

**A Comparison of National and Local Reports
The 2003 Freshman Survey (CIRP)
Higher Education Research Institute (HERI/UCLA)
and
Point Loma Nazarene University
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by Keith R. Bell, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Academic Administration

Introduction

In its thirty-eighth annual report of national normative data on the characteristics of students attending American colleges and universities as first-time, full-time freshmen, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) sponsored by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), highlights six significant observations. These include: interest in politics, volunteerism, grade inflation, family values, drinking and smoking habits, and financial resources as an influence in college choice. This article summarizes how Point Loma Nazarene University (PLNU) entering freshmen in August of 2003 compare to these national norms and to the characteristics of freshmen at the University in earlier years.

The 2003 Administration at PLNU

Since the Freshman Survey is administered during the University's New Student Orientation (NSO) program each August, the numbers of respondents as a percent of entering full-time freshmen are consistently impressive. The average number of respondents is in the high-400 range out of approximately 525 entering freshmen. In the fall of 2003, the voluntary response of 463 students (36.1 percent male and 63.9 percent female) was usable from the NSO administration. Entering freshmen at 412 other U.S. baccalaureate colleges and universities join this group. The national norms are based on the weighted responses of 276,449 students in the cohort.

SIX THEMES

ONE: Interest in Politics on the Rebound

In the years following the heydays of the 1960s, pollsters witnessed the ironic evaporation of political activism, it has taken literally decades for political apathy to diminish among entering college freshmen. Student interest in politics at the beginning of the 21st century now seems to be rebounding at extraordinary rates. At the national level, the percentage of those who feel "keeping up-to-date with political affairs" is a very important or essential life goal rose for the third consecutive year to 33.9 percent. Among the 2003 freshman cohort at PLNU, this index stood at 34.8 percent as compared to 32.1 percent in 2002, increasing dramatically from just five years ago when it stood at 27.0 percent. Similarly, the percent of PLNU freshmen who "discuss politics" on a frequent basis increased from 25.2 (compared to 21.0 in 1999), slightly higher than the national mark at 22.5, the highest point reached in the national cohort since 1993. Although HERI points out that "these indicators of political engagement are far lower

than the peaks reached in the late 1960s, when 60.3 percent of the 1966 freshmen valued keeping up with politics and one-third of the 1968 freshmen discussed politics on a frequent basis,” it is interesting to note the recent and solid rebounding from a somewhat disturbing political disengagement during the late 20th century.

Moreover, PLNU students demonstrate resurgence in their interest in politics by assigning personal importance to the goal of “influencing the political structure,” up from 14.2 percent five years ago to 17.3 percent in 2003. This same value is reflected at the national level, increasing from 17.1 percent in 1999 to a healthy 20.1 percent in 2003. PLNU students also exceed the norms in the area of voting in high school elections, registering 27.4 percent compared to the national 21.5 percent, though this figure reached a towering 78.7 percent in the late 1960s.

There also has been an observable shift to the political right among college freshmen, moderate at the national level and more intense among PLNU students. In the national sample, 22.7 percent self-identify as “conservative” or “far right,” compared to 21.3 in the 2002 survey. At Point Loma Nazarene University, fully 59.3 percent identified with the political right compared to 53.5 in 1999. It is interesting to note that during this same period, the number of entering non-denominational students has outstripped the growth rate of students coming from Nazarene and perhaps more moderate backgrounds. The percent of entering students at PLNU who consider themselves to be middle-of-the-road in politics has decreased from 39.9 five years ago to 32.4 percent in 2003.

