



Understanding the Entering Class of 2025

Key Insights from The CIRP
Freshman Survey 2025

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Understanding the Entering Class of 2025:
Key Insights from The CIRP
Freshman Survey 2025

Maria Claudia Soler
Ellen Bara Stolzenberg
Julia Napier

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INTRODUCTION

The CIRP Freshman Survey (TFS) captures how students think about college before they officially begin their experience on campus. With 60 years of data, TFS remains the longest-running survey of incoming college students in the United States and continues to provide a unique view into who students are, what they expect, and how they make decisions about higher education.

The 2025 survey explores a range of topics, including students' backgrounds, academic preparation, college choice, financial concerns, values and goals, and expectations for their college experience. Together, these areas illustrate how today's entering college students are approaching higher education in a changing context in which questions about cost, value, well-being, and future opportunities are becoming even more important. This report uses 2025 survey data to provide insights for college and university leaders, faculty and staff, student affairs professionals, enrollment and admissions teams, financial aid professionals, researchers, policymakers, foundations, and other higher education organizations interested in student experiences and success.

Instead of covering every result from the survey, this report focuses on a few key areas that help explain how students are entering college. It looks at how students define the value of higher education, including how they think about return on investment (ROI). It also looks at how students connect college to future careers and credentials and how financial pressure shapes their decisions.

Data from 17,127 incoming students show a population that continues to become more diverse across race and ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, language, and socioeconomic background. The analysis also focuses on differences across student groups, including racial and ethnic minority students, LGBTQ+ students, low-income students, first-generation students, and military learners. Looking at these differences helps campus stakeholders better understand how students' experiences and expectations vary and identify where institutions may need to respond differently to support all students' success.

METHODOLOGY

TFS has changed over time in its content, the institutions that participate, and the students who respond. Since it started in 1966, more than 15 million students from over 1,900 colleges and universities have completed the survey. This report uses responses from 17,127 incoming students across 44 four-year colleges and universities. Each student included in the analysis completed at least 10 percent of the survey. It is important to note that these findings are not nationally representative. They reflect the students and institutions that participated in the 2025 survey.¹

TFS is designed to track changes over time while also adjusting to new priorities in higher education. It uses established methods to group related questions into broader measures that capture key aspects of students' experiences and characteristics. Each year, the survey is reviewed and updated by HERI in collaboration with researchers, institutions, and other partners. This ongoing process helps ensure that TFS remains a useful and trusted source for understanding incoming college students.

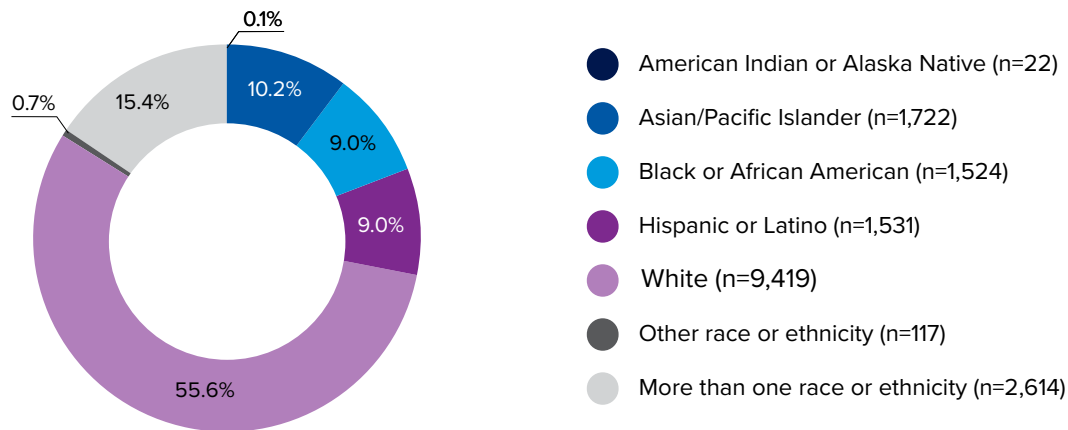
1 <https://heri.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/DATA-TABLES-TFS-2025.pdf>



SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

Although the sample is not nationally representative of all incoming college students, the 2025 survey captured a wide range of student demographics, including racial/ethnic background,² gender, income, first-generation student status, and military status. Regarding race and ethnicity, over half of respondents (55.6 percent) identified as White, but other racial and ethnic groups were highly represented as well, with 10.2 percent of respondents identifying as Asian/Pacific Islander, 9.0 percent Black or African American, 9.0 percent Hispanic or Latino, and 15.4 percent two or more races. Fewer students self-reported as American Indian or Alaska Native (0.1 percent) or indicated an unlisted race or ethnicity (0.7 percent), but these groups were represented in the sample.

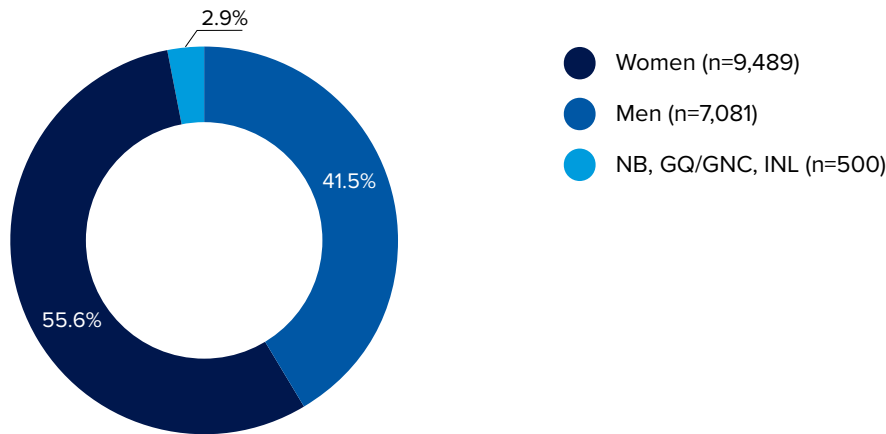
Figure 1. Respondents from the Incoming Freshman Class of 2025, by Race and Ethnicity



With respect to gender identity, over half of survey respondents (55.6 percent) identified as women, with another 41.5 percent of students identifying as men. Another 2.9 percent of students identified as either nonbinary (NB) (1.3 percent), genderqueer/gender nonconforming (GQ/GNC) (1.3 percent), or identity not listed (INL) (0.3 percent).

² The race and ethnicity categories presented in this report were aligned with those used by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)—American Indian or Alaska Native, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, White, and more than one race—excepting the categories of Asian and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. Due to collected sample sizes, the data for Asian and Pacific Islander students were combined into one category (Asian/Pacific Islander) for analysis.

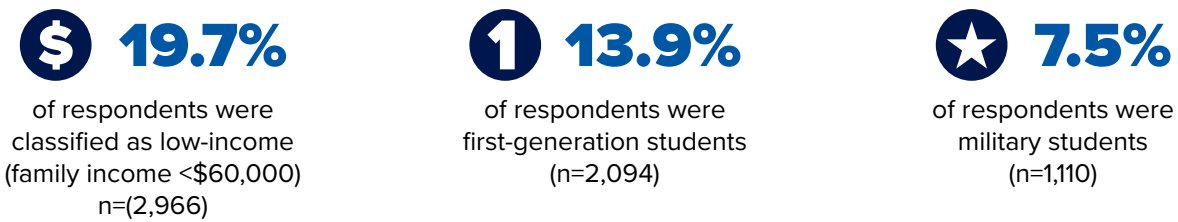
Figure 2. Respondents from the Incoming Freshman Class of 2025, by Gender Identity



Surveyed students from the entering class of 2025 also varied across income, first-generation college student status, and military status. About one-fifth (19.7 percent) of respondents were classified as low-income, which is defined here as a reported family income of less than \$60,000. Additionally, 13.9 percent of students were classified as first-generation after indicating that their parents or guardians did not have any prior college experience, and 7.5 percent of respondents reported as military-affiliated students.

