

SPOTLIGHT ON OU

“Looking Inward, Freshmen Care Less About

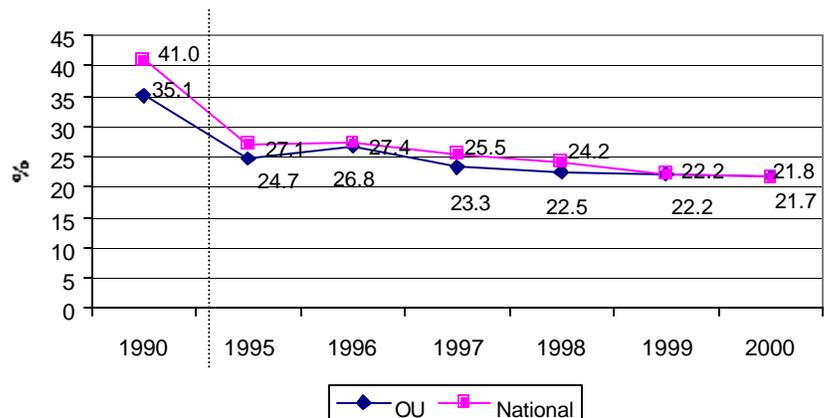
Politics and More About Money,” said a headline in *The Chronicle of*

Higher Education (January 26, 2001). The article reviewed the report on the 2000 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey issued by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. The survey has been administered annually since 1966, and Oakland University (OU) has been a participant since the beginning. The 2000 norms are based on the responses of 269,413 students at 434 of the nation’s baccalaureate colleges and universities¹; Oakland University respondents included 1,410 (523 males and 887 females) first year students. The survey was conducted during freshman orientation. The students’ responses reflected their experiences in the last year of high school and their expectations for college.

Keeping up to date with political affairs

The percentage of first-year students who indicated that this was important to them reached an all-time low of 21.8%, compared with 41% in 1990. The percentage of these first-year students who ‘discussed politics frequently’ was also lower than last year (12.6% vs. 13.4%). Only 17.8% of respondents ‘voted in a student election,’ compared

Figure 1:
Keepin Up To Date With Political Affairs



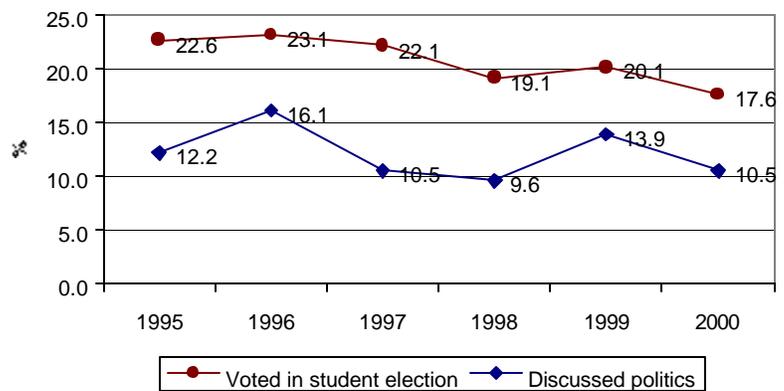
¹ In this report, OU data is compared to the CIRP national norms for 4 year Public-Medium Selectivity universities.

20.6% last year and 22% in 1995. The CIRP national report comments that, “although the 2000 results reflect a long-term decline in students’ political interest, the persistent downward trend is noteworthy since freshman interest in politics traditionally increases during a presidential election year.”

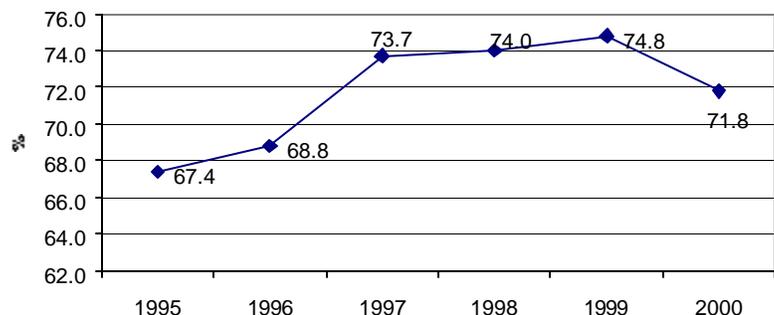
Yet, as Alex P. Kellogg points out in his article in the *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “the drop in political engagement does not mean that freshmen lack refined tastes or ignore broader social issues entirely.” 78.5% of respondents said they had attended a public recital or concert, 51.8% had visited an art gallery or museum, and 74.5% performed volunteer work during their last year. Moreover, he concluded that “many freshmen aren’t just tuning out – they’re turning inward.” John Gardner, a director of the Policy Center on the First Year of College at Brevard College, in North Carolina, agreed. “I think increasingly students are focused much more locally and even individually on their own circumstances.”

