

Research in BRIEF

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THE GRADUATING CLASS OF 2004:

An Analysis of Changes in Students' Activities, Perceptions, Attitudes, and Behaviors

Executive Summary

(Administered Spring 2004)

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program's (CIRP) *Freshman Survey*, administered by the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), is completed every year by thousands of new college students across the United States as part of a national study of higher education. Since 1966, over 10 million freshmen across the nation have participated in the CIRP, establishing it as the nation's largest and oldest empirical study of higher education. Chapman University has participated in the *Freshman Survey* for 38 consecutive years. Every year, incoming freshmen (Orange Campus only) are administered the survey during freshman orientation in a proctored setting.

The *College Student Survey* (CSS), also created by HERI, was initiated in 1993 to permit individual campuses to conduct follow-up studies of their students. The four-page CSS instrument, also known as the "Senior Survey," contains over 50 items inquiring how undergraduates spend their time, their level of satisfaction with the college experience, student involvement, cognitive and affective development, student values, attitudes, and goals, degree aspirations and career plans. The CSS has been administered at Chapman University during the Spring Semester to graduating seniors on the Orange Campus since 2003. Surveys are sent directly to students' homes via U.S. mail with commencement information and are returned with the students' Ceremony Attendance Form to the Office of the Provost.

Since the *Freshman Survey* (pre-test) and *College Student Survey* (post-test) have many survey items in common, it is possible to explore the extent to which the class of 2004 changed (if at all) with respect to activities, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors since entering college. This edition of *Research in BRIEF* focuses on the students who participated in both the CSS and the CIRP *Freshman Survey* and highlights some of the changes in activities, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors that transpired while attending Chapman.

Survey Respondents

Approximately 778 graduating seniors were asked to complete the *College Student Survey* between February and May of 2004. In total, 401 seniors (143 men and 258 women) completed the CSS survey, resulting in a 52% response rate. Of the 401 seniors who completed the CSS, 189 of them (47%) also completed the *Freshman Survey* between 1997 and 2001. Since twenty-one of these Chapman University graduates completed the *Freshman Survey* somewhere else, they are excluded from the analysis and discussion below. Findings focus on the 168 students who completed the CSS and the CIRP *Freshman Survey* at Chapman University. The final sample represents approximately 22% of the graduating seniors who were asked to complete the *College Student Survey* during the 2004 Spring semester.

Sample Demographics	
	Class of 2004 PERCENT
	Survey Sample (n = 168)
GENDER	
Male	32.7%
Female	67.3%
RACE/ETHNICITY	
African-American/Black	1.8%
Asian-American/Pacific Islander	6.0%
White/Caucasian	70.2%
Hispanic or Latino	13.1%
Native-American/Alaskan Native	0.6%
Other/Unknown*	8.3%
SCHOOL/COLLEGE	
Business and Economics	14.5%
Communication Arts	29.7%
Education	4.2%
Film and Media Arts	15.8%
Music	4.8%
Letters and Sciences	29.7%
Professional Studies	1.2%
FRESHMAN YEAR	
1997	1.2%
1998	1.8%
1999	4.8%
2000	82.1%
2001	10.1%

*Includes Multi-ethnic.

