About The Study

In 2006, the University of Virginia Office of Institutional Assessment and Studies undertook a study to describe how first-year students have changed over the past four decades. Using data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey (CIRP), this report describes and compares first-year students entering the University in 1966, 1976, 1986, 1996, and 2005. Students’ college choice decisions, college and life aspirations, personal activities and opinions, and student and family demographic indicators are analyzed for each year.

CIRP survey results are provided to the University in the aggregate—the number and percent of students responding to each question. Lack of access to original data precluded analysis of responses by gender, race/ethnic group, or other factors of interest.

While the study offered a remarkable opportunity to envision the classes of students entering the University ten, twenty, thirty and forty years ago, the survey methodology—especially changes in questions asked and in comparison groups—limited the scope of the analysis. Lower response rates for the more recent study years (the lowest: 56% for 2005) required more cautious interpretation especially regarding gender and racial/ethnic representation. Finally, original results for 1986 were unavailable, requiring us to use a summary report produced by the University of Virginia Bureau of Educational Research; this report did not analyze all variables of interest for 1986.

This article was written by Lois Myers, UVa Assessment Coordinator, and Lindsay Flynn, Graduate Research Assistant.

UVAssessment is published by the University of Virginia Office of Institutional Assessment and Studies. For information, call 434/924-3417.

Director
George Stovall

Associate Director and Assessment Coordinator
Jonathan A. Schnyer

Staff
Tracey Crehan Gerlach, Layout Editor
Anne-Marie Durocher
Lindsay Flynn
Doug Loyd
Lois Myers
Ronald H. Pack
Martin W. Shank

The Changing Face of UVa Students:
Comparison of First-Year Classes from 1966 to 2005
Based On CIRP Survey Results

Forty years ago, in 1966, the University welcomed its 142nd first-year class. With few exceptions and much like previous classes, the students were almost all young Caucasian men. A snapshot of today’s first-year class bears little resemblance—over half of the students are women and over a quarter are from non-white racial and ethnic groups.

This report compares entering classes for each decade since 1966 using survey results from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program. Demographic shifts are the most obvious changes, but not the only ones that have occurred during the past forty years. Yet, in some ways, today’s first-year students are similar to first-year students from 1966. Interesting in its own right, the changing nature of entering classes also suggests the myriad of responses—from facilities to programs—required of the University as it opens its doors each year.

Why Go to College? Why UVa?

On this, student thinking has not changed.

The most important reasons that students chose the University have not changed in thirty years.1 When asked to identify the most important reasons for choosing the University of Virginia, at least 85 percent of students each study year cited “this college has a very good academic reputation.” In 1986, 1996, and 2005, the second most important reason was “this college’s graduates get good jobs,” and the third was “this college’s graduates gain admission to top graduate and professional schools.”2 If first-year students are any indicator, the University has maintained a lasting reputation as a center of academic excellence and as an excellent “jumping off point” for professional life beyond college.

The primary reasons for going to college in general also did not change. Three reasons dominated student thinking and have remained stable since 1976:

• “to learn more about things that interest me” (top reason in 1976, 1996, and 2005);
• “to gain a general education and appreciation of ideas”;
• “to be able to get a better job” (top reason in 1986).

At least 70 percent of students noted the above reasons as very important in any given year.

Student Population: Majority women, more racially and ethnically diverse, and slightly older

Women comprised 61 percent of first-year students completing the survey in 2005, reflecting a remarkable sea change in the student body. Before 1970, women were allowed to obtain graduate and professional degrees but not permitted to enroll in the College of Arts and Sciences.3 The University began to admit women in 1970, resulting in the marked rise in women from nine percent in 1966 to 44 percent in 1976. The rapid implementation was mandated by the U.S. Cir-

(continued on page 2)

1 This question was not asked in 1966.

2 Prior to the mid-1980s, students were offered fewer response choices, not including these two, and responded in large numbers only to “this college has a very good academic reputation”; other response options garnered less than 30 percent of student responses and thus have not been reported here.

3 See Mehmet (2004) for more information on the history of women at the University.
cuit Court, which ruled that the phase-in period for coedu-
cation must not exceed three years. The percentage of women
in the first-year class rose steadily since then, achieving parity
in the 1980s, and rising to more than half by 1996 (Fig. 1).

The racial and ethnic composition of entering classes also
changed steadily over the four decades, with the classes be-
coming more diverse (Fig. 1). In 1966, two percent of survey
respondents were non-white. By 1976, eight percent of re-
spo ndents were non-white, nearly all being African-Amer-
cans. From 1976 on, the percent of Asian-Americans and,
to a lesser degree, Hispanic-Americans also began to rise (Fig.
2). As of 2005, approximately one-quarter of respondents were
non-white, primarily African-Americans and Asian-Americans.
This represents a slight decline in the percent of African-
Americans from 1996. Also, the rate of increase for Asian-
Americans leveled off from previous decades.

