



Trends in Entering UCLA Freshmen: Results from the CIRP Freshman Survey 1974—2011

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Executive Summary

The information in this report is based on data collected between 1974 and 2011 by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Science (GSE&IS). Information from The Freshman Survey, a national survey conducted annually through the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), has traditionally been used to understand the characteristics of the entering class. This brief draws on nearly forty years of CIRP data on incoming first-year students at the University of California, Los Angeles. Reporting the data in a longitudinal trend format allows readers to identify patterns and changes over time.

CIRP data reveal that over the past three-and-a-half decades incoming UCLA freshman have come to:

- show higher levels of achievement and ambition;
have a stronger orientation toward career and professional success;
experience higher levels of stress and high, but decreasing, self-concept; and,
be more interested in social engagement but less invested in the political system.

Introduction

This brief summarizes key findings from data collected for The Freshman Survey (TFS) between 1974 and 2011. CIRP administers this survey to hundreds of thousands of incoming college students across the country each year; at UCLA, approximately 2,000 to 4,000 students have taken TFS each summer before starting class in the fall. (See Figure 1). Results are reported in the aggregate as percentages of the entire incoming freshman class.

The annual findings are intended to help faculty, staff, and administrators understand the characteristics of incoming freshmen, and trends reports such as this one allow UCLA to identify changes in student characteristics.

UCLA student trends are organized into themes commonly of interest to university faculty and administrators and presented here in separate sections with the following content:

- College choice
- Financial concerns
- Reasons for attending college
- Goals and ambitions
- Beliefs and values

- Self-concept
- Health and wellness

In addition to providing a discussion of key trends, the data are presented graphically to aid in visual interpretation.

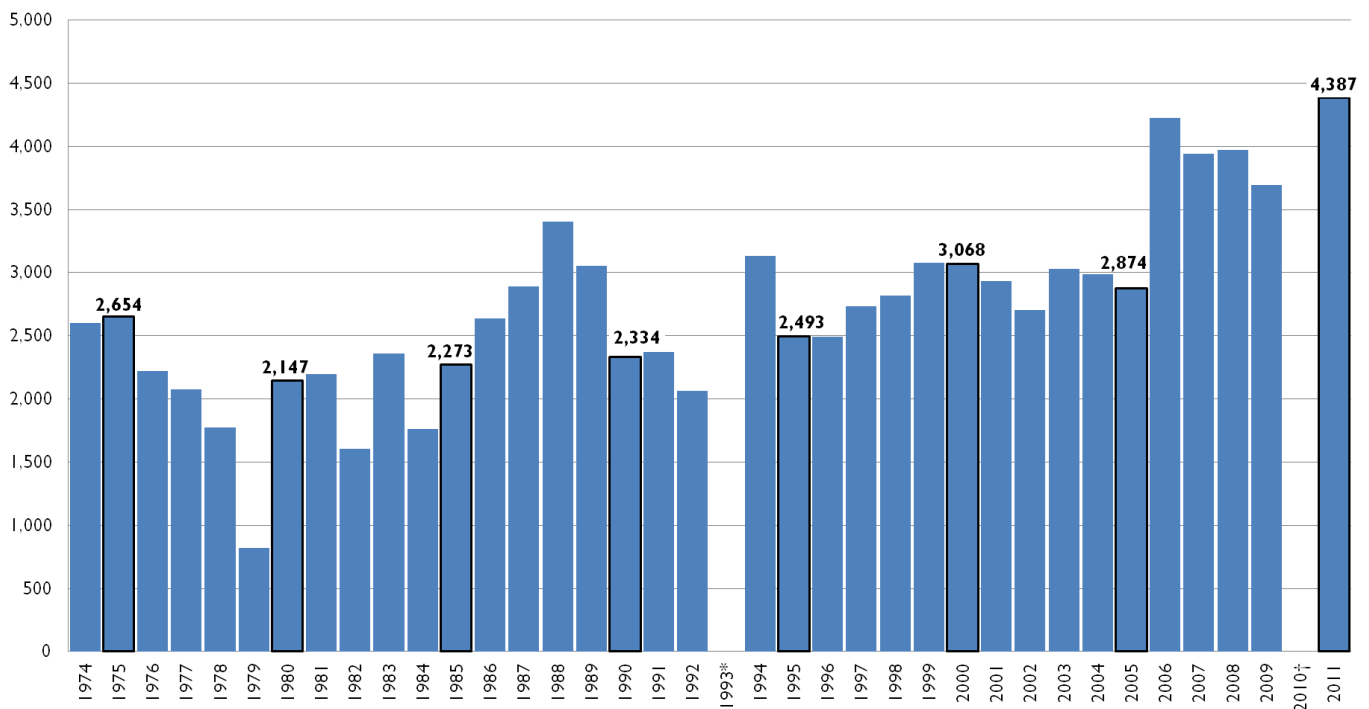
### College Choice

Throughout the US, the number of college applications that students file each year has been increasing steadily. In 2011, nearly 75% of incoming UCLA freshman reported having applied to 6 or more campuses. This shift began in 1986 with the UC's transition to the multiple filing system and has been rapidly increasing as admissions become more selective. (See Figure 2) While it may be surprising, the percentage of freshman indicating UCLA as their

## The Freshman Survey, Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP)

The Freshman Survey is conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). This survey is administered on an annual basis to incoming first-year students at hundreds of two- and four-year institutions throughout the US. Students are asked to provide information on personal background, college choice, academic preparation, and beliefs and values. In addition to supplying student data to institutions, HERI publishes yearly TFS reports and trends monographs that document changes in the values and characteristics of college freshmen nationwide. Additional information on CIRP and *The Freshman Survey* can be found on the HERI website at <http://www.heri.ucla.edu/>