FINDINGS

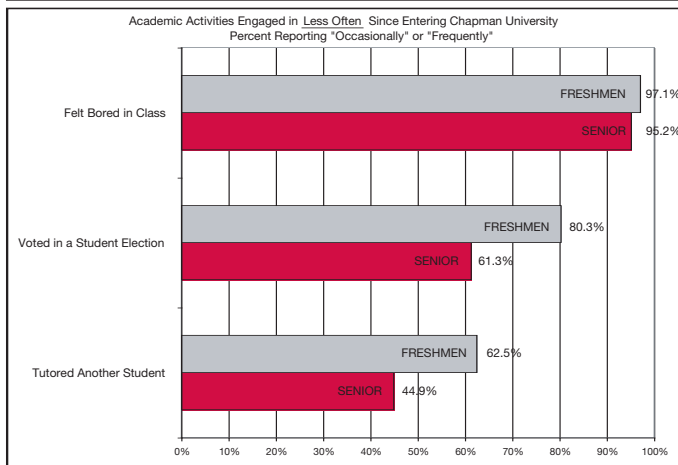
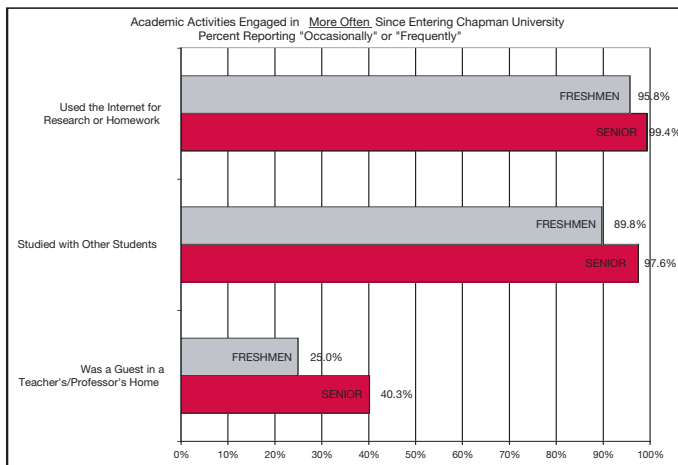
For the purposes of this discussion, student changes in activities, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors will be discussed in terms of changes occurring since entering Chapman University as a freshman. *Freshman Survey* results will be used as a baseline from which increases and decreases will be discussed.

Activities while at Chapman University

Using a 3-point scale from “not at all” to “frequently,” students were asked to gauge how frequently they participated in certain activities within the last year. For the purposes of this discussion, activities are separated into academic activities and general activities.

Academic Activities

Findings indicate that almost all respondents already utilized the Internet for research or to do homework when they entered Chapman University and continued that same level of use until they graduated. Seniors were more likely to have studied with other students or to have been a guest in an instructor’s home than when they entered as freshmen.

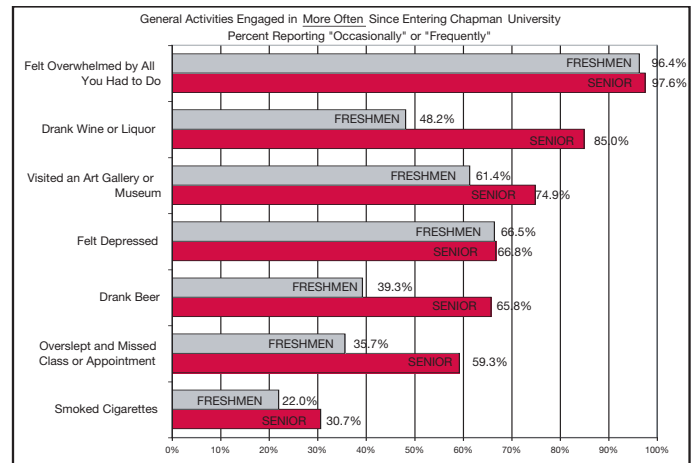


Graduating seniors also reported experiencing slightly less boredom in class and were less likely to indicate that they

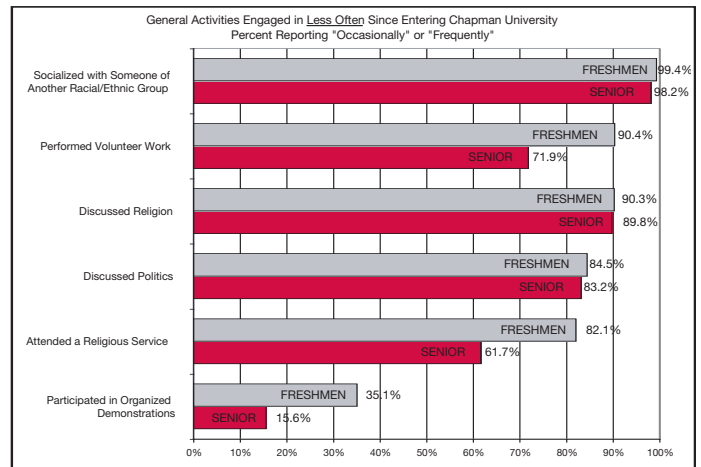
had voted in a student election or tutored another student at Chapman University.