TWO: Volunteerism

HERI points out that a national trend seems to have begun in the early 1990s relative to the spirit of volunteerism. A full 83.1 percent of students in the 2003 national sample report participating in volunteer work during their senior year prior to entering college, compared to last year’s figure of 82.6 percent. At PLNU, volunteerism reached 94.2 percent in the 2003 cohort, compared to 90.2 last year and a dramatic five-year leap from 88.3 percent in 1999. It is clear, incidentally, that more and more high schools (approximately one-third) now require a service activity for graduation. Still, there is substantial affirmation of the spirit of volunteerism at the university level as seen in a 25.3 percent indication that there is a “very good chance” they will continue to do volunteer work while in college. At PLNU, where currently there is no formal service requirement, this same statistic registers at 41.7 percent—well above the national data—and up in an impressive way from 25.6 percent in 1990, when the item was first introduced on the Freshman Survey.

THREE: Grade Inflation

University faculty and administrator suspicions about grade inflation continue to be verified by the proportion of students earning pure “A” or “A+” averages in high school, now burgeoning to all-time high levels (46.6 percent at the national level; 34.0 at PLNU). This compares to 45.7 percent and 28.3 respectively in the 2002 cohort. At PLNU, this figure stood at 10.8 percent the first year that the University participated in the Freshman Survey (1988), a change of 61.8% over time. While some of this increase in grade-point averages can be relegated to modifications in the traditional 4-point grading system (with

the addition of points for courses considered to be honors level or other advanced levels, such as International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement course work), it is clear that lower grades are disappearing at the same time. For example, at the national level only 5.1 percent reported earning average grades of “C+ or below” in high school, a decrease from 23.1 percent in 1968. At Point Loma, the percent now stands at 1.5 compared to 17.1 percent in 1988. It is not a surprise, then, that at the same time students’ academic confidence has hit new heights at the national level with a record 69.7 percent of students believing that their academic ability is “above average” or “highest 10%” among people their age (82.5 percent at PLNU!). Just five years ago at Point Loma, this figure stood at 79.9 percent of 488 students responding to the survey.

Ironically, students at the national level report spending less time studying in order to achieve this astounding level of achievement. In 2003, only 34.0 percent (44.1 at PLNU) report studying or doing homework six or more hours per week in the senior year. This is the second lowest figure since that item was added to the survey in 1987; in 1988 PLNU students reported spending 47.5 percent (in excess of the national high of 47.0 percent in 1987), dipping to an all-time low of 36.5 percent last year (2002). Not surprisingly, HERI also reports a strong correlation between superior grades and hours per week spent in studying as well as an inverse relation to hours spent working for pay.

FOUR: Family Values

Despite cultural pressures perhaps to the contrary, the national survey in 2003 reveals a full 74.8 percent of students (a new high for this category) claiming a strong commitment to “raising a family.” This compares to PLNU’s 87.9 percent who name this as a “very important” or “essential” life goal. The national low stood at 58.8 percent in 1977, while ten years ago at Point Loma the figure registered five points lower at 82.5 percent. Furthermore, HERI states “the importance of raising a family category currently ranks highest among the survey’s list of twenty-one values.” The second-highest priority for students in the national sample is “being well-off financially,” reaching its highest point in thirteen years at 73.8 percent. This figure registers 47.7 percent at Point Loma in the 2003 survey down from 49.9 last year and 48.5 five years ago.

Conversely, students’ desire to “develop a meaningful philosophy of life” in the national cohort fell to its lowest point in the history of the survey. In 2003, only 39.3 percent (48.9 at PLNU) champion this as an important life goal that hit an all-time high of 85.8 percent in 1967. In PLNU’s first administration of the Freshman Survey in 1988, this category stood at a high of 57.4 percent. These contrasting trends reflect the “continuing tension between extrinsic and intrinsic values within this generation of students” (HERI).