These groups are not completely distinct; there was some overlap between students who identified as low-income and first-generation or military students. Among first-generation students, 47.9 percent also reported being low-income. Among military students, 8.5 percent also identified as low-income students.

Figure 3. Respondents from the Incoming Freshman Class of 2025: Characteristics of the Sample



The following sections present the report’s main findings. Bolded subheadings are used throughout to highlight key insights and notable patterns identified in the survey results.

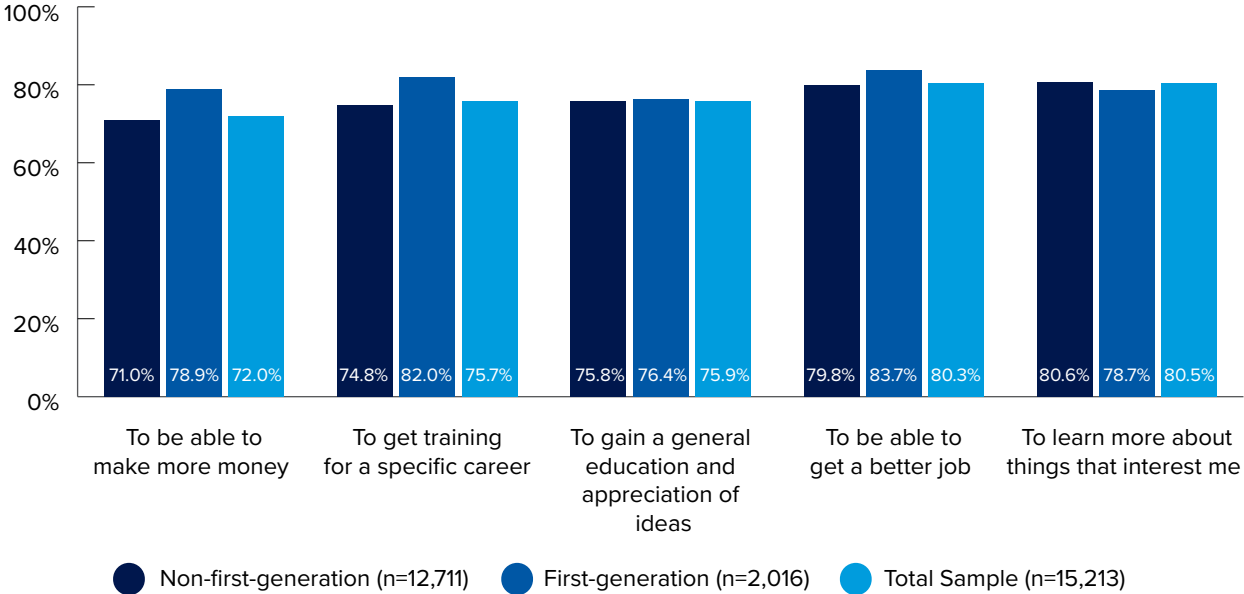
Students approach the value of college by considering both financial outcomes and personal goals. While 80 percent say getting a better job is important, similar shares emphasize learning and personal interests, suggesting that ROI is broader than financial returns alone.

In ACE’s most recent Pulse Point survey of college and university leaders, respondents identified the value of higher education as one of their top concerns.³ Questions about whether college is worth it continue to shape public discourse, enrollment trends, and institutional strategy.

The 2025 TFS instrument does not ask students directly how they define the ROI of higher education. However, it includes several questions related to reasons for attending college, career preparation, employment, earnings, educational goals, and financial concerns that help provide insight into how students think about the value of attending college. By examining students’ motivations for attending college, their perceptions of degree value, and the factors shaping their college choice, we can better understand how incoming students navigate these questions.

Students connect the value of college to both career outcomes and personal interests. About 80 percent said that being able to get a better job is a very important reason to attend college, and a similar share indicated that learning more about things that interest them is very important. Students also saw other reasons as important, including training for a specific career (75.7 percent) and making more money (72.0 percent). These results show that students are not prioritizing one type of value over another—they simultaneously have multiple reasons for attending college.

Figure 4. Reasons for Attending College (Very Important)



These findings also show that students are not entering college without direction. They are making decisions with clear goals in mind, combining career outcomes with personal interests. For many, especially those facing financial pressure, workforce outcomes play a stronger role in shaping these decisions. This perspective is also visible among military learners, who often approach college with clear career goals and a strong focus on practical outcomes.

³ <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/Presidents-Survey-Winter-2026.pdf>

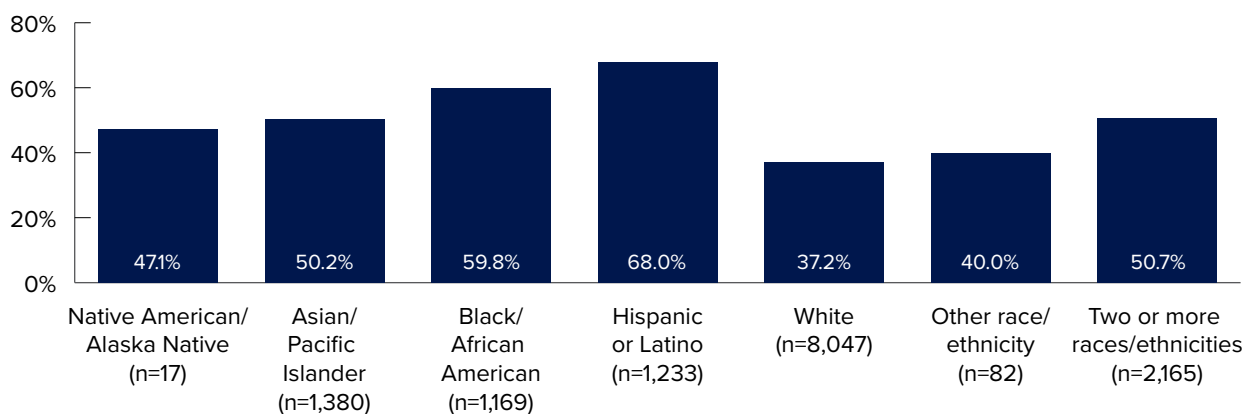


However, this orientation is not the same for all students. Students from historically underserved backgrounds—particularly Black or African American and Hispanic or Latino students, who are also more likely to be first-generation and low-income students—consistently reported higher importance across these measures. For example, 80.1 percent of Black or African American students and 79.1 percent of Hispanic or Latino students said that making more money is very important, compared to 68.7 percent of White students. Similarly, career-specific training is very important for 84.5 percent of Black or African American students and 82.4 percent of Hispanic or Latino students, versus 73.4 percent of White students. First-generation (78.9 percent vs. 71.0 percent) and low-income students (75.1 percent vs. 71.9 percent) also placed greater emphasis on earnings.

There were also notable differences across gender identity. While men (81.1 percent) and women (80.4 percent) reported similar levels of importance of getting a job as a reason for attending college, students who identified as nonbinary (NB), genderqueer/gender nonconforming (GQ/GNC), or identity not listed (INL) reported lower levels (67.2 percent), suggesting a broader or more complex definition of value beyond employment.

Differences in how students define value were closely tied to their financial realities. More than three-quarters (78.8 percent) of students reported that being offered financial assistance was at least somewhat important in their decision to attend a particular institution, including 53.2 percent who said it was very important. This indicated level of importance was higher among first-generation students (65.8 percent vs. 50.9 percent of non-first-generation) and low-income students (73.4 percent vs. 49.0 percent of higher-income students), who more often reported being offered financial aid as a very important factor in their decision to attend. Cost considerations show a similar pattern. Nearly 78 percent of students considered the cost of attending college at least somewhat important, including 45.1 percent who said it is very important. However, the degree varied widely across groups. For example, 68.0 percent of Hispanic or Latino students and 59.8 percent of Black or African American students reported cost as very important, compared to 37.2 percent of White students—a gap of about 30 percentage points.