General Activities

Findings show that respondents experienced little change from their freshman year to their senior year with regard to the frequency that they felt depressed or overwhelmed with all they had to do. While findings also show that many more students reported engaging in drinking and smoking as college seniors, it is important to keep in mind that, as freshmen, most were not of legal age to participate in such activities and as a result, it is not surprising to see an increase in these activities.



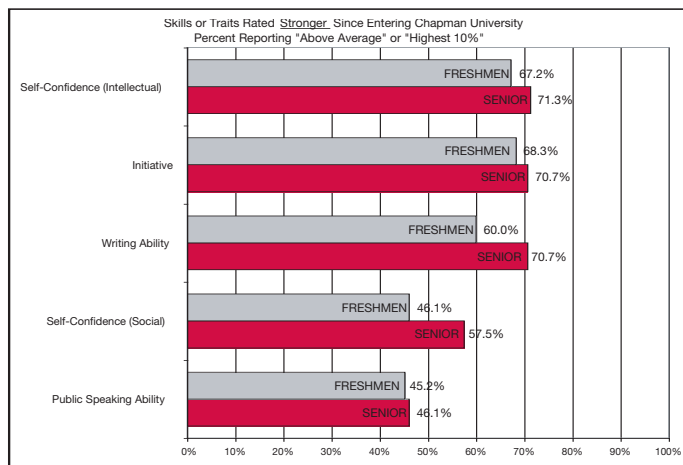
Findings show that there was relatively little change with respect to the frequency students engaged in socializing with someone of another racial/ethnic group or discussing religion or politics. Students were not as likely to report as seniors frequently performing volunteer work and attending a religious service.



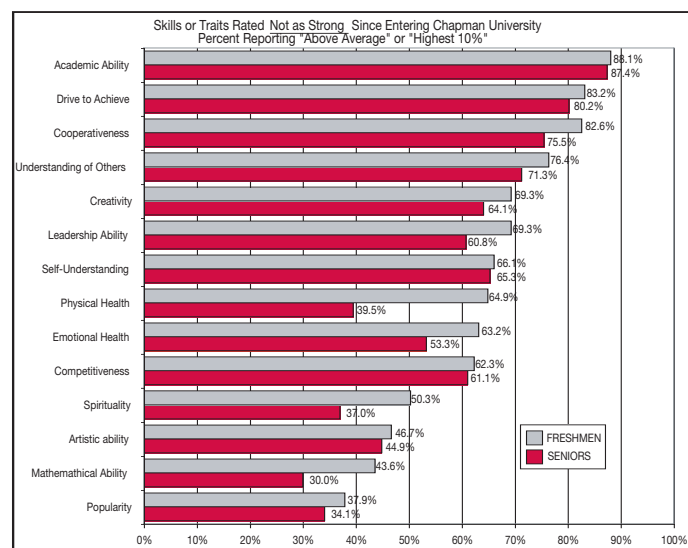
Self-Concept

The *Freshman Survey*, as well as the CSS, asked students to rate themselves on several skills and traits (as compared to the average person their age) using a 5-point scale from “highest 10%” to “lowest 10%.”

Data reveal that the largest increase in self-concept was in the area of writing and students' social self-confidence. Compared to when they entered Chapman University, students' perceptions of their writing skills and social self-confidence grew stronger. Results also show that as freshmen, 67.2% of the students rated their intellectual self-confidence as being "above average" or "highest 10%," whereas in 2004, 71.3% of the seniors reported that same level of self-confidence.