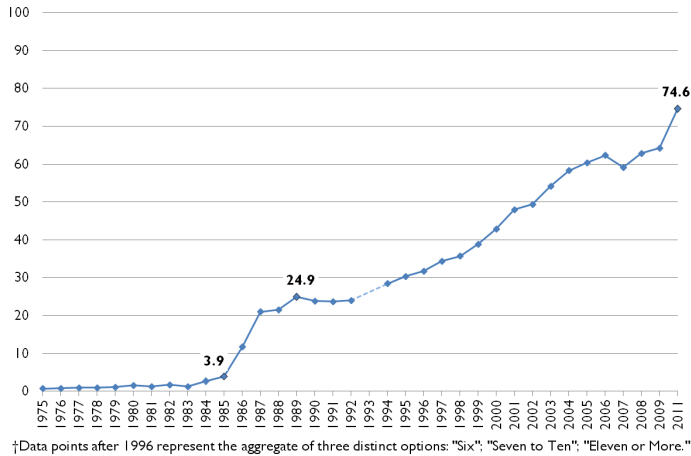
**Figure I. Number of UCLA Freshman Survey Responses By Year: 1974 - 2011**



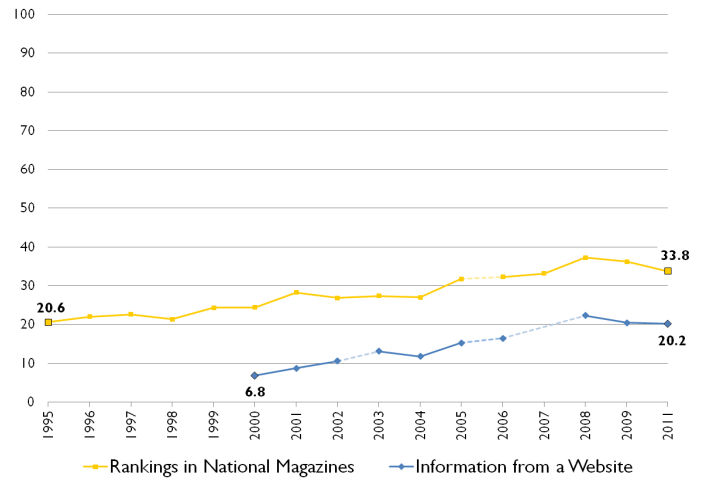
\* Data for 1993 were not collected.

† Survey moved to biennial administration cycle beginning in 2009.

**Figure 2. Number of College Applications Submitted This Year (Not Including UCLA Application) Percentage of Students Responding "6 or More"<sup>†</sup>**



**Figure 4. Factors Influencing Decisions to Attend UCLA Percentage of Students Responding "Very Important"**



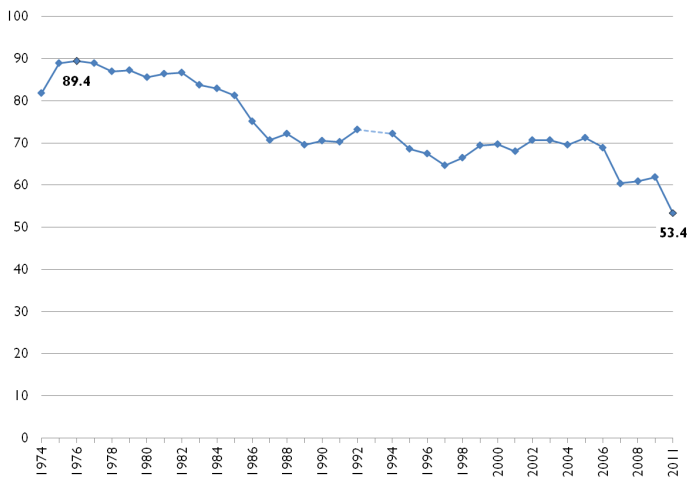
first choice has steadily decreased over time (See Figure 3); however, this trend likely reflects the competitive profile of our highly-qualified students and the greater ease of applying to multiple schools through common applications and through the expansion of the internet. Although this percentage remained relatively stable for the 20 years after multiple filing began, a curious drop-off occurred after 2006. New data from the 2013 Freshman Survey will reveal whether this downward trend continues.

The Freshman Survey asks students to describe how important various factors were in the decision to attend college. Students also share why they chose the specific college they attend. Although some higher education scholars question the validity of studies by consumer publications like *US News and World Reports* (McDonough, Antonio, Walpole, & Perez, 1998), applicants and their families are paying close attention to national college rankings. UCLA

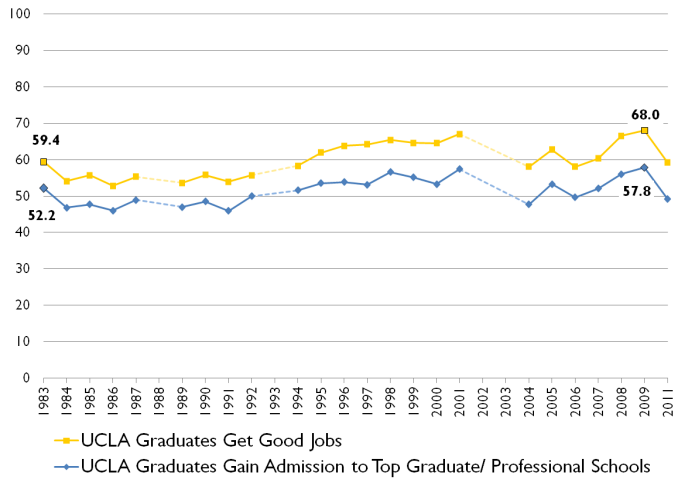
students have increasingly reported that such information was a very important factor in deciding to attend this institution, with the most recent findings indicating that approximately 30% of freshman believe it is “very important.” (See Figure 4) As information continues to become more and more accessible, students are also paying greater attention institutional web presence during the application process, and 20% of 2011’s incoming class found information on the internet about UCLA to play a role in their decision-making. (See Figure 4) UCLA students have steadily indicated that information from websites is very important in making the decision to attend this campus. While this may not be a surprising finding in the digital age, the data do reinforce that our online profile plays an important role in attracting students.