Figure 5. How Important Is the Cost of Attendance in Your Decision to Come Here?



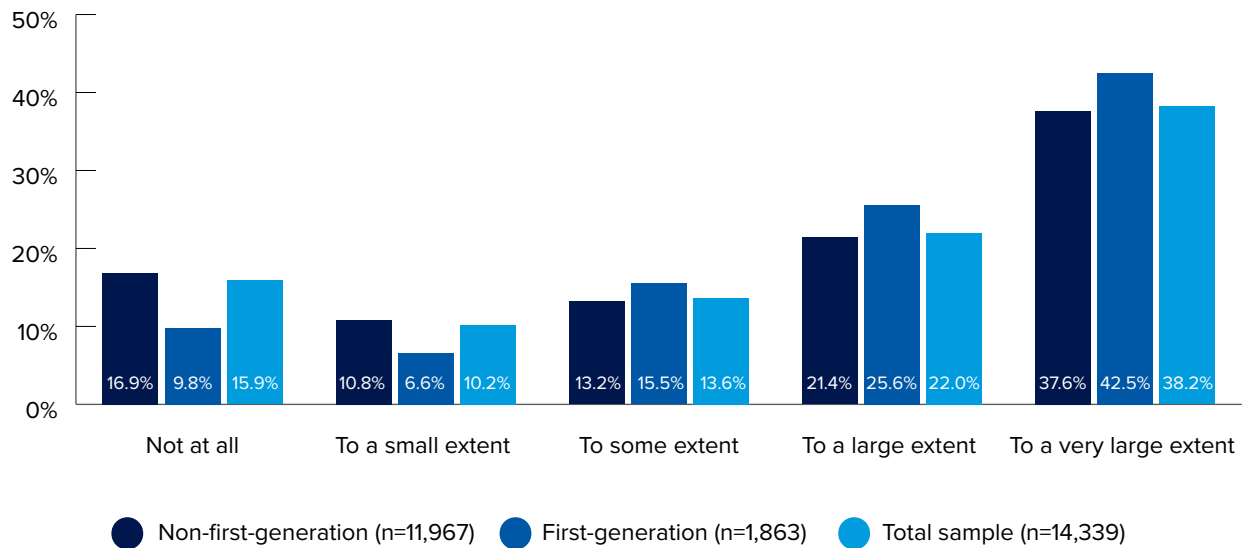
Note: Answers to the question were “not important,” “somewhat important,” and “very important.” The figure shows only respondents who selected “very important.”

Taken together, these findings show that for many students, especially those with financial constraints, college is not only an academic decision but also a financial calculation. Students are weighing cost, expected returns, and long-term outcomes as they make decisions about where to enroll. Military learners are a bit different in this context, since many rely on education benefits instead of traditional financial aid. Still, 44.1 percent of military learners said financial aid was very important, and 62.9 percent said cost was very important in their college choice.

When directly asked on the survey, students indicated that they are also actively thinking about whether college is worth it. In fact, 38.2 percent said they considered this question to a very large extent, the largest share across response options. This consideration is even higher among students who face greater challenges.

For example, 42.5 percent of first-generation students and 43.0 percent of low-income students said they considered whether college is worthwhile to a very large extent, compared to lower shares among their peers. Similarly, 47.8 percent of Black or African American students and 42.7 percent of Hispanic or Latino students reported this level of consideration, compared to 34.7 percent of White students. These results may reveal that first-generation, low-income, Hispanic or Latino, and Black or African American students are not stepping back from college. Instead, they are more intentional and more likely to see it as a key path to opportunity.

Figure 6. To What Extent Did You Consider Whether a College Degree Is Even Worthwhile?



Intrinsic motivations remain a core part of how students define value. About 75.9 percent said gaining a general education and appreciation of ideas was very important, and 80.5 percent said learning more about things that interest them was very important. These motivations were especially strong among women and LGBTQ+ students, showing that value is not only tied to economic outcomes but also to personal and intellectual development. Women reported higher levels of importance for general education (81.2 percent vs. 68.9 percent for men), and NB, GQ/GNC, or INL students reported the highest levels of interest-driven learning (89.1 percent). LGBTQ+ students also placed slightly more emphasis on general education than non-LGBTQ+ students (78.8 percent vs. 75.7 percent).

Overall, the data show that value is not one-dimensional for students. They are not choosing between career outcomes and personal motivations but are balancing both, depending on their situation. For some students, especially those who face financial constraints, college is more closely tied to economic outcomes. For others, personal and intellectual growth play a stronger role. For institutions, this means that conversations about value need to reflect both dimensions and recognize that students are navigating cost, risk, and opportunity at the same time.



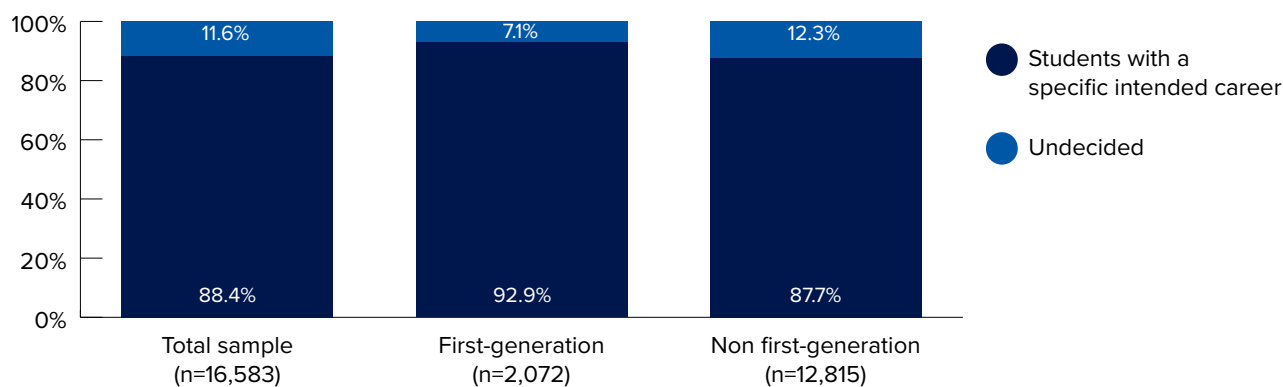
With only about three in ten students planning to stop at a bachelor’s degree (29.2 percent), students are entering college already thinking about what comes next. This suggests that students are not only thinking about their first job but about longer-term pathways, and they are looking at colleges and universities as part of a broader trajectory that includes additional credentials and opportunities.

Students are entering college with a clear focus on career outcomes, and the data show that they are actively aligning their education with workforce goals. At the same time, they are also thinking beyond first jobs by considering how credentials and institutional outcomes will shape their long-term opportunities.

As discussed in the previous section, a large majority of students (about 80 percent) said that being able to get a better job is a very important reason to attend college. Building on this, the data show that students are not only motivated by these outcomes but actively align their education with them. Most students enter college with a clear sense of direction, including defined career goals and expectations about the education needed to achieve them.

This focus on outcomes also shows how students think about their future careers. Most students arrived on campus with a defined direction, with 88.4 percent reporting a specific intended career and only 11.6 percent undecided.