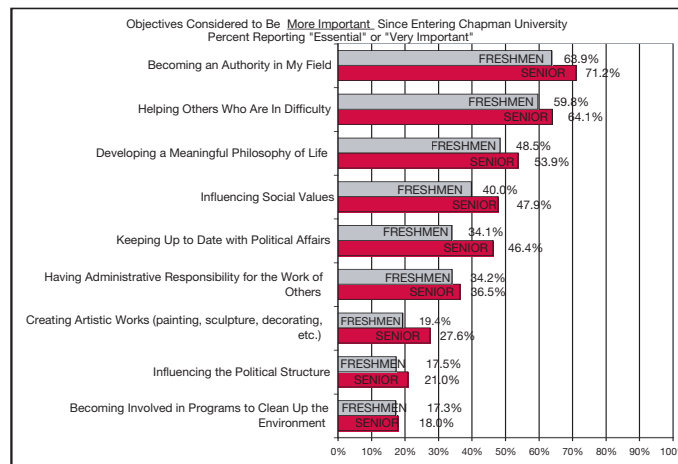
However, findings also show that in 2004, there were many skills and traits that seniors were not as likely to rate as strong as they did when they first arrived as freshmen. The largest decreases were in physical health, spirituality, emotional health, and mathematical ability. While students' perceptions of their academic ability was one of the traits that was not rated as highly in 2004, the decrease was small and over 87% of the seniors rated their academic ability as "above average" or "highest 10%."



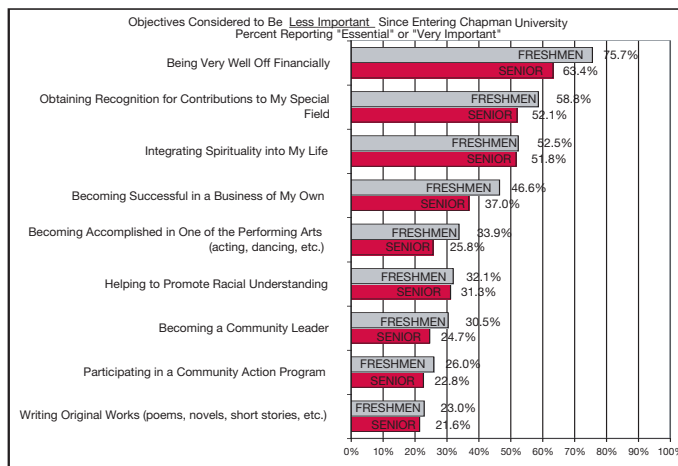
Important Objectives

Students were asked as freshmen and again as seniors to indicate, using a 4-point scale from "not important" to "very important," how important various objectives were to them personally.

Findings show that as graduating seniors, students were more likely to rate as "essential" or "very important" becoming an authority in their field, helping others who are in difficulty, developing a meaningful philosophy of life, influencing social values, keeping up to date with political affairs, having administrative responsibility for the work of others, creating artistic works, influencing the political structure, and becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment. In other words, more students considered these objectives more important as seniors, compared to when they entered as freshmen.