UCLA’s reputation for producing successful graduates has remained a stable factor in attracting students over the past 30 years, with minor fluctuations. A consistent majority of students have answered that they chose UCLA because its “graduates get good jobs.” (See Figure 5) Students have also reported that the campus’ reputation as a pipeline to top professional and graduate schools is a very important factor in their college choice. Although the sharp downward trend after 2009 appears curious, it may be explained by the transition to biennial survey administration. After examining the two years immediately prior to 2009, it becomes more evident that the 2011 response aligns with the overall trend. In fact, it might be better to ask why these rates *peaked* in 2008 and 2009. Uncertainty about a weak economy and high unemployment rates may have driven students to pay closer attention to

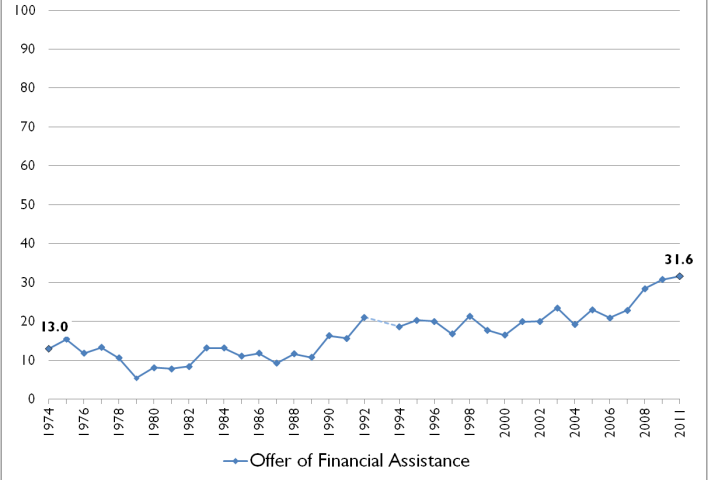
**Figure 3. Rank of UCLA among College Preferences Percentage of Students Responding "First Choice"**



**Figure 5. Factors Influencing Decisions to Attend UCLA**  
Percentage of Students Responding "Very Important"



**Figure 7. Factors Influencing Decisions to Attend UCLA**  
Percentage of Students Responding "Very Important"



their post-graduation prospects. 2011 response rates suggest that widespread anxiety about the national financial situation may have begun to improve, reflected by stabilization in interest about how UCLA students fare *after* graduation.

### Financial Concerns

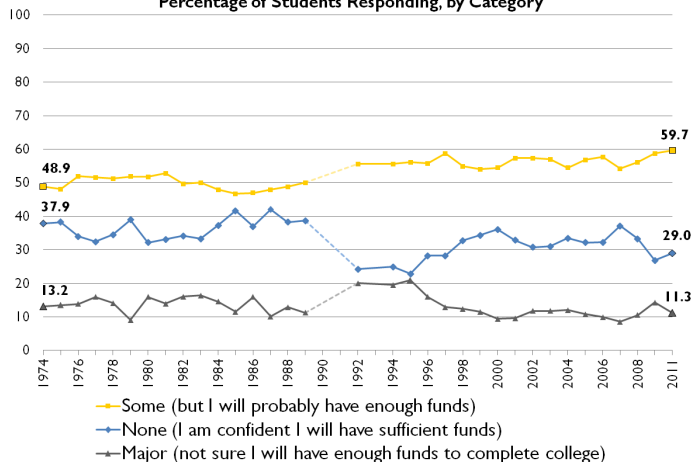
UCLA students have always been concerned with the ability to pay for their college education. Although the proportion of students reporting major uncertainty about having enough funds for school has remained fairly steady since 1974, the percentage of those who report having *some* concern has steadily risen over time. (See Figure 6) When the survey was first conducted at UCLA during the mid 1970s, about half of the freshman class reported having some level of concern about affording college; however, by the early 1990s that percentage began slowly rising to leave nearly 60% of students with some worries about paying for school. By 2011, between those who

were somewhat concerned and those with major uncertainties, over 70% of UCLA students worried about affording college. Although this graph's peaks and valleys do reveal shifts in economic stability, growth, and decline over time, the consistent upward trend of student concern clearly mirrors the rapidly increasing cost of higher education.

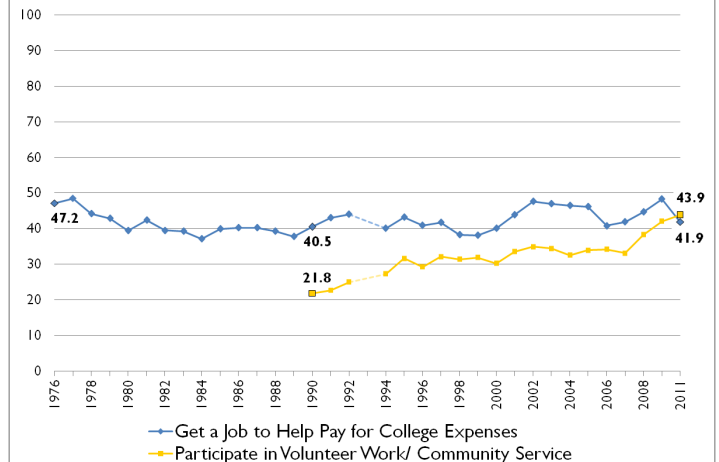
Related to growing concerns about paying for college, students have increasingly reported that offers of financial assistance play an important role in the decision to attend UCLA. (See Figure 7) Nevertheless, most students do not intend to work to pay for school themselves. In 2011, the rate of incoming freshman with plans to work during college to pay for school expenses (43.9%) was on par with national data for four-year college student employment (45.7%) (BLS, 2013).