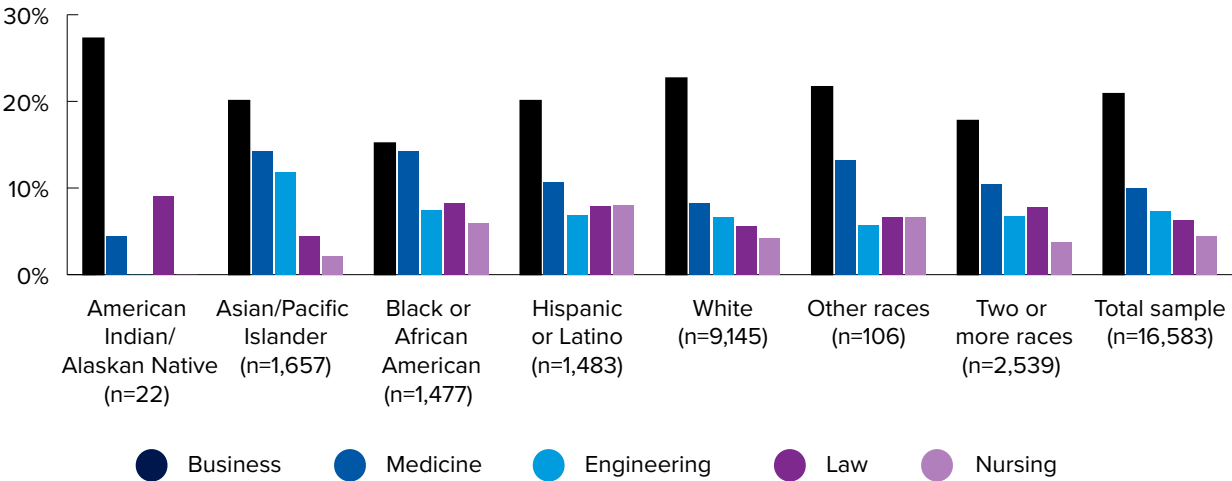
Figure 7. Career Plans Among Incoming Students



The most common career paths were concentrated in fields that typically require specialized training or professional credentials, including medicine (10.0 percent), engineering (7.3 percent), law (6.3 percent), finance (20.9 percent), and nursing (4.4 percent). These choices were not the same across groups. Asian/Pacific Islander students, for example, showed higher interest in becoming medical doctors (12.6 percent compared to 8.3 percent overall) while Hispanic or Latino students were more represented in nursing pathways (8.0 percent compared to 4.4 percent). First-generation students also leaned toward nursing (7.9 percent compared to 3.7 percent of non-first-generation students). Gender differences showed a similar pattern, with a higher share of men selecting engineering (11.5 percent compared to 4.2 percent of women) and more women selecting nursing (7.2 percent compared to 1.0 percent of men) and medical

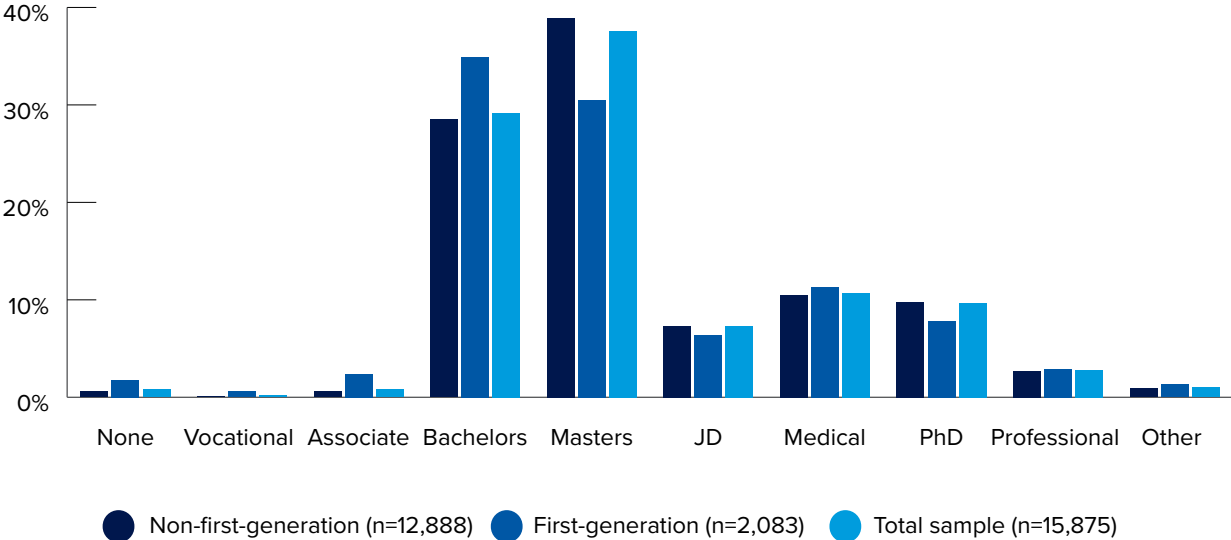
pathways (12.5 percent compared to 7.0 percent of men). Overall, workforce alignment was strong but not uniform. Students reported career interests that varied across demographic groups and reflected different educational and professional pathways.

Figure 8. Top Intended Careers



Students’ expectations about pursuing additional education credentials reinforced the patterns shown in their anticipated future career paths. Only 29.2 percent planned to stop at a bachelor’s degree, while a majority expect to pursue further education, including 37.5 percent planning a master’s degree and other students planning medical (10.7 percent), doctoral (9.7 percent), or law (7.3 percent) degrees. This breakdown changes across subgroups. Military learners reported higher expectations of pursuing a master’s degree than non-military students. At the same time, most students expected to follow a traditional timeline, with 87.2 percent expecting to graduate in four years.

Figure 9. What Is the Highest Academic Degree That You Intend to Obtain



Note: The sample is restricted to students from 4-year colleges and universities.

Students also considered whether institutions can support these goals when choosing their college. About 78.4 percent said it is at least somewhat important, and 38.7 percent said it is very important that graduates from their chosen institution gain admission to top graduate or professional schools. These findings suggest that many students are evaluating colleges not only based on the degree itself but also on the opportunities and educational pathways that may follow after graduation.



This importance varied across groups. Students of color were more likely to indicate it was very important, including 44.7 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students, 42.7 percent of Black or African American students, and 42.0 percent of Hispanic or Latino students, compared to 36.8 percent of White students. Women were also more likely to find this outcome very important than men did (41.4 percent compared to 36.0 percent). Differences by income are minimal, with similar proportions of low-income and non-low-income students who considered this as very important (39.6 percent vs. 38.9 percent). Differences are more visible by LGBTQ+ identity, with 32.6 percent of LGBTQ+ students reporting this as very important, compared to 40.7 percent of non-LGBTQ+ students.

At the same time, students recognized that their plans may evolve. About 46.1 percent reported some or a very good chance of changing their major, and 57.1 percent reported the same regarding their career choice. This suggests that while students enter college with clear goals, they also expect some degree of adjustment along the way. In some cases, this flexibility varied across groups. First-generation students, for example, were slightly less likely to say there is “no chance” of changing their major, while military learners were less likely to report a very high likelihood of change, suggesting more fixed pathways.

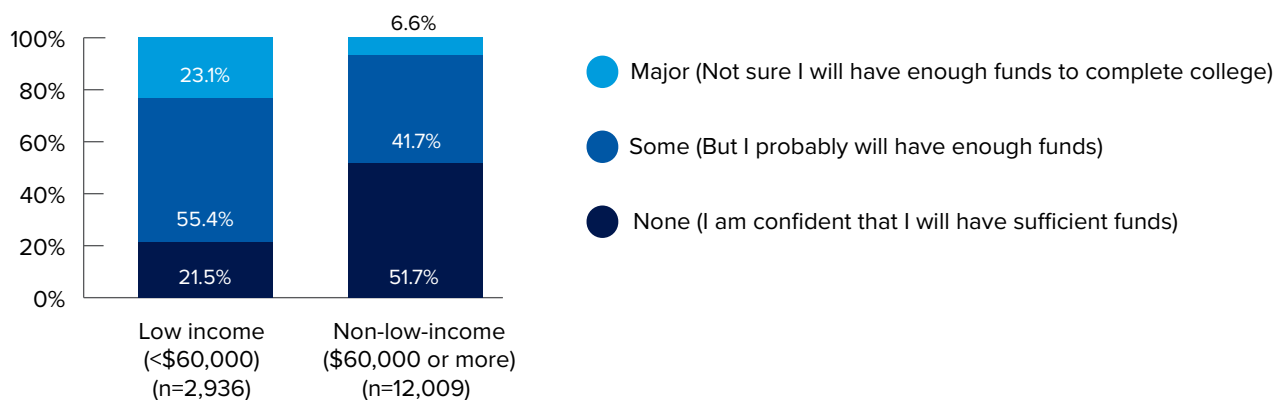
Overall, the data show that students are entering college with a strong alignment between education and workforce goals. They are selecting careers that often require structured pathways and advanced credentials, and they are evaluating institutions based on their ability to deliver those outcomes. At the same time, a significant share of students expected their plans to change, suggesting that alignment is not rigid. For institutions, this points to a dual challenge: providing clear and credible pathways into careers while also allowing flexibility for students as they refine their goals over time.