Most first-year respondents across all four decades were 18
years or younger. Since 1976, however, the percentage of older
students has increased. By 2005, nearly 30 percent of first-
year students were 19 years or older, compared to 23 percent
in 1966.

Parents’ Education:
Both Mom and Dad more educated

In 1966, it was not unusual for first-year students’ parents
(especially the mother) to have only a high school diploma or
less. Twenty-eight percent of fathers and 40 percent of moth-
ers did not have a degree beyond high school. About a third
of fathers and mothers had earned a college degree, and about
one-fifth of fathers had gone to graduate school. In the inter-
vening forty years, parents of University first-years were sig-
ificantly more likely to have earned advanced degrees. The
greatest change for fathers occurred in acquisition of gradu-
ate degrees; mothers demonstrated a remarkable rise in both
college and graduate degrees (Figs. 3 and 4). By 2005, over
three-quarters of respondents’ mothers and fathers had at least
a college degree, and often a graduate degree as well. While
the percentage of fathers who earned only a college degree

---

* Categories of racial/ethnic groups varied among study years and students were permitted to select more than one group. As an estimate, the total non-
white population was calculated by subtracting the white population from the total population. All categories may include non-citizens.

* Data for 1986 were not available. The data points were interpolated from the 1976 and 1996 data.

* The 1986 point was interpolated from 1976 and 1996 data for the response “high school diploma.” For Figures 3 and 4, several responses were not
included in the graphs, such as “some high school” and “some college.”
(about 30 percent) remained relatively stable across time, the percentage of mothers earning only a college degree increased from 26 percent in 1966 to 42 percent in 2005. Similarly, the percentage of fathers and mothers with graduate degrees rose across the four decades: by 1986, almost half of the fathers had graduate degrees, a proportion that remained steady through 2005. Mothers showed a steady growth in percent with graduate degrees, reaching nearly 30 percent in 2005, up from five percent in 1966.

Figure 4
Formal Education Obtained by Respondents' Mothers by Year

The changing financial picture of UVa first-year classes from 1966 to 2005, however, presents a more complex picture. Trends become visible when examining the family income of the median student, of students falling in the upper income brackets, and of students falling in the lower income brackets. The 2005 median student was wealthier as compared to both previous cohorts and the national average. The 2005 median student family income was 66 percent higher than the 1966 median student family income. In contrast, the national median family income increased only 48 percent between 1966 and 2005 (Fig. 5).

Figure 5
Comparison of Respondents' Median Family Income and National Median Family Income (2005 Dollars)

Finances: Predominantly well-off, but showing some signs of change

Consistently through the four decades, most first-year students came from families who were financially well-off as compared to families nationally. In 1966, while the national median family income was $38,000, the median UVa student reported a family income between $60,000 and $90,000. Similarly, in 2005 the national median family income was $56,000, while the median UVa student reported a family income between $100,000 and $150,000.

Probably because they came from higher income families, few UVa first-year students (less than 10 percent across all years) expressed major concern about their ability to finance college. The percent of students indicating that they had no concern regarding their ability to finance college rose from 46 percent in 1966 to 54 percent in 2005.

A further comparison of UVa first-year student family income to national income distributions reinforces the finding that UVa students tend to come from families who are well-off. A majority of students in 1966 and 2005 are represented in the highest quintile of national family income (Table 1). That is, for example, whereas one fifth of families nationally reported an income of $59,000 or more in 1966, nearly three-quarters of UVa first-year students reported an income of $60,000 or more that year. Likewise, nearly half of first-year students’ families were represented in the top five percent of national family income (Table 1). Notably, although still high, the percentage of students in both the top quintile and top five percent declined between 1966 and 2005, to 62 percent and 23 percent, respectively.

(continued on page 4)

---

1 The reader is cautioned that the surveys asked students to provide “best estimates” of their parents’ total income. This analysis is valid only to the extent that students’ estimates were accurate within the income categories offered.

8 All 1966 dollars were converted to 2005 dollars using the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis CPI Inflation Calculator. Historical Income Tables from the U.S. Census Bureau provided the national data.

9 To calculate the median bracket, the midpoint of the bracket in which the median student fell was used. The 1986 midpoint was interpolated from the 1976 and 1996 data because the 1986 summary data were aggregated and thus not comparable.
The percentage of students growing up in lower income families was small but growing across the four decades (Table 2). In 1966, less than two percent of students fell in the lowest fifth of American family incomes (less than $20,000 in 2005 dollars), but by 2005, this had increased to approximately four percent. The percent of students falling within and below the second quintile of American family income nearly doubled, from seven percent in 1966 to 13 percent in 2005.

### Table 2
Percent of Respondents' Families in Lower Two Quintiles of National Family Income, 1966 vs. 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1st Quintile</th>
<th>2nd Quintile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>National Families</td>
<td>$20,000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UVa Families</td>
<td>$24,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>National Families</td>
<td>$26,000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UVa Families</td>
<td>$25,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Upper bound of quintile.