Traditionally, fewer than half of UCLA students have planned take on a job to afford college, and this has remained relatively stable over time. (See Figure 8)

**Figure 6. Concerns about Ability to Finance College Education**  
Percentage of Students Responding, by Category



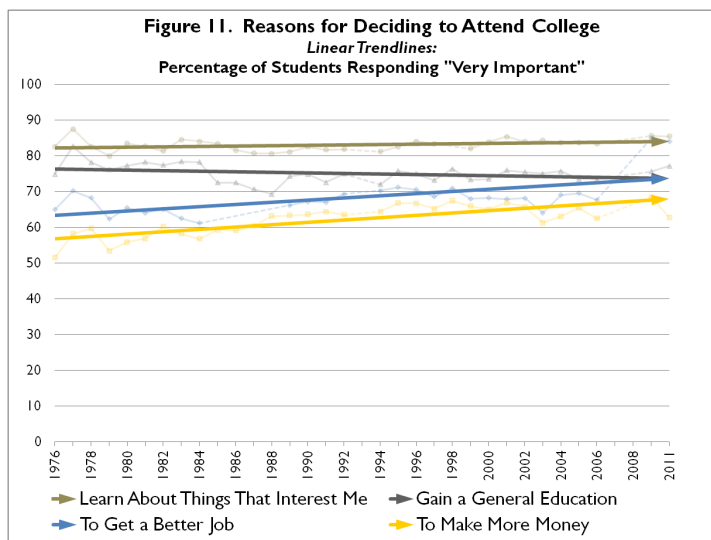
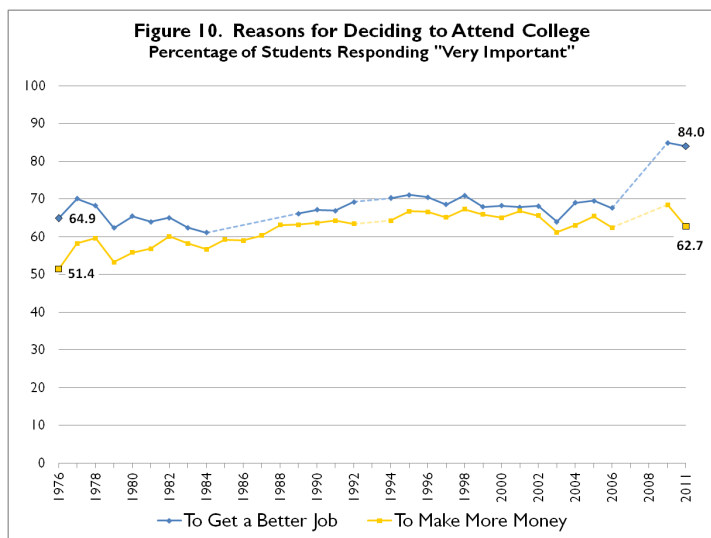
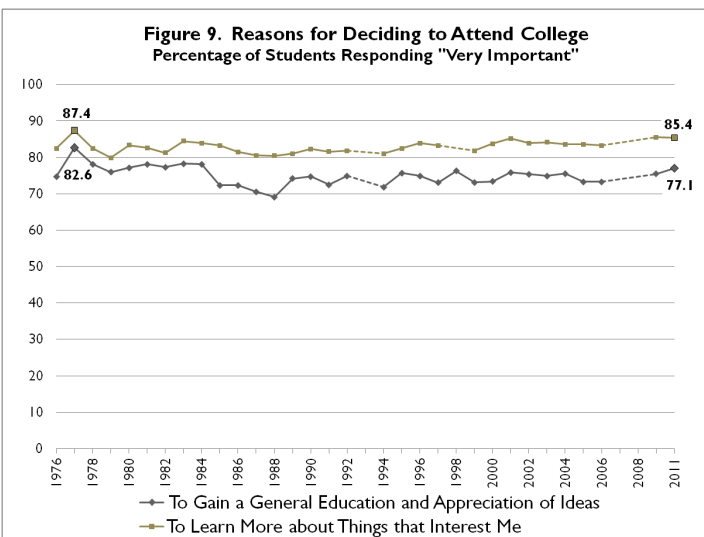
**Figure 8. Best Estimate of Future Activity**  
Percentage of Students Responding "Very Good Chance"



This is in stark contrast to the growing rate of students who plan to volunteer or perform unpaid community service while in college. During the 21 years that the Freshman Survey has asked UCLA students about volunteering, the percentage indicating a “very good chance” of participation nearly doubled from 21.8% to 41.9%. Although most students are increasingly concerned about their ability to pay for college, growing proportions plan to spend their out-of-classroom time performing *unpaid* service while the percentage of those who plan to work has remained constant. This may mean that even though UCLA freshmen are worried about their finances, they value the opportunities and experiences that volunteer service provides over offsetting school expenses by working for pay.

### Reasons for Attending College

When asked about reasons for attending college, the vast majority of UCLA students have offered responses indicating strong intellectual curiosity and a desire to pursue knowledge. Over 80% of UCLA students past and present reported attending college because they wanted to follow their own interests. (See Figure 9) While more than three-quarters have said that the ability “to gain a general education and appreciation of ideas” was a very important factor in their decisions, that trend has shown a slow decline over the past 35 years. At the same time, students have become increasingly invested in higher education’s promise of upward mobility. The data illustrate that a growing majority of UCLA students decide to attend college to improve their prospects of obtaining a better job and earning a higher income. (See Figures 10 and 11)



During the 1970s--a period of protracted economic and political uncertainty--societal values and priorities began to shift; at UCLA, the decreasing percentage of incoming students hoping to “develop a meaningful philosophy of life” converged with the rising number who sought to be “very well-off financially.” (See Figure 12) In a striking graphical representation of how the Reagan-era promise of personal prosperity reached college youth, between 1979 and 1982 the percentage of students seeking to be wealthy skyrocketed above those who wanted to lead a meaningful inner life. While UCLA freshmen seemed to care equally about financial success and personal depth in 1979, within three years there was a sharp divide, with financial gain winning out by 15 points. This sharp divergence continued throughout the 1980s to settle by 1988 at a fairly constant spread of 25% that persists today. When asked about future goals, a record majority of the newest Bruin class (78.4%) reported that “being very well-off financially” was important to them. In contrast,