With over half of students (54 percent) reporting concern about paying for college, these pressures are much higher for low-income and Black and Hispanic students, shaping how they approach college and their expectations once they arrive.

In fact, financial pressure is already shaping how students choose a college, how they plan to pay for their education, and how they expect to spend their time once enrolled. In general, over half of incoming students (54.1 percent) reported at least some concern about their ability to finance their college education, with 9.7 percent having major concern and 44.4 percent citing some concern about paying for college. Students from low-income families showed more concern about their ability to finance college. More than three-quarters (78.5 percent) of low-income students reported at least some concern about paying for college, compared to less than half (48.3 percent) of those from higher-income backgrounds. Further, students from low-income backgrounds were 3.5 times as likely to report major concern (23.1 percent) than their peers from higher-income families (6.6 percent).

Financial concerns also vary across racial and ethnic groups. American Indian or Alaska Native and White students reported lower levels of financial concern (40.0 percent and 45.5 percent, respectively), compared to 71.5 percent of Black or African American and 75.6 percent of Hispanic or Latino students with at least some concern. These differences were also reflected in higher levels of concern, with 19.8 percent of Black or African American students and 17.2 percent of Hispanic or Latino students reporting major concern about their ability to pay for college. These patterns show that financial pressure is not the same for all students, with some groups entering college with much higher levels of risk.

Figure 10. Financial Concern by Income

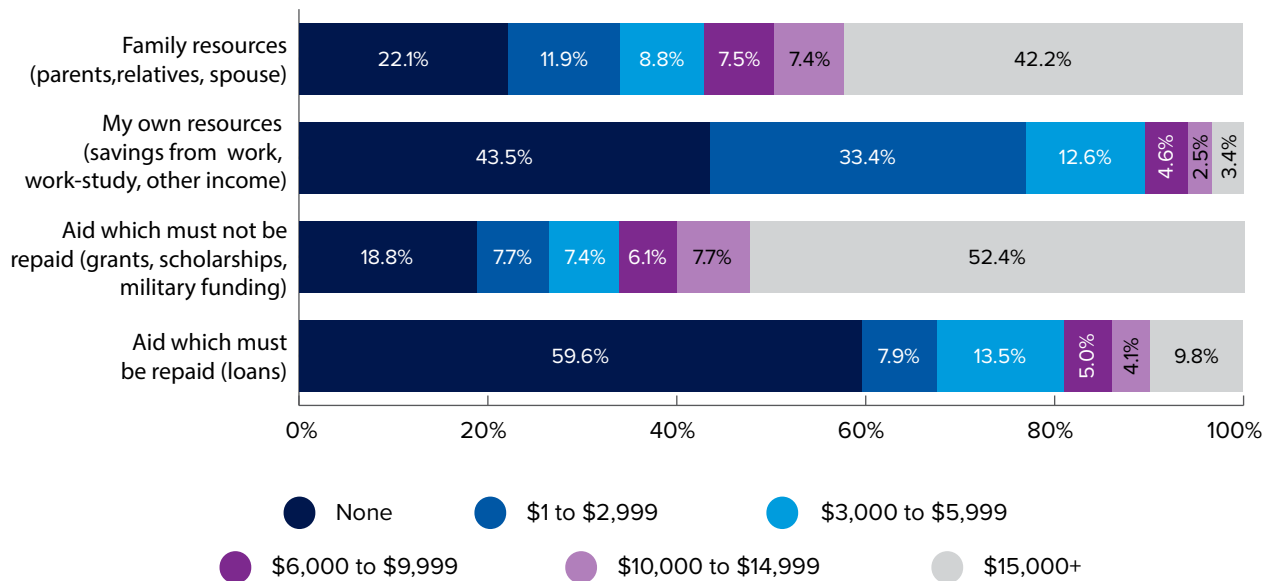


Students are also using multiple strategies to finance their education. Among the four primary funding sources that the survey asked about, 81.2 percent of students reported using scholarships, grants, or other aid that does not need to be repaid, making it the most common source of funding. Family resources (78.0 percent) and personal resources such as work (56.5 percent) were also widely used, while 40.4 percent of students anticipated taking out loans. Also, more than half of students getting nonrepayable aid reported receiving \$15,000 or more.

In terms of subgroups, over half of first-generation students (56.6 percent) reported using three or four sources, compared to 48.8 percent of non-first-generation students. Students of color (53.6 percent of Black or African American, 53.8 percent of Latino or Hispanic, and 55.1 percent of multiracial students) were more likely to report using three or four sources of funding than White students (48.3 percent).

These patterns show that students are piecing together multiple funding sources rather than relying on a single one.

Figure 11. Distribution of Anticipated Sources of First-Year Funding, Total Sample (n=14,382)



Loan use varies across groups. While a larger proportion of low-income students (47.0 percent) than higher-income students (39.1 percent) reported taking out loans, low-income students also reported taking out less money. In fact, despite the financial need, only 36.5 percent of low-income students reported taking out at least \$6,000 in loans to cover first-year expenses, compared to over half of higher-income students (50.3 percent). At the same time, Black or African American (45.6 percent) and Hispanic or Latino (50.8 percent) students more commonly reported family income below \$60,000, compared to 25.8 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students, 20.9 percent of students with two or more races or ethnicities, and 9.1 percent of White students, which shapes how they approach financing college.

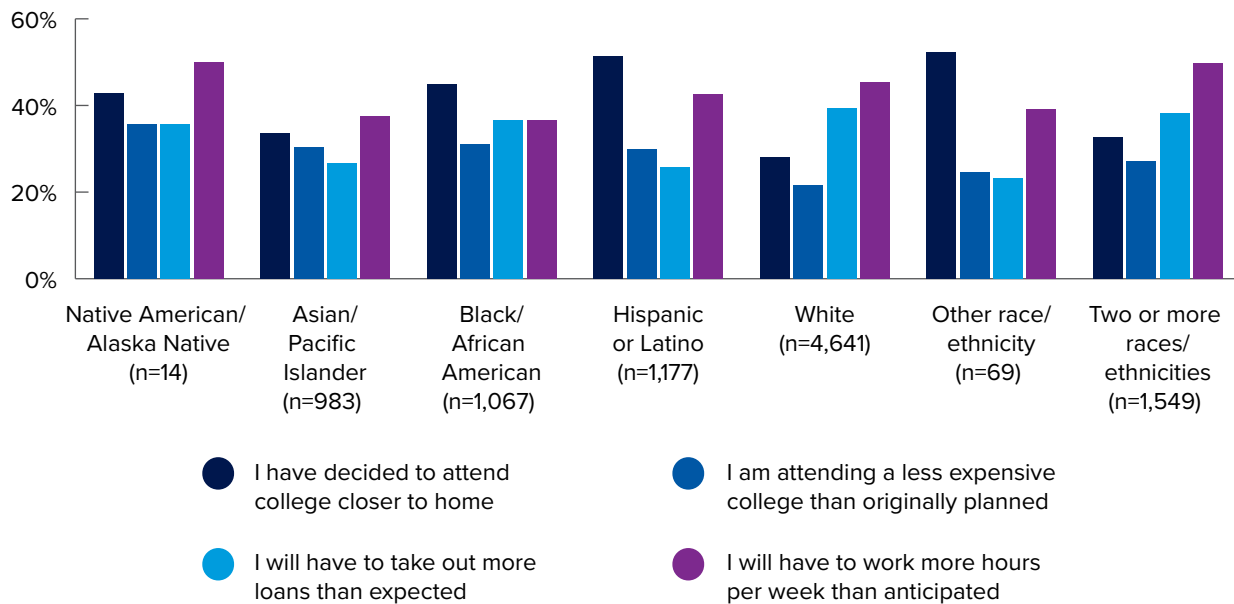
In addition to established strategies for financing college, student decisions were also affected by current economic conditions, such as inflation.⁴ About one-quarter (25.5 percent) of students reported attending a less expensive college than originally planned due to inflation, and just over one-third (34.4 percent) reported choosing a college closer to home. Many students also reported expecting to adjust their financial behavior once they were enrolled. About 35.7 percent reported expecting to take out more loans than planned, and 43.8 percent reported expecting to work more hours than anticipated.