OU students’ responses are consistent with the national trend toward lessening political engagement (see Figures 1 and 2). The percentage of OU students who are interested in ‘keeping up to date with political affairs’ is 13% lower than 1990, and only 17.6% of OU first-year students ‘voted in student election’ last year, the lowest percentage in five years. Although the responses to ‘discussed politics’ tend to be irregular from year to year, the percent in 2000 is 5.6% lower than the last election year (1996). Also, OU students’ responses on social issues are similar to the national norm:

**Figure 2 : Last Year Activities
Oakland University**



**Figure 3: Volunteer Work
Oakland University**



79.4% ‘attended public recital or concert,’ and 51.4% ‘visited an art gallery or museum.’ However, after increasing for a number of years, ‘performing volunteer work’ dropped 3% from last year.

Declining interest in status, rising interest in affluence

The CIRP report observes that responsibility, recognition, and authority are less appealing, but wealth continues to gain in appeal to first-year students. 56.4% students responded that to ‘become authority in my own field’ is important or essential, a decline of 9% since 1990. The percent of first-year students who consider ‘obtaining recognition from colleagues’ to be important dropped from 49.7% in 1999 to 48.8% in 2000, an 8% drop from 1990. Fewer students,

35.7%, are interested in ‘having administrative responsibility for the work of others,’ compared to 43.9% in 1990. On the other hand, the CIRP report concluded that “(the) declining interest in status does not correspond

to declining interest in affluence.” Three quarters of first-year students are interested in ‘being very well off financially’ (see Figure 4). According to the CIRP report, the interest in affluence is “a fairly stable trend in the past decade after a steep climb during the 70s and 80s.”

OU students’ responses track closely to the national data showing declining interest in responsibility,

recognition, and authority (see Figure 5): 57.4% of students are interested in ‘becoming authority in my own field,’

Figure 4: Be very well off financially

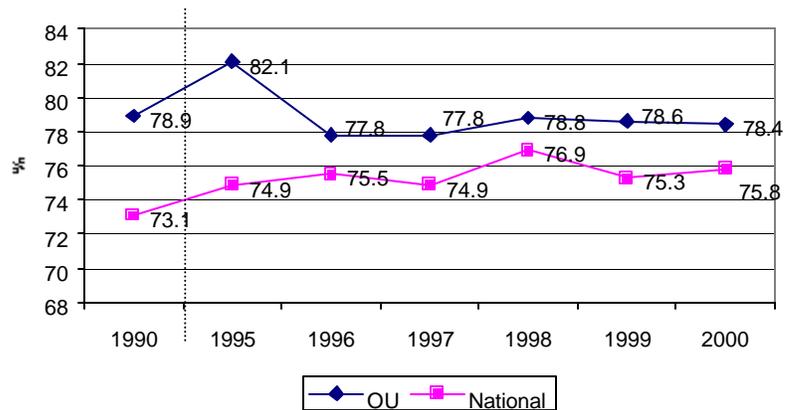
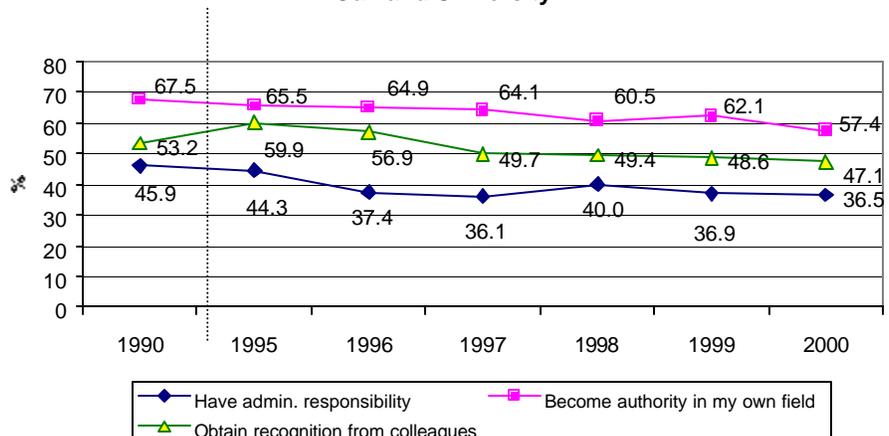


Figure 5: Goals and Values Oakland University



which is 4.7% less than 1999 and 10.1% less than 1990. OU students' interest in 'being very well off financially' has been steady at 77-78% for most of the past decade. The OU response on this item has been as much as seven percentage points higher than the national norm, but is now only three percentage points higher (see Figure 4).

Women close gender gap in computer use, but lag behind in computing confidence

"Reflecting the growing reliance on technology in education, student use of personal computers has escalated in recent years," stated the CIRP report. A record high 74.3% of first-year students used a personal computer frequently before entering college, which is an 11% increase over last year (see Figure 6). Furthermore, the gap between men and women's computer use decreased to 2.1% in 2000 from 4.2% in 1999.

However, when asked

about their confidence in

their computer skills, only

23.2% of women rated

themselves 'above

average' or 'top 10%,'

compared to 44% among

men. The CIRP report

concludes that, "this gap in

self-confidence likely

contributes to the fact that men are five times more likely to pursue careers in computer

programming." About eight times more men state that their possible career is 'computer

programmer or analyst' than women (9.5% vs. 1.2%). (However, it may be that other factors

contribute to a lack of interest in computers that may in turn lead to both less confidence and

less interest in computer careers.) Other gender differences in computer use are that men are

more likely to 'participate in Internet chat rooms' (23.4% vs. 18.0%) and more frequently log

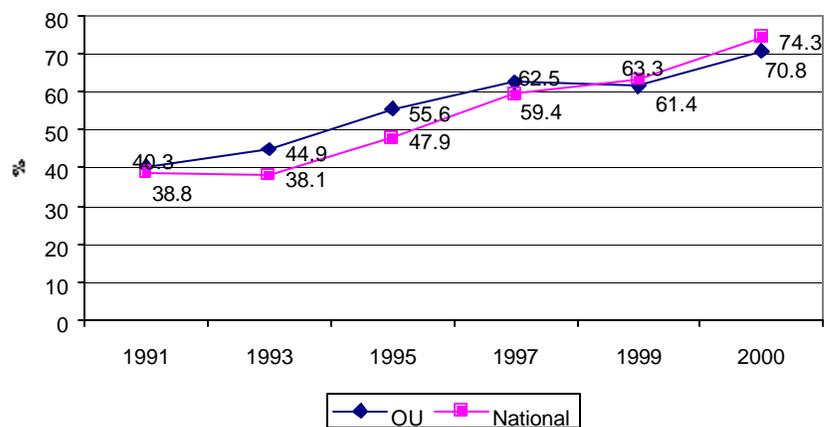
on the Internet for 'other' uses than women (54.2% vs. 46.3%).

Overall, OU students' responses reflect the national trend towards rapid growth in

computer use (see Figure 6). However, when it comes to computer use by gender, the trend

at OU differs somewhat in that the gap in 2000 is a little wider than in 1999 (6.4% vs. 5.8%)

Figure 6: Computer Use



and is three times wider than the national (2.1%) (see Figure 7). Higher percentages of both women and men at OU rate themselves 'above average' or 'top 10%' compared to the national norms. However, the gender gap remains the same as the national: almost twice as

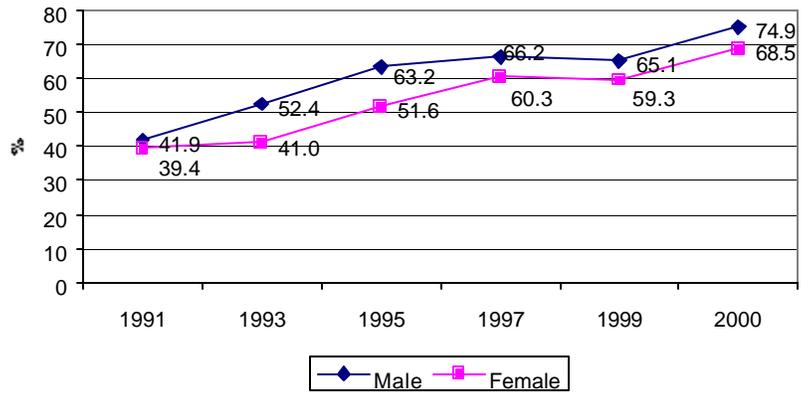
many men (49.7% vs. 26.1%) reported they were confident about their computer skills as women. Also, about nine times more men than women (8.3% vs. 0.9%) responded that their possible career choice was computer programmer or analyst.

81.2% of OU first-year students answered they own computers: 2.6% more men own computers than women do. 36.4% of students responded they expected to use the computer for study daily, and 53.2% of them responded that they expected to use it several times a week.

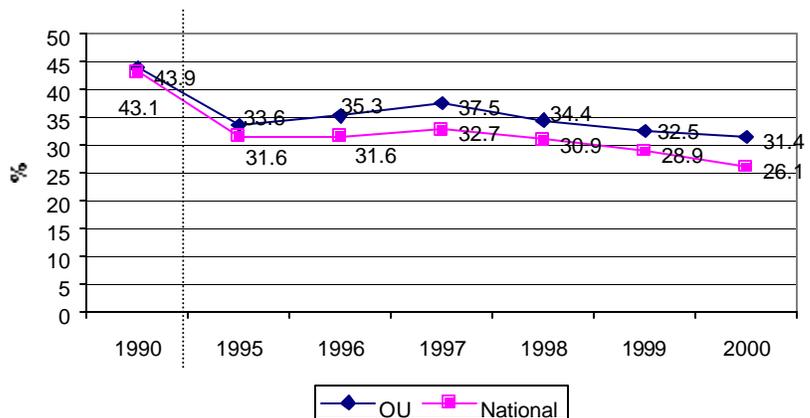
Higher grades, less time studying

The CIRP reported, "Today's freshmen are spending less time studying and doing homework than any previous entering class." To the question of 'how much time did you spend studying or doing homework during a typical week,' 26.1% of students responded 6 or more hours, which is 17% less than 1990 (see Figure 8). Despite the reduced study time, 11% more students report that they have high schools GPAs of 'A' than 1990 (19.5%). In addition, the CIRP observes, "escalating grades appear to translate into rising academic

**Figure 7: Computer Use
Oakland University**



**Figure 8:
Studying or Doing Homework 6 or more hours per week**



aspirations.” 52.5% of students estimate there is a very good chance that they will ‘make at least B average.’ This percent is 11% higher than 1990 (41.4%). Furthermore, 15.8% of 2000 first-year students believe that they will have very good chance to ‘graduate with honors,’ compared to 14.9% in 1999 and 12% in 1990.

At OU, although percent of students who answered they ‘studied or did homework more than 6 hours’ in their last year of high school has consistently been higher than the national, the decline in

studying time shows a similar trend (see

Figure 8). OU

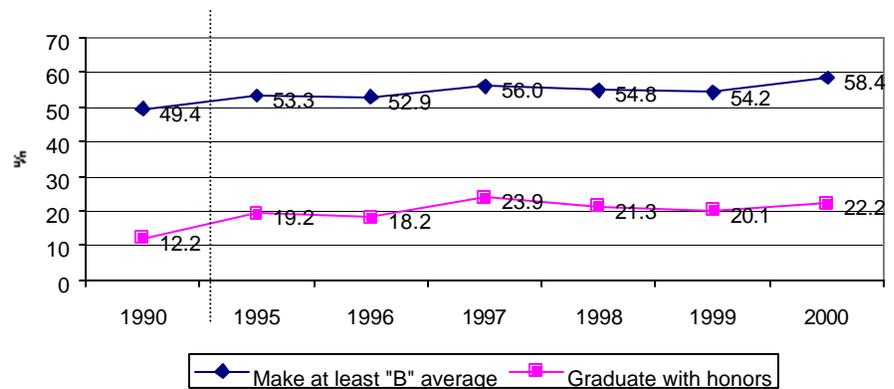
students also report a similar trend towards escalating grades.

About 10% more OU first-year students

report having an ‘A’ average than 1990

(20%). OU students have consistently had higher expectations than the national norms and they continue to rise as well. 4.2% more students than last year believe that there is a very good chance of ‘making at least B average’ and 9% more than 1990 (see Figure 9). 22.2% of students think that they will have a good chance to ‘graduate with honors,’ which is 2% higher than last year, although 1.7% less than 1997.

**Figure 9: Expection of Grade and Graduation Level
Oakland University**



Alcohol and cigarette use

After several years of decline, the rates of drinking alcohol went up among first-year students. About six percent more students reported they drank beer in their last year in high school than 1999 (55% vs. 49%). Moreover, 15.1% of students smoked cigarettes, which is 2.6% higher than last year.

Percentages of OU students in both drinking alcohol and smoking cigarettes are generally lower than national norms; drinking beer is 18.3% lower, and smoking cigarettes is 6.5% lower than the national. However, OU students reported slightly higher rates of

drinking alcohol than last year. (see Figure 10). Smoking cigarettes continues to decline among incoming OU students.

**Figure 10: Alcohol and Cigarette Use
Oakland University**