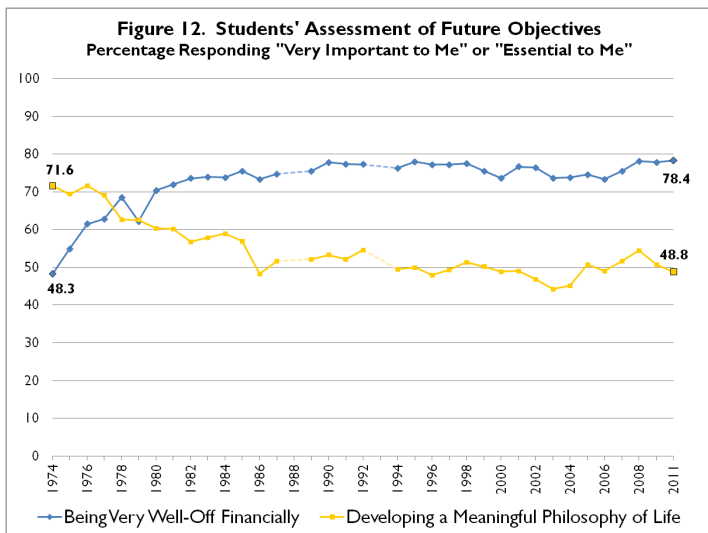
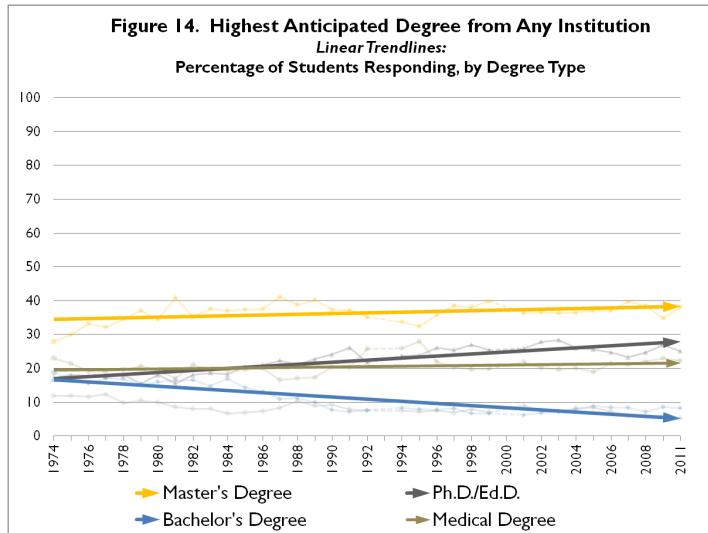
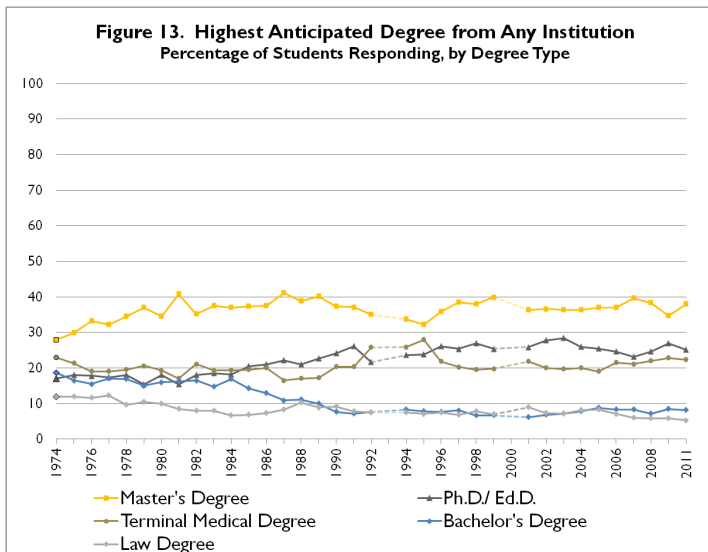


Figure 12 also shows that less than half of incoming freshmen (48.8%) described “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” as an important life-goal. Not unique to UCLA students, the same phenomenon has been observed as a national trend over the past 40 years (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007).

## Goals and Ambitions

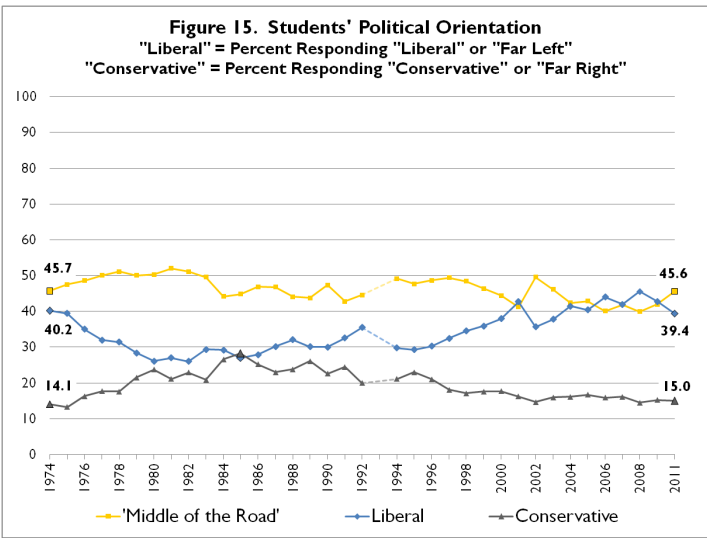
The Freshman Survey asks students about both their highest anticipated degree at UCLA and their highest degree ambition overall. In general, the most common answers for incoming UCLA students are Bachelor’s degree, Master’s degree, Ph.D./Ed.D., terminal medical degree (eg., M.D., D.O., D.V.M., D.D.S), and law degree (J.D.). (See Figure 13) When asked about their ultimate academic ambitions, students’ responses tend to follow patterns consistent with the research mission of the University of California (CSDE, 1960). Many more students plan