These patterns also vary across groups. More than half of Hispanic or Latino (51.4 percent) and students of other races or ethnicities (52.2 percent) reported choosing a college closer to home due to inflation, compared to lower percentages among other groups (33.6 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students, 44.8 percent of Black or African American students, 28.0 percent of White students, and 32.6 percent of students with two or more races or ethnicities). Similarly, expectations around borrowing and working more hours differed across racial and ethnic groups, suggesting that inflation is not affecting all students in the same way.

⁴ The 2025 survey includes a new question in which students could select all that applied from the following items: Due to current inflation rates; I have decided to attend college closer to home; I am attending a less expensive college than originally planned; I will have to take out more loans than expected; I will have to work more hours per week than anticipated; and I have changed my choice of major.



Figure 12. How Inflation Is Affecting Students' Decisions, by Race and Ethnicity



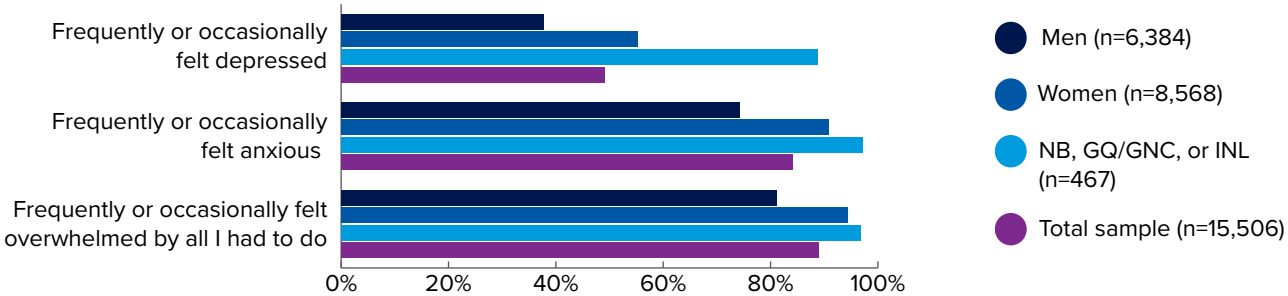
Overall, the data show that financial pressure is not only shaping how students pay for college but also how they choose institutions and how they expect to balance work and academics once they arrive. For institutions, this suggests that affordability is not only a question of access but also of student experience and engagement.

Many incoming students report challenges related to mental health and academic engagement before entering college, creating important opportunities for institutions to provide support. In 2025, large shares of students reported feeling anxious, overwhelmed, and depressed. At the same time, many also reported signs of academic disengagement, including incomplete assignments and falling asleep during class.

Student well-being is made up of several factors that are all related to their educational experiences. These factors, whether they are indicators of physical or mental health, elements of academic engagement, supportive relationships, or a sense of belonging, emerge before students enter higher education but can be significantly supported by institutions through student services and student affairs. TFS asks students several questions that serve as indicators of student well-being and success, with this section focusing on reports of mental health and academic engagement.

Mental health challenges were frequently reported among the incoming freshman class. Just under half of survey respondents (49.0 percent) reported feeling occasionally or frequently depressed over the past year. Feelings of anxiety were even more prevalent across the sample, with 84.1 percent of students reporting occasionally or frequently feeling anxious. Similarly, most students (88.9 percent) reported occasionally or frequently feeling overwhelmed by all they had to do.

Figure 13. Mental Health Concerns, by Gender

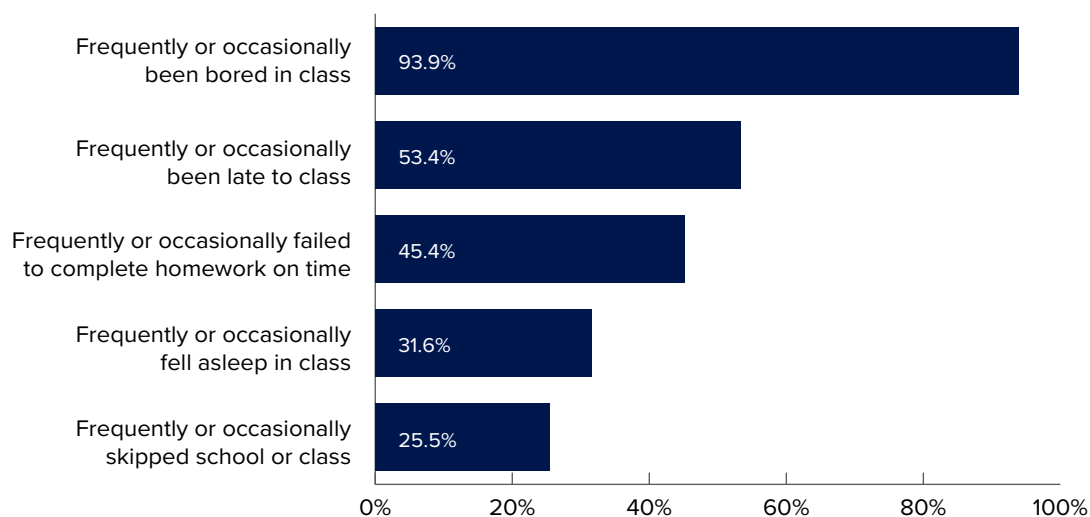


In looking at mental health challenges across various subgroups, over twice as many women reported frequently feeling anxious (42.9 percent) and overwhelmed by all they had to do (48.1 percent) than their male counterparts (19.3 percent and 21.9 percent, respectively). NB, GQ/GNC, or INL students reported the greatest mental health challenges, with most students occasionally or frequently feeling depressed (88.7 percent), anxious (97.2 percent), and overwhelmed with all they had to do (96.8 percent).

Differences could also be found across various subgroups in terms of reported feelings of depression. American Indian or Alaska Native students (55.0 percent), Black or African American students (54.6 percent), Asian/Pacific Islander students (51.1 percent), students of another race (51.5 percent), and students with two or more races (56.0 percent) reported feeling occasionally or frequently depressed more often than Hispanic or Latino (46.6 percent) and White students (46.2 percent). LGBTQ+ students also reported feeling frequently or occasionally depressed (77.5 percent) more often than non-LGBTQ+ students (43.3 percent). While mental health challenges were found to affect the majority of the student body, underrepresented groups often reported greater challenges than their peers, which could serve as an opportunity to provide further student support services.