Amid this tension, HERI recognizes that religious involvement has fallen sharply at the national level. The percent of freshmen who attended religious services frequently or occasionally during their senior year in high school fell to 80.4 percent—a significant decline from the record high 91.7 in 1968. In stark contrast, Point Loma entering freshmen in 2003 show a 99.1 percent involvement in religious services. With the University’s appeal to evangelicals in relatively similar religious cultures, this category is consistently high at PLNU, always registering in the high 90s. Further, the percent of

PLNU students who rate their level of “spirituality” as “above average” or “highest 10%” among peers reached 73.7 percent in 2003, compared to 73.3 in 2002 and 71.5 in 1999. The national levels in this category dropped for the fourth consecutive year to 38.3 percent compared to a high of 46.4 percent just five years ago.

Finally, the 2003 Freshman Survey report that “the number of students claiming ‘none’ as their religious preference has nearly tripled over its history, reaching a record high 17.6 percent this year, compared with 17.2 percent last year and a low of 6.6 percent in 1966.” At PLNU, this figure stood at 2.3 percent when the survey began at this institution and in 2003 registers 1.3 percent (1.4 in 2002, 1.7 in 1999).

FIVE: Drinking and Smoking Habits

Given the continuing negative health reports and the national campaign against drinking and smoking (among minors in particular and in the broader society in general), entering freshmen at the national and local levels not surprisingly report very low levels in these categories. Fewer than half of national freshmen report frequent or occasional beer drinking (44.8 percent compared to a high of 67.8 percent in 1982). At the University, this percentage has dropped from 33.8 in 1992 to 14.9 in 2003. Consumption of wine and liquor is also down to a record low of 50.7 percent in 2003 (PLNU numbers show a decrease from 28 percent in 2001 to 21 percent in 2003). Consistent with these trends is the fact that students at national levels report spending less time “partying” than ever before, with 24.1 percent partying six or more hours per week in 2003, a significant drop from 36.8 percent in 1987. At PLNU, a 4.4 percent figure in 2003 reveals a significant change from the 12.5 percent level in 1988, the first time University students were asked to respond to this question on the Freshman Survey.

While declines in drinking and partying have been fairly steady over the past decade, trends for cigarette smoking have been less consistent. As HERI reports, “following record-high number of freshmen who frequently smoked cigarettes reported in 1998 (12.7 percent), smoking rates have fallen over the past five years...[to] a record low 6.3 percent” of high schoolers entering their first year of college. Students entering Point Loma Nazarene University in 2003 show an all-time low of 0.9 percent, compared to 1.1 percent in 2002, 3.3 percent five years ago, and 2.3 percent in 1988.

SIX: Financial Resources as an Influence in College Choice

With the ever-increasing costs associated with higher education in this country, both in the public and independent sectors, it is not surprising that receiving financial assistance continues to be a very important reason for choosing one’s college or university. PLNU’s percentage of entering freshmen who claim this to be true exceeds the national sample (PLNU – 38.9%, Freshman Survey sample – 33.6%). HERI points out that “the influence of financial aid consideration has increased steadily since the early 1970s, an era marked by the advent of many financial aid policies and programs at the state and federal level.” Even in 1988, when surveying first-time, full-time freshmen began at the University, this item stood at 30.0 percent.

Closely related to students' concern about paying for a college education is the expectation of students to work part-time while studying. At PLNU, 52.0 percent of those responding in the entering class of 2003 believe there is a "very good chance" they will work to help pay for their education (compared to 49.2 percent in 2002). On the national level, this registered 47.0 percent in 2003—near the all-time high reached last year at 47.1 percent. Point Loma entering students also parallel the national norms that show more women student expecting to get a job than men. While nationally 53.2 percent of women expect to get a job and only 39.2 percent of men, at PLNU 55.7 percent of female students well surpasses the 45.1 percent of male students in this regard. In addition, HERI has detected a correlation between ethnicity and the intent to find a job while in college. According to the national norms, Asian Americans "are least likely to expect to work while in college" with White/Caucasian students, African American students, and Latino students in ascending order of likelihood for working. Currently, the Office of Institutional Research at PLNU has not disaggregated this data by ethnicity primarily due to low numbers in the sample; only anecdotal information may be available on this intriguing point.