to pursue graduate-level degrees than those who intend to finish with the baccalaureate. The percentage of UCLA students hoping to obtain a law degree has slowly decreased over time while interest in pursuing medicine has remained stable at around 20%. Students’ desires for the Master’s degree have steadily risen over the past four decades, with 38% reporting this as their end goal in 2011. Among the most interesting findings are the divergent proportions of students seeking terminal academic degrees (Ph.D./Ed.D.) and those looking to finish with a Bachelor’s degree. (See Figure 14) In the first decade of survey administration, the percentage of those planning to end their college careers with a four-year degree hovered between 15% and 19%. In 1985, this rate began to steadily fall over the next five years until it reached the stasis still seen today between 7% and 8%. During the same period, the rate of students planning to complete an academic doctorate climbed from under 20% in the mid-1970s to a sustained proportion of over one-quarter beginning in the mid-1990s. These findings support university claims that UCLA students are among the most ambitious college students in the nation and also reflect popular sentiment that it takes more than a Bachelor’s degree to succeed in today’s world.

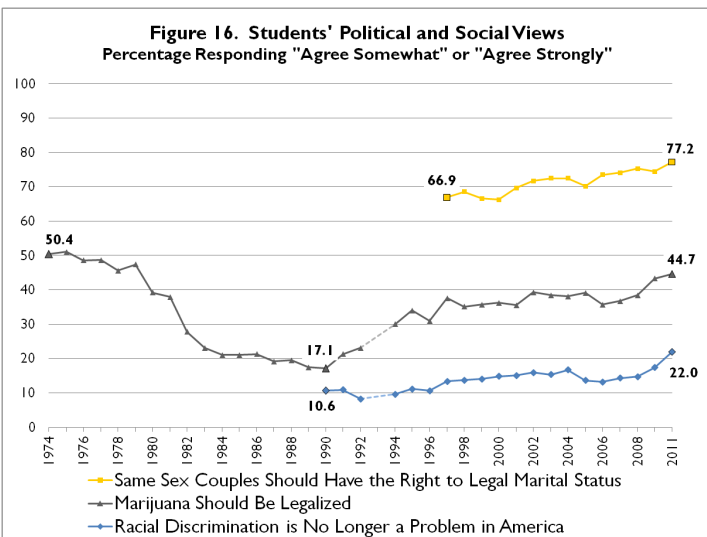
## Beliefs and Values

Students’ reported political leanings have fluctuated over the past 40 years, with a majority consistently claiming the “middle of the road.” (See Figure 15) Aside from a period of increased conservatism during the 1980s, UCLA freshman who indicate a preference have tended to be liberal. During the mid-1990s, increased polarization began to occur. By 2001, the



ratio of liberal students to conservatives was nearly 3 to 1, and the trend of increasing liberalization appears to be continuing. It is curious that UCLA's political composition is nearly identical in 2011 to what it was almost 40 years ago at the first survey administration.

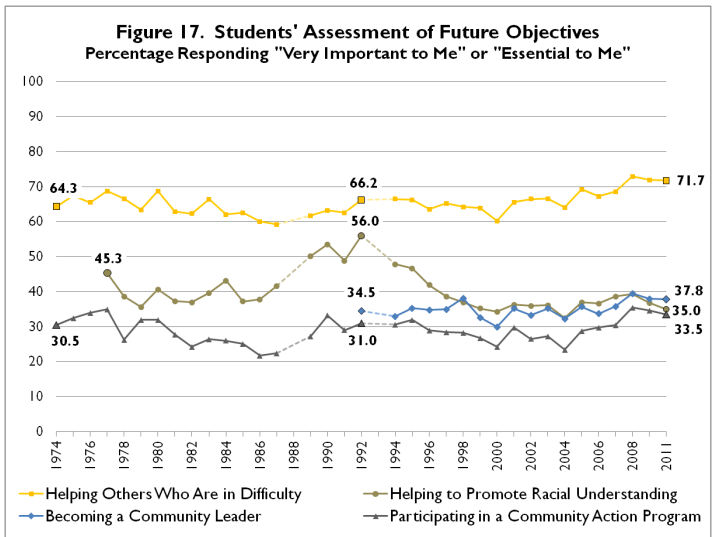
CIRP polls students about their values and beliefs using a set of questions that varies from year to year. As social mores shift over time, new questions are added and removed. Figure 16 shows trend data for three survey items that remain relevant to UCLA students' experiences in 2011. Mirroring the shift in national opinion, UCLA students have increasingly supported the legal right to same-sex marriage over time, although at much higher rates than the general public. Although there was a significant decrease in permissive attitudes toward the legalization of marijuana during the Reagan era, the proportions of UCLA freshman in favor of it have begun to approach levels seen during the 1970s. Increasing support for these particular issues appears to reflect both the rise in liberalism on campus and broader



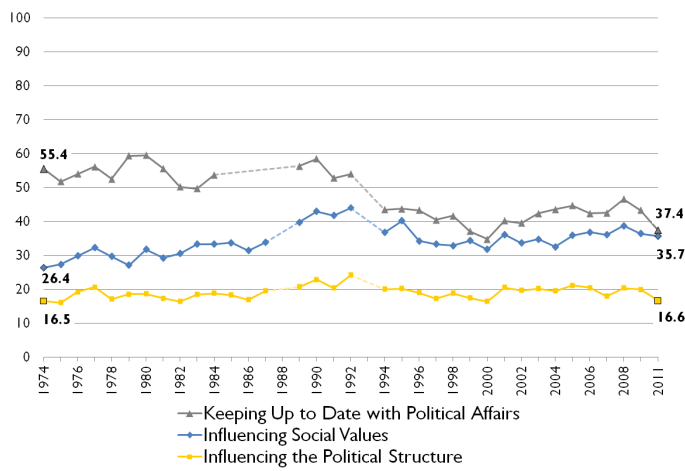
acceptance throughout California. It may not be coincidental then that these two issues—same-sex marriage and the legalization of marijuana—have seen state legislative victories over the past decade.

