



# Background Characteristics of Entering First-Year Students

## Results from the Fall 2000 Diverse Democracy Survey

### UMass Amherst Research Coordinating Team

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**SUMMARY.** UMass Amherst is participating in a national longitudinal study of the relationship between student diversity and learning outcomes in higher education institutions. As part of the study, first-year students at the Fall 2000 New Students program completed a survey of their prior experiences and expectations for college. The survey results have provided valuable information on the background characteristics, experiences, and expectations of over 80% of the Fall 2000 entering class. Students come to UMass Amherst from urban, suburban, and rural population centers and with a variety of familial and cultural experiences. Background characteristics of entering students (including citizenship status, family income, and parent education) varied significantly according to student racial/ethnic status.