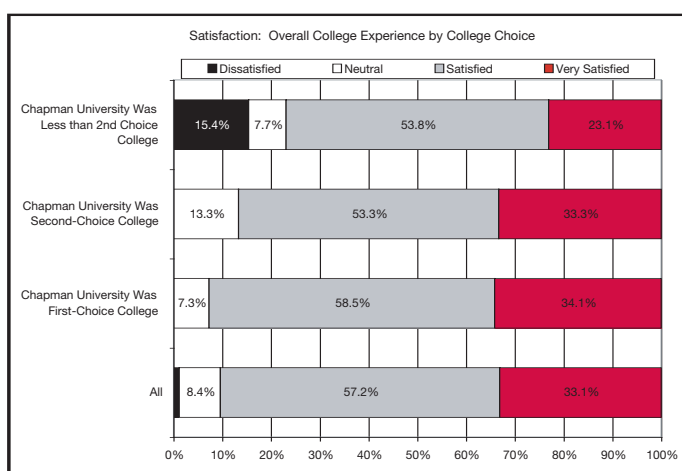


On the other hand, findings show that seniors were less likely to rate the following objectives as "essential" or "very important": being very well off financially, obtaining recognition for contributions to their special field, integrating spirituality in their life, becoming successful in their own business, becoming accomplished in one of the performing arts, helping to promote racial understanding, becoming a community leader, participating in a community action program, writing original works.



Overall Satisfaction

Seniors were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with their college experience, using a scale from “very satisfied” to “dissatisfied.” Findings show that the majority of students graduate from Chapman University “satisfied” or “very satisfied.” When data are analyzed by a question on the *Freshman Survey* asking students to indicate if Chapman University was their first-choice college, seniors who identified Chapman as their first choice were more likely to be satisfied with their overall experience than seniors who did not consider Chapman their first-choice college.



CONCLUSION

What do we know about Chapman University’s 2004 graduating class? Chapman University students are no different than your average young adult when it comes to drinking and smoking. Results show a sizable increase in the number of Chapman University students reporting having participated in drinking and smoking while attending Chapman University.

While students are graduating from Chapman University with much stronger self-concepts of their writing ability, the same cannot be said with regard to their mathematical ability. In addition, although many of the changes were small, results did show that there was a decrease in students’ self-concept on a variety of skills and traits since entering Chapman University. These decreases, some researchers would argue, may be explained, in part, by the big-fish—little-pond effect (BFLPE), “an application to social comparison theory to educational settings which posits that a student will have a lower academic self-concept in an academically selective school than in a nonselective school” (p. 364). According to the BFLPE, “an individual student’s academic self-concept is based partly on the academic achievement levels of the individual student and partly on the average achievement levels of other students in the same school the student attends” (p. 365).¹ As a result, when the class of 2004 completed the

CIRP *Freshmen Survey* and rated their self-concept, they were comparing themselves to their classmates in high school, while as graduating seniors their standard of comparison was other college students who most likely entered Chapman University at the top of their class as well.

Lastly, findings reveal that Chapman University undergraduates leave satisfied with their college experience. Furthermore, students who select Chapman University as their first-choice college leave the most satisfied. However, of the students who consider Chapman University their second or third-choice college, the majority graduate from Chapman University “satisfied” or “very satisfied.”

IMPLICATIONS

When reviewing these results, it is important to keep in mind that some reported changes may not be entirely attributable to the Chapman University college experience or programs. According to Astin (1993), you cannot always “assume that *change* is equivalent to *environmental impact*.”² Astin notes that it is “useful to regard changes in students that occur during the course of an educational program as comprising two components: change resulting from the impact of the educational environment and change resulting from other influences (maturation, effects of other unmeasured environmental variables, and so on)” (p. 35). There may be some changes in students’ activities, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors that would have occurred regardless of having attended Chapman University or not. It is important to consider if the same changes would have occurred if the student had attended another university or no program at all.

Student outcomes research emphasizes that in order to understand student outcomes it is important to know where students start and what they encounter along the way (Astin, 1993). Astin argues that simply having pre-test and post-test data of a group of students over a period of time is of limited value if the forces that were acting on these students during the same period of time are unknown. In other words, the college environment, the various academic and non-academic programs, and individual experiences are as important as the end result when assessing change over time. More research and multivariate analyses are necessary in order to more clearly decipher environmental impact.

¹ Marsh, H. W., and Hua, K. T. (2003, May). Big-Fish—Little-Pond Effect on Academic Self-Concept. *American Psychologist*, 58, No. 5, 364-376.

² Astin, A. W. (1993). *Assessment for Excellence*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.

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