With regard to the university's commitment to social justice and equality, it is alarming that incoming students are more than twice as likely as students in 1990 to agree with the statement "racial discrimination is no longer a problem in America." Following the 2008 election of President Obama, the rate of agreement increased by over 60% from 14.7% to 22.0%, revealing that nearly a quarter of 2011 UCLA freshman may believe that race no longer poses a barrier to achievement. That this trend has not moved in a downward direction illustrates a continued need to provide students with opportunities to learn about systemic injustice, racism, and cultural competence.

When asked about their goals for the future, incoming UCLA students have always wanted to help and serve others. (See Figure 17) Two-thirds of students have regularly claimed that "helping others in difficulty" is very important—even essential—to them, and this has been slowly trending upward. Throughout the years, more than 30% of freshmen have also reported being a leader and participating in community action programs as key objectives. However, there appears to be a disconnect between the types of community support that students say they want to perform and what may actually be needed to help others in difficulty; on average, students have been nearly 40% more likely to say they want to help *undefined* "others" over wanting to help improve race relations. Even taking into account the period of increased investment during the late 1980s through the early



**Figure 18. Students' Assessment of Future Objectives**  
Percentage Responding "Very Important to Me" or "Essential to Me"



1990s—the era of Spike Lee’s “Do The Right Thing” and the L.A. Riots—support for improving racial understanding has been slowly moving in a downward direction. Mirroring student beliefs about racial discrimination, support for improving racial understanding decreased after the 2008 presidential election. When considered together, it appears that incoming UCLA students increasingly feel they live in a post-racial society.

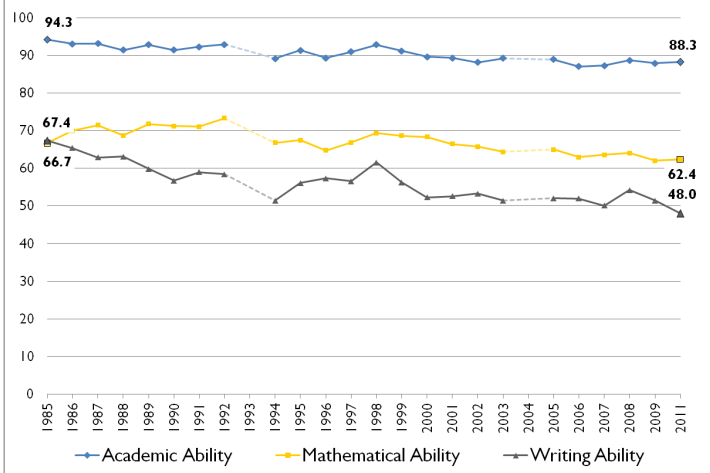
Freshman engagement with politics and society has tended to follow the particular milieu of the times: when tensions have been high domestically or internationally, students have become more invested in both being aware of their environment and wanting to change it. Conversely, when more secure, they have placed less emphasis on such priorities as “influencing social values” and “keeping up to date with political affairs.” (See Figure 18) In fact, there has been a sharp 18-point decline in student interest in political news between 1974 and 2011, with major downward movement beginning in 1991, perhaps not coincidentally the same year the World Wide Web went public. While freshman interest in changing the larger political structure has been traditionally low, beginning in the mid-1980s students began to care much more about influencing social values. While a growing disinterest in politics combined with little investment in changing the system may seem at odds with a student body who increasingly wants social change, the data may actually reveal that students do not fully believe in the current system of government. It remains to be seen whether the post-2008 decreases in engagement will continue throughout President Obama’s tenure as they did during the previous Democratic administration.

## Self-Concept

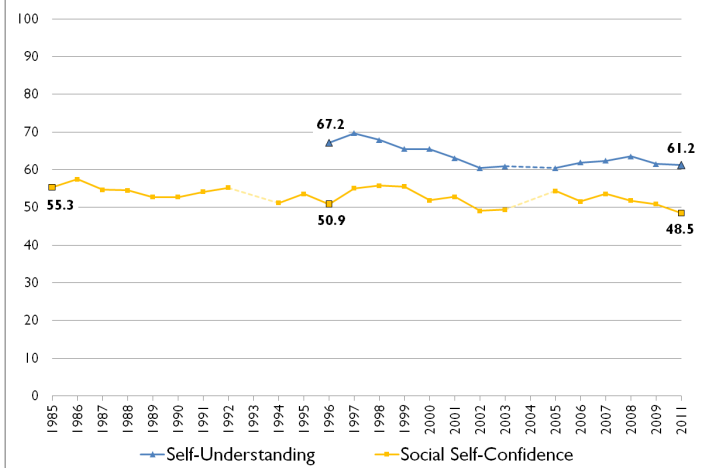
Academically, UCLA freshmen are among the very best of their graduating class, yet their perceptions of themselves--while generally high--have slowly decreased over the past 25 years. (See Figure 19) Although it is unclear whether this downward trend reflects true empirical differences or whether it is due to harsher self-evaluations in today’s competitive environment, incoming students nevertheless have high self-confidence in their scholarly abilities. While nearly 90% of freshmen claim superiority in *academics* over their high school peer group, the consistent decline in self-perceived writing ability may be compelling for faculty and administrators looking for ways to better support student success. This decline may also be symptomatic of changes in curricular priorities in the K-12 pipeline over the past quarter century.