Life Goals: Helping others, but focusing close to home

Helping others in difficulty appears to be an enduring and strongly-held value among UVa first-year students, 60 to 69 percent of whom cited it as at least a very important goal each year. That said, a remarkable shift occurred in students’ “essential” or “very important” goals. Narrowly focused goals—raising a family and financial success (“being very well-off”)—appear to have supplanted other, more expansive life goals. Respondents in 2005 were more likely to cite family and financial success as important goals than their counterparts forty years ago (raising a family: 63 percent in 1970 vs. 77 percent in 2005; financial success: 56 percent in 1966 vs. 68 percent in 2005). In contrast, more outward-looking goals, such as “being an authority in my field” and “developing a philosophy of life” dropped in importance, mirroring national trends. For example, those who felt it important to develop a philosophy of life—a whopping 85 percent in 1966—declined to 54 percent in 2005 (Fig. 6).

Since 1966, first-year students have demonstrated a substantial interest in keeping up-to-date with political affairs, but only a modest interest in influencing the political structure or influencing social values (Fig. 7). While substantial, the percentage of students who responded that keeping up-to-date with political affairs was “essential” or “very important” slipped by 13 percentage points from a high of 66 percent in 1966 to 53 percent in 2005. Likewise, the percentage of first-years who responded that influencing the political structure was very important fell nine percentage points, from 32 percent in 1969 to 23 percent in 2005. This pattern also mirrors national trends. Influencing social values was cited by about 40 percent of students in both 1969 and 2005. The percentage of students who indicated that promoting racial understanding was “essential” or “very important” also declined from 45 percent in 1977 to 36 percent in 2005.
Self-Appraisal: Confident and Growing More So

The University’s high standards for admission are reflected in first-year students’ confidence in their abilities. Between 1966 and 2005, first-year students reported growing confidence in their abilities when they were asked to compare themselves to the average person their age. In 2005, fully 92 percent believed that they were above average in overall academic ability (Fig. 9). When asked about specific discipline areas, 67 percent felt they were above average in their math abilities, 60 percent in their writing abilities, but only 46 percent in their public speaking abilities. Pertaining to leadership ability, 67 percent believed they were above average, and in regards to their ability to understand others, 71 percent were above average. The greatest boost in self-evaluation across the forty years occurred in writing ability (14 percentage points), followed by leadership (12 percentage points), public speaking (11 percentage points), and overall academic and math abilities (9 percentage points). Only a modest increase occurred in understanding of others (4 percentage points).

Table 9

Percent Respondents Rating Themselves as Above Average on Three Measures, 1966 vs. 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>1966</th>
<th>2005</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall Academic Ability</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Ability</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of Others</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: 1986 data point was interpolated from 1976 and 1996 data for the response “keeping up to date with political affairs.”

14 “Liberals” includes “liberals” and “far left;” “conservatives” includes “conservatives” and “far right.”

15 Percentages include those who rated themselves as either “above average” or “in the highest 10 percent.”

(continued on page 6)
Conclusion

If Edgar Shannon, University President from 1959 to 1974, were to welcome students at Convocation today, he would see a first-year class that was both the same and different than those he welcomed forty years ago. First-year students still choose the University for its academic reputation and the opportunities it provides to excel beyond graduation. These students arrive on Grounds highly confident in their abilities. Their increasing confidence over the past forty years reflects actual ability and accomplishment as applicants have faced steadily stiffer competition and higher admissions standards since the mid-1960s.

The two most significant changes in the first-year classes since 1966 are demographic: the acceptance of women and the increasing racial and ethnic diversity. Without access to original survey response data, however, we are unable to answer many of the questions that accompany such a finding. For example, while the increase in racial/ethnic diversity among their peers was not accompanied by an increase in overall students’ personal commitment to promoting racial understanding or participating in political affairs, is it possible that men and women, or white and non-white students, differ in their social and political commitment? More broadly, how do men and women, or whites and non-whites, differ in their perception of the University, their confidence and their aspirations?

Students today are more likely to come from families with well-educated, well-compensated parents where money is not a source of worry. For most of today’s students, financial security is a given and an explicit personal goal, more so than in past decades. Less important are the loftier goals, such as developing a philosophy of life or promoting racial understanding. The students present a complex picture: they have not grown significantly more confident of their ability to understand others nor are they more committed to affecting social values, but they consistently cite “helping others in difficulty” as a top personal goal.

Four decades of student survey results depict the evolution of the University community. In 1966, the typical first-year student was a young white man from an upper middle-class family who considered it important to keep up-to-date with political affairs and to help others in difficulty. By 2005, it was more difficult to describe the “typical student”: she or he was probably white, probably from an upper middle class family with well-educated parents, and probably set family and financial success as his or her life goals. By sustaining and responding to an ever-changing, diverse, co-educational community, the University fulfills its purpose and furthers its mission to educate future citizens and leaders. This study provides a tangible sense of the changes in student body that have faced the University over the past four decades and likely presage the changes and challenges to come.

References


University of Virginia Bureau of Educational Research, Summary of Responses to the 1986 American Council of Education Survey.