Another aspect of student well-being, academic performance and engagement, is heavily represented on TFS. Among the respondents, many students indicated challenges in staying engaged during their last year in high school across several measures. Nearly all students (93.9 percent) reported being frequently or occasionally bored in class during their last year in high school. Around half of students reported occasionally or frequently being late to their classes (53.4 percent) and failing to complete homework on time (45.1 percent). While less represented in the population, over a quarter of students reported having occasionally or frequently skipped school or class (25.5 percent) and having fallen asleep in class (31.6 percent).

Figure 14. Factors of Academic Disengagement, Total Sample (n=15,405)



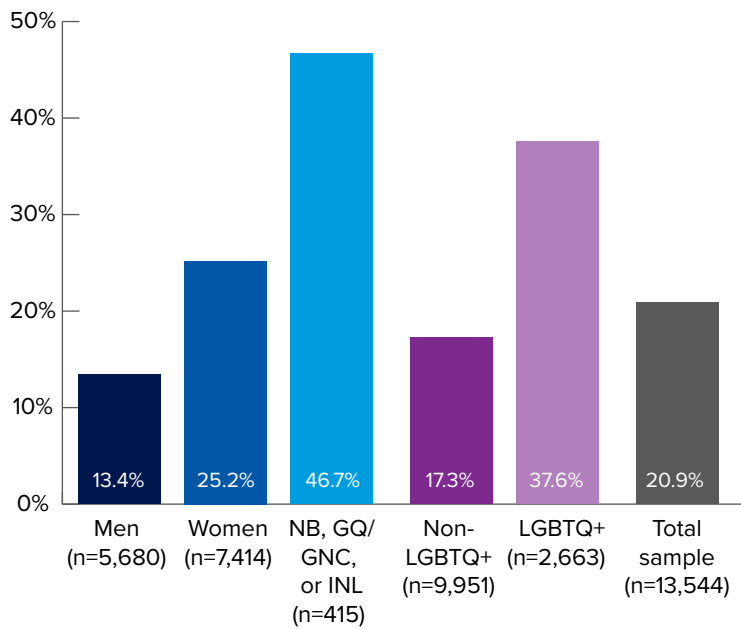
These behaviors associated with academic disengagement vary across subgroups as well, sometimes similar to mental health challenges. LGBTQ+ students were more likely to report incomplete assignments, with over half of LGBTQ+ students (54.6 percent) occasionally or frequently failing to complete their homework on time when compared to 42.7 percent of non-LGBTQ+ students who indicated failing to complete their homework with the same frequency.

In looking at academic engagement by racial and ethnic subgroups, Black or African American students (48.1 percent) and Asian/Pacific Islander students (41.9 percent) reported occasionally or frequently falling asleep during class more often than students of other races (36.5 percent), students with two or more races (35.6 percent), Hispanic or Latino students (34.3 percent), White students (25.8 percent), and American Indian or Alaska Native students (25.0 percent). Boredom in class was reported more frequently by students with two or more races (39.6 percent), students with other races (37.8 percent), White students (37.7 percent), and Black or African American students (36.0 percent) than Hispanic and Latino students (29.5 percent), American Indian or Alaska Native students (30.0 percent), and Asian/Pacific Islander students (30.9).

While respondents to the 2025 TFS faced several mental health and academic engagement challenges, many also indicated the desire to seek support resources, which presents an opportunity for institutions to assist students through a variety of services. Well over half of students indicated that there was some chance or a very good chance they will seek personal counseling (60.3 percent) during college. NB, GQ/GNC, or INL (46.7 percent), Black or African American (31.1 percent), and LGBTQ+ students (37.6 percent) reported being very likely to seek personal counseling, around 10 or more percentage points higher than their counterparts.



Figure 15. Future Action: Very Good Chance of Seeking Personal Counseling



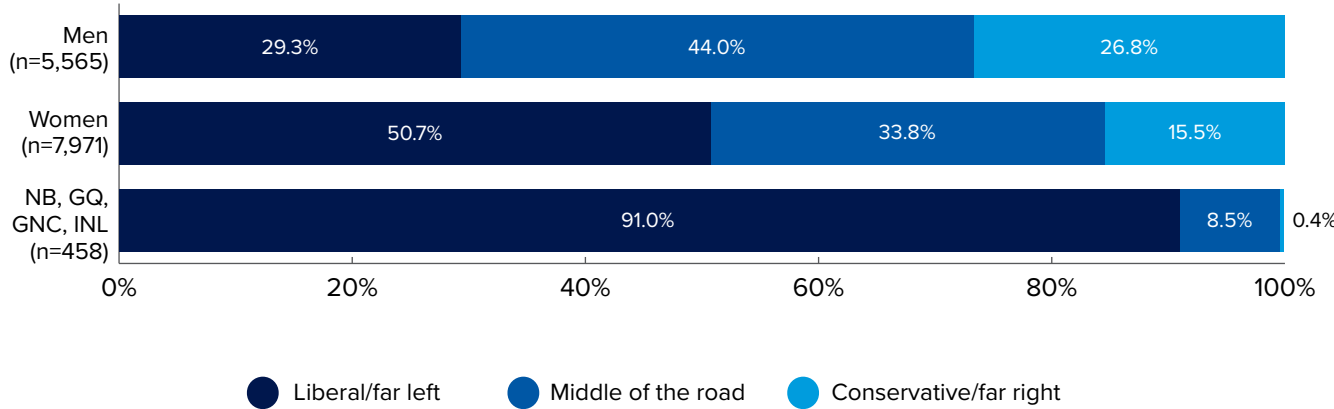
Overall, the findings above highlight two significant areas of interest and concern for higher education leaders as they consider student well-being through mental health and academic engagement. Understanding which populations of students may face more mental health challenges and which student populations may report signs of decreased academic engagement can help institutions think more intentionally about how to direct student support and resources.

Differences in students’ political views are also reflected in how they choose colleges and approach civic engagement. In 2025, 43.6 percent of incoming students identified as liberal or far left, while 19.4 percent identified as far right or conservative. Political views were also connected to how students approached college choice and civic engagement, including whether politics influenced where they decided to enroll and how they expected to participate once they arrived on campus.

Political views are related to college choice and how students think about college before they even arrive on campus. With respect to college choice, the data show that students across the political spectrum differ in how they choose institutions, how they engage with civic life, and how they expect to participate during college. At the same time, some attitudes remain consistent across groups, pointing to both division and common ground among incoming students.

TFS has included a general measure of political leaning for over 50 years. In 2025, 19.4 percent of students identified as far right or conservative, 36.9 percent as middle of the road, and 43.6 percent as liberal or far left. These patterns vary across demographic groups. Men are more likely to identify as far right/conservative (26.8 percent) or middle of the road (44.0 percent), compared to women (15.5 percent and 33.8 percent, respectively). Differences also appear by race and ethnicity, with Black or African American students (50.5 percent), students with two or more races or ethnicities (49.0 percent), Hispanic or Latino students (46.8 percent), and Asian/Pacific Islander students (46.5 percent) more commonly identifying as liberal or far left, while White students (25.3 percent) are more represented among those identifying as far right or conservative. Differences by income are smaller, although low-income students are somewhat more likely to identify as middle of the road.

