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## Freshmen Pay, Mentally and Physically, as They Adjust to Life in College

New survey provides more data on what happens during that crucial first year

BY THOMAS BARTLETT

**T**HE FRESHMAN YEAR is taking a real toll on students' physical and mental health. Colleges now have a better sense of that cost, based on the results of a new survey.

For more than 30 years, freshmen have been asked about their attitudes, behaviors and aspirations when they enter college. But until recently, researchers have ignored what is perhaps more crucial to college leaders concerned about the freshman experience: What happens to students during that transformative first year?

A new assessment tool tries to answer that question by surveying students in the spring and comparing the results with those gathered from the survey that students take at orientation.

The comparisons yield insights into how the first year affects students—and most of the news isn't good.

The survey is the brainchild of John Gardner, executive director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College, at Brevard College, in North Carolina. It was designed to offer a "more holistic portrait" of students new to college, he says. "What we know about freshmen up to this point has been mostly anecdotal. We haven't been able to look at broad data that are empirically verified."

The 2001 report, "Your First College Year," was conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles, which also administers the freshman-orientation survey. The report is based on the responses of 3,680 freshmen at 50 four-year institutions who were surveyed in the fall of 2000 and again the following year.

Some of the findings are troubling. For instance, 44.9 percent of freshmen rated their emotional health "above average" at the end of their first year of college—a significant drop from 52.4 percent at the beginning of the academic year. A similar decline in ratings of physical health over the course of the year—51.4 percent to 41.3 percent—may be linked to the fact that students are exercising less frequently. The percentage of students who said they didn't exercise at all during a typical week doubled, from 5.4 percent to 11.8 percent.

### FEELING OVERWHELMED

Also worrisome is the increase in the number who reported feeling depressed at some point during the past year—from 8.2 to 16.3 percent. Likewise, many more students said they felt "overwhelmed by all that I had to do"—44.3 percent, compared with 31.6 percent. "We've heard it said so many times to students in orientation sessions that the freshman year is the time of your life," says Randy L. Swing, co-director of the Brevard research center. "Then you read these data, and it doesn't look like it's the time of anybody's life."

Other results provide insights into students' faith. The survey showed a big dip in the percentage of students who said they



*Mary Stuart Hunter of the U. of South Carolina: In college, "students aren't able to fall back on some of their old routines."*

had attended a religious service during the past year (84.7 at orientation, 59.6 at the end of the first year). But more students said they considered "integrating spirituality" into their lives "essential" or "very important" at the end of their first year (56.7 percent) than at the beginning (47.7 percent).

"At first, those statistics seem to conflict," says Mary Stuart Hunter, director of the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, at the University of South Carolina at Columbia. "But when you think about it, they really go hand in glove. Students aren't able to fall back on some of their old routines, like attending a religious service with their parents. They're searching for something else."

Some of the findings mirror those of the National Survey of Student Engagement, which gauges how well colleges encourage learning. The most recent version of the annual report, released last fall, revealed that many undergraduates studied only half as much as professors said was necessary, and that a fifth of those surveyed admitted "frequently" coming to class unprepared.

Freshmen are no different. Although they study more than they did during their senior year of high school, 65.2 percent of them said they hit the books 15 hours or less during a typical week.

They are also struggling to stay awake in class. The freshman survey found that 39.5 percent of the respondents said they felt "bored in class"—an increase over the 36 percent who reported the same feeling during their senior year of high school. "That the boredom factor went up is really a red flag for me," says Mr. Gardner, of Brevard. "Colleges expect students to be more engaged, but this shows just the opposite. We need to do more than blame students. We need to try to figure out why this is happening."

Not all of the findings in the freshman survey are discouraging. Students showed greater interest in "developing a meaningful philosophy of life" (50.4 percent, compared with 42.3 percent when they arrived on campus) and in "helping to promote

racial understanding" (38.4 percent, compared with 29.6 percent).

While part of the survey was designed as a follow-up to the orientation survey, other questions were new and focused on "engagement," a buzzword among educators.

There was a disparity between what students ranked as "very important" in helping them to learn and what actually happened in the classroom. Students ranked "group discussion" as more important than "extensive lecturing," but indicated that the latter was more frequent. And nearly half (46 percent) said "field experience or internships" were important to them, while only 4.7 percent said such activities took place at their colleges.

Brevard's Mr. Swing says professors should pay close attention to those statistics. "The mismatch between what students tell us they want and what is actually delivered is striking," he says.

The survey also offers a look at the not-so-rosy financial lives of first-year students. A majority (60.4 percent) said they had overspent their budgets, and a significant number (16.7 percent) reported accumulating "excessive" credit-card debt.

### KEY OBJECTIVES

When asked about their objectives, students ranked "raising a family" (75.5 percent), "being very well-off financially" (73.2 percent) and "becoming an authority in my field" (66.4 percent) at the top of their lists. Fewer aspired to "become involved in programs to clean up the environment" (22.1 percent) or to "influence the political structure" (19.9 percent).

The next freshman-year survey, to be conducted this spring, will include more colleges—125 have signed up so far. "I'm interested to see if the trends continue over the next several years," Mr. Gardner says. "It's already given us greater clarity about what's going on during the freshman year on campuses, and about the kinds of questions college leaders need to be asking."

The report will be released in April. The results of last year's pilot survey are available on the World Wide Web (<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/yfey>).