which falls 11 percentage points below the 38.5% of all FTFT first-year students reporting the same. Although former foster care youth rely less heavily on family resources to pay for college, it is important to note that they are somewhat less likely to take out loans to finance their first year of college. Just under half of former foster care youth (48.6%) reported taking out loans to finance their first year of college compared to 55.5% of the national sample of FTFT freshmen.

Examining the pathways to college among former foster care youth

The 2016 Freshman Survey introduced a new item that asked students to indicate whether they had lived in foster care or as a dependent of the court at any time since they turned 13. More than 1,000 students (n=1,147) reported having lived either in foster care or as a dependent of the court since their 13th birthday. In this section, we refer to these students as former foster care youth and compare them to the nationally normed sample of FTFT freshmen.

Given that a student who has lived in foster care after age 13 can identify as independent on the FAFSA, analyses of students’ concerns about and strategies for paying for college underscore critical differences between former foster care youth and the national sample of FTFT first-year students. As they start their college careers, nearly one-quarter of former foster care youth (23.9%) have “major” concerns about their ability to finance their college education compared to just 13.3% of all FTFT incoming students. These differences likely connect to disparities in reported family/parental income. Nearly half of first-year students with connections to the foster care system (46.5%) reported parental/family income as less than \$30,000, which was nearly triple the proportion (16.3%) of all FTFT incoming students who reported the same.

With these differences in mind, it is not surprising that former foster care youth utilize distinct strategies to pay for college. Former foster care youth have a greater propensity than the national sample of FTFT students to use funding from work-study opportunities (29.9% vs. 19.7%) and Pell grants (54.2% vs. 28.4%) to finance their undergraduate education. By contrast, a substantially smaller proportion of former foster care youth report relying on financial support from family (56.7%)

STUDENTS ENROLL IN COLLEGES CLOSER TO HOME

This year’s incoming first-year students enrolled in colleges located closer to home than in previous years. Roughly 37.9% of incoming first-year students enrolled in an institution within 50 miles of their permanent residence, including 13.0% of FTFT students attending college within 10 miles of their permanent homes—nearly two percentage points higher than the 11.3% of students reporting the same proximity in 2015. Not only are more students attending schools closer to home but more of them are also planning to live with family members than in past years. Almost one-fifth of incoming first-year students (18.5%) plan to live with parents or relatives during their first year of college, which represents a three percentage-point increase from 2015 when 15.3% of incoming students intended to spend their first year of college living with parents or relatives.

Of the students who indicated that they plan on living with parents or relatives this year, roughly two-thirds reported that their families played an important role in their decision about where to enroll in college. Additionally, more than four out of five students intending to live with parents or relatives rated living near home as an important factor in their ultimate college choice.

Finally, roughly three-quarters of students who expected to live with parents or relatives were accepted by their first-choice institution (76.8%); however, only half of those students (54.9%) decided to attend their first-choice institution. By contrast, students planning to live in a private room (60.9%), college residence hall (57.1%), or fraternity or sorority house (70.5%) enrolled at their first-choice institution at much higher rates. It is unclear whether rising costs associated with living expenses and tuition, stronger familial ties, or other factors are contributing to more

students planning to live with parents or relatives and attend college closer to home, but these findings suggest that students who choose an institution closer to home and/or live with family tend to be more likely than their peers to sacrifice the opportunity of attending their first-choice college or university.

FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

First-generation college students, which HERI defines as those whose parents have no college experience, continue to receive attention from researchers and policymakers hoping to better understand their college-choice process and their transition to college. Over the past 10 years, the proportion of first-generation college students enrolling full-time in four-year institutions has hovered around 20%. In 2015, 17.2% of incoming first-year students reported that they were first-generation college students, which represents the lowest proportion of first-generation students in the history of the survey. Roughly one in five (18.8%) of this year’s cohort of incoming students identify as first generation college students.

The proportion of students identifying as first-generation varies considerably by sex and race/ethnicity. As shown in Table 1, about one in five women (20.3%) identify as first-generation, slightly higher than men (17.0%). Across race/ethnicity, nearly three out of five Latino students (57.3%) are first-generation, roughly twice the proportions of students who identify their race as “other” (29.1%) and Black students (27.0%). By contrast, just 1 in 10 White students (10.5%) are first-generation.

Table 1. Percent of Group Identifying as First-Generation

Women	20.3
Men	17.0
Native American	21.5
Asian American/Pacific Islander	18.2
Black	27.0
Latino	57.3
White	10.5
Other	29.1
Multi-racial	17.3

While first-generation freshmen are nearly as likely to be accepted by their first-choice institution (73.8%) as freshmen with parents/guardians who have at least some college experience (74.8%), they are less likely than their peers to be attending their first-choice institution (52.9% compared to 57.2%). First-generation students are more likely to consider the cost of their selected institution and the offer of financial assistance as very important factors in selecting their college (56.1% and 58.2%, respectively) compared to continuing-generation students (45.1% and 43.9%, respectively), a difference of 11 and 14.3 percentage points, respectively. Given the apparent differential influence of financial concerns in first-generation students’ college choice, institutions need to pay particular attention to this demographic both in terms of financial aid packaging and transitioning these students to college, as they represent about one in five first-time, full-time freshmen nationally.

SOURCE:

Eagan, M. K., Stolzenberg, E. B., Zimmerman, H. B., Aragon, M. C., Whang Sayson, H., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2017). *The American freshman: National norms fall 2016*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

REFERENCE:

Eagan, K., Stolzenberg, E. B., Bates, A. K., Aragon, M. C., Suchard, M. R., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2016). *The American freshman: National norms fall 2015*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA.

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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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