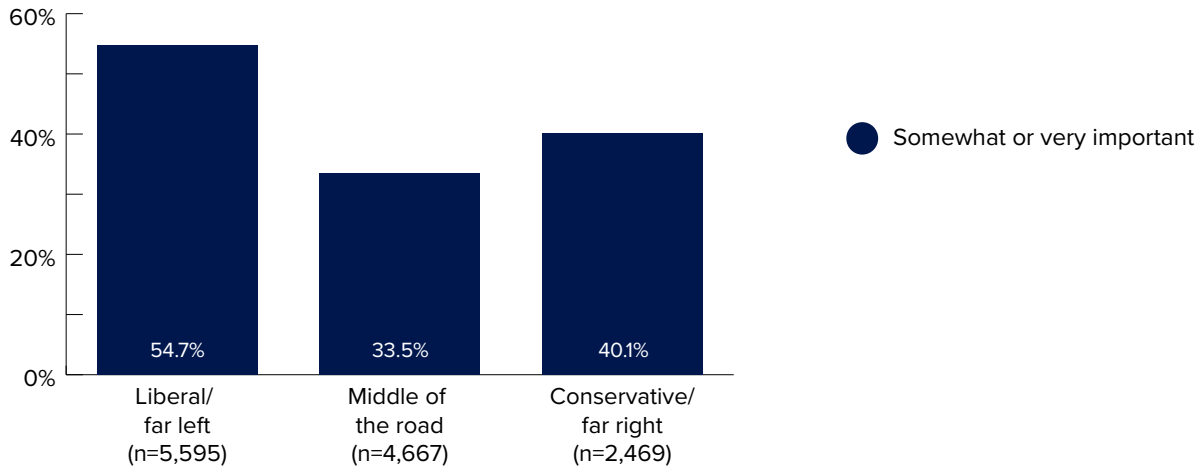
Figure 16. Political Views by Gender Identity



Note: 3,103 missing observations were dropped from the analysis to produce this figure.

Political views may also affect how students choose colleges. Students who identify as middle of the road were less likely to consider the politics or legislation of the state where a college is located as an important factor in their choice of college. Only about one-third (33.5 percent) of these students reported this as somewhat or very important, compared to 40.1 percent of far right/conservative students and 54.7 percent of liberal/far left students. This suggests that political context was part of the college decision-making process for a meaningful share of the incoming class of 2025.

Figure 17. College Choice: Importance of State Politics



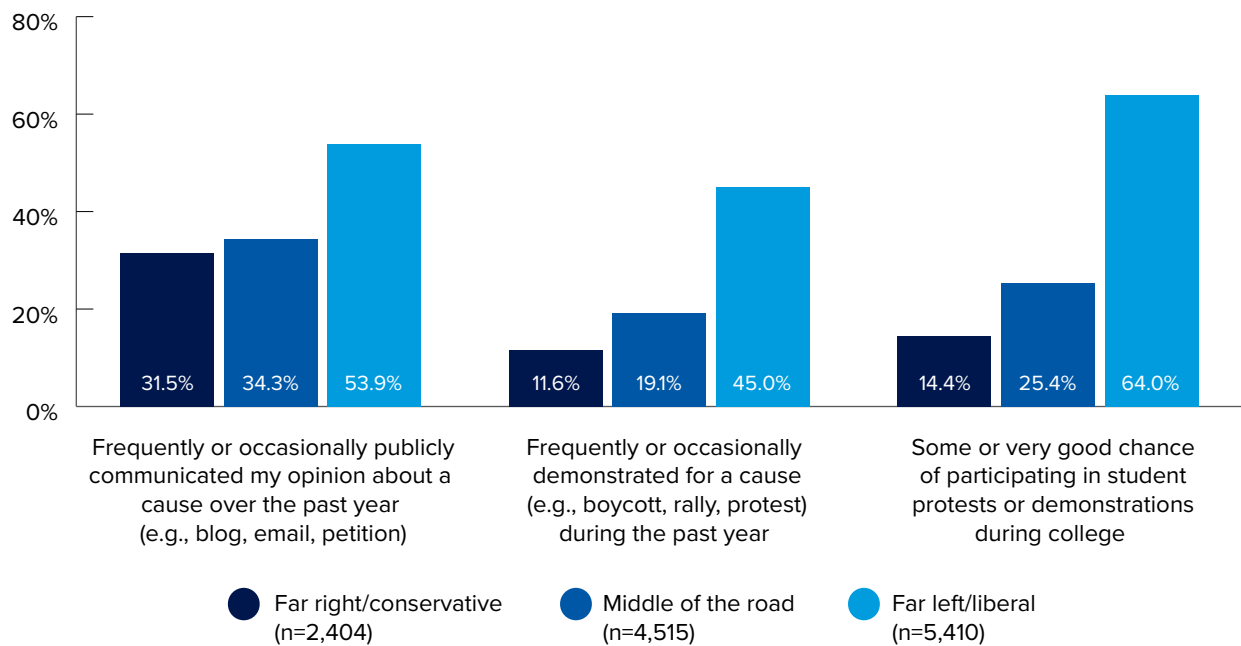
A similar pattern appears in civic participation. Students in the middle were less likely to anticipate voting during college, with fewer than half (48.4 percent) indicating a very good chance. This compares to 64.7 percent of far right/conservative students and 75.2 percent of liberal/far left students.

Still, not all forms of engagement were politically delineated. Students across the political spectrum reported similar levels of traditional civic activities during their last year in high school. Nearly nine out of ten students across all groups (far right/conservative, 89.0 percent; middle of the road, 87.1 percent; and liberal/far left, 87.9 percent) reported participating in volunteer work at least occasionally in their last year of high school. Similarly, regardless of political beliefs, roughly half of students reported helping raise money for a cause or campaign at least occasionally in the past year (49.8 percent of far right/conservative, 49.7 percent of middle of the road, and 47.9 percent of liberal/far left).

Differences become more visible when looking at political expression and activism. Liberal or far left students were much more likely to discuss politics frequently (44.2 percent), compared to 15.2 percent of middle of the road students and 17.7 percent of far right/conservative students. They were also more likely to report frequently or occasionally publicly communicating their opinions (53.9 percent) and participating in demonstrations (45.0 percent), compared to much lower proportions of students who are middle of the road (34.3 percent and 19.1 percent, respectively) or conservative (31.5 percent and 11.6 percent, respectively).

These gaps widened when students were asked about expected behavior in college. Nearly two-thirds (64.0 percent) of liberal or far left students said there is some or a very good chance they will participate in protests or demonstrations, compared to 25.4 percent of middle of the road students and 14.4 percent of far right/conservative students. These differences reflect variation in how students engage, not whether they engage.

Figure 18. Types of Activism by Political Views



Despite these differences, students also share some views. Across all political groups, a large majority supported creating a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, including 75.4 percent of far right/conservative students, 88.1 percent of middle of the road students, and 96.8 percent of liberal or far left students. However, views diverged more sharply on access to public education, with 60.6 percent of conservative students agreeing that undocumented immigrants should be denied access, compared to 20.6 percent of middle of the road students and 3.6 percent of liberal students.

Overall, the data show that political views are not just about beliefs. They are already shaping how students choose colleges and how they expect to engage once they arrive. At the same time, students across the political spectrum are participating in similar levels of traditional civic activities, even if the way they engage manifests differently. For colleges and universities, this creates an important challenge: how to support different forms of engagement while also creating opportunities for students with different viewpoints to interact, learn from one another, and participate in campus life together.

LOOKING AHEAD

As this report shows, the experiences and expectations of incoming college students continue to evolve alongside broader social, economic, and technological changes. At the same time, many of the themes highlighted throughout this report, including student well-being, financial pressure, educational aspirations, and career preparation, also reflect longer-term patterns that have developed across decades of CIRP data collection.

Since the first administration of the CIRP Freshman Survey in 1966, more than 15 million students from colleges and universities across the country have participated in this effort, creating one of the longest-running and most important sources of information on incoming college students in the United States. The 2016 monograph, *The American Freshman: Fifty-Year Trends, 1966–2015*, helped document many of these historical changes and continuities, and the findings presented here continue to build on that work.⁵

As CIRP reached 60 years of data collection, this milestone also highlighted the importance of continuing to examine how the freshman experience changes over time while identifying the patterns that remain central across generations of students. Future publications will continue building on this long history of research to further explore how incoming students' experiences, expectations, and priorities continue to evolve.

⁵ <https://www.heru.ucla.edu/monographs/50YearTrendsMonograph2016.pdf>