When asked to evaluate themselves against peers, incoming UCLA students have reported slight

**Figure 19. Self-Comparison to Average Student in Age Group**  
Percentage Responding "Above Average" or "Top 10%"



**Figure 20. Self-Comparison to Average Student in Age Group**  
Percentage Responding "Above Average" or "Top 10%"

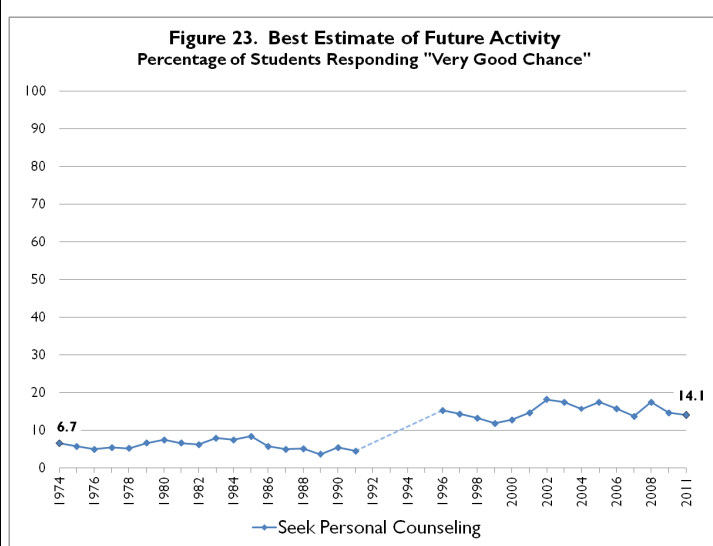
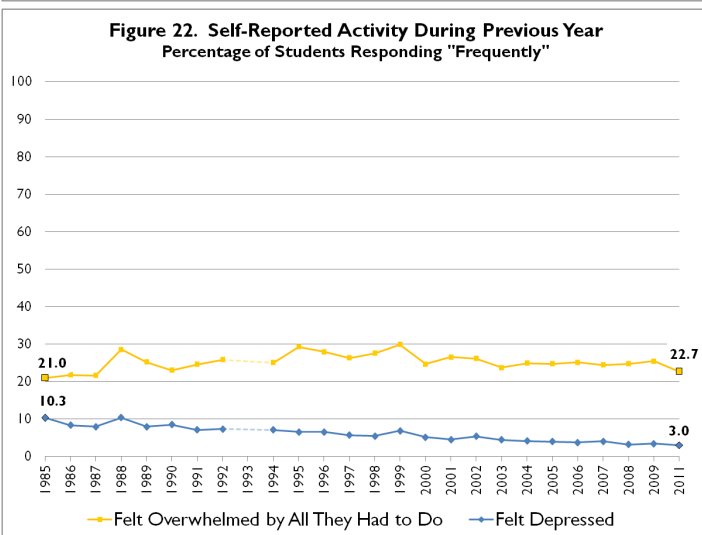
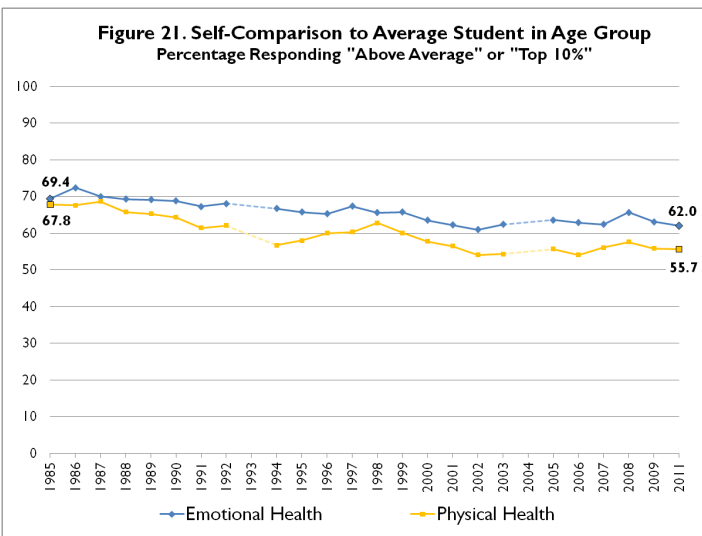




decreases in overall self-confidence and self-understanding over the last few decades. (See Figure 20) It is possible that this phenomenon is a result of the tremendous focus required to get into college; one trade-off of being academically competitive may be less time spent on self-development.

## Health and Wellness

With regard to the health and wellness of incoming freshmen, there is a slow yet troubling downward trend in students' self-reported emotional and physical health as compared to that of their peer group. (See Figure 21) While students still rate themselves higher than others their age in general, they are moving closer to what they perceive as "average" in the area of physical health. Given the nationwide trend of increasing overweight and obesity among young people, student perceptions of being the norm in physical health may call for more resources to be dedicated to campus health care and recreation. While incoming freshman are increasingly reporting lower levels of emotional health relative to



their peer group than previously, it is somewhat encouraging to see that on average, their overall sense of feeling frequently overwhelmed during the past year has remained stable. (See Figure 22). While this is just above 20%, these findings nevertheless may be higher than is reasonably acceptable for sustainable mental and physical wellbeing. This information does reinforce the notion that young people are under incredible pressure to perform and succeed. It is encouraging that the percentages of students reporting frequent depression in the past year has been on a steady decline since 1985. This is surprising given research that indicates mental health problems among college students have been on the rise in recent years (Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004). It is possible that incoming UCLA students have become increasingly aware of the lexical difference between being clinically depressed and simply feeling bad. Another explanation may be that students who suffer from depression have gotten better care for managing their symptoms over time.

Despite the differences in mental and emotional health trends for first-year students, one thing is certain: there has been a marked increase in the numbers of UCLA students who report that there is a "very good chance" that they will seek personal counseling in the future. (See Figure 23) Although this information is not surprising for those who work in student counseling and healthcare, it does provide administrators and faculty with valuable insight about the particular needs and awareness that today's students have regarding their own mental health.

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