

The New York Times

More College Freshmen Report Having Felt Depressed

By ALAN SCHWARZ

FEB. 5, 2015

High numbers of students are beginning college having felt depressed and overwhelmed during the previous year, according to an annual survey released on Thursday, reinforcing some experts' concern about the emotional health of college freshman.

The [survey](#) of more than 150,000 students nationwide, "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2014," found that 9.5 percent of respondents had frequently "felt depressed" during the past year, a significant rise over the 6.1 percent reported five years ago. Those who "felt overwhelmed" by schoolwork and other commitments rose to 34.6 percent from 27.1 percent.

Conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the [University of California, Los Angeles](#)'s Higher Education Research Institute for almost 50 years, the survey assesses hundreds of matters ranging from political views to exercise habits. It is considered one of the most comprehensive snapshots of trends among recent high school seniors and is of particular interest to people involved in mental well-being.

"It's a public health issue," said Dr. Anthony L. Rostain, a psychiatrist and co-chairman of a University of Pennsylvania task force on students' emotional health. "We're expecting more of students: There's a sense of having to compete in a global economy, and they think they have to be on top of their game all the time. It's no wonder they feel overwhelmed."

Other survey results indicated that students were spending more time on academics and socializing less — trends that would normally be lauded. But the lead author of the study, Kevin Eagan, cautioned that the shift could result in higher levels of stress.

"Students may be getting the message that they have to take the last year of high school more seriously to get into college, so they're coming in with greater levels of anxiety," Mr. Eagan said. "There may need to be a balance that students need to have at some point, and helping students achieve that balance will be more of a concern on colleges and universities."

Julia Fortier, a freshman at Haverford College in Pennsylvania who graduated last year from the prestigious Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, N.Y., said it had not been uncommon for some of her friends to take five [Advanced Placement classes](#) in the same year, while also trying to juggle the extracurricular activities expected by college admissions boards.

The New York Times

“You have to get good grades, have all sorts of after-school activities that take up tons of hours, and you have to be happy and social — you have to be everything,” Ms. Fortier said. “That’s a lot of pressure to live up to sometimes.”

Students reported watching considerably less television compared with 2009, with more than half saying they watched less than two hours a week. Not surprisingly, some of that time had shifted to using social networks, on which more than one in four students said they spent more than six hours a week.

Suzanne Ciechalski, a freshman at St. John’s University in Queens, said technology that might appear social in nature could in fact lead to stress and feelings of depression.

“I feel like people spend a lot of time on social networks trying to create this picture of who they want to be,” Ms. Ciechalski said. “Maintaining that takes a lot of effort. I feel like being a teenager or young adult, the pressure to try and make people see you’re the best is really high.”

Contrary to some reports of high rates of drinking among high school students, the survey found a continued decline in college freshmen reporting those behaviors. About one-third said they had drunk beer, wine or hard alcohol at least occasionally in the past year, compared with almost half just 10 years ago. Fewer than one in 50 students reported smoking cigarettes.

Tamar Lewin contributed reporting.

A version of this article appears in print on February 5, 2015, on page A17 of the New York edition with the headline: More Freshmen Report Having Felt Depressed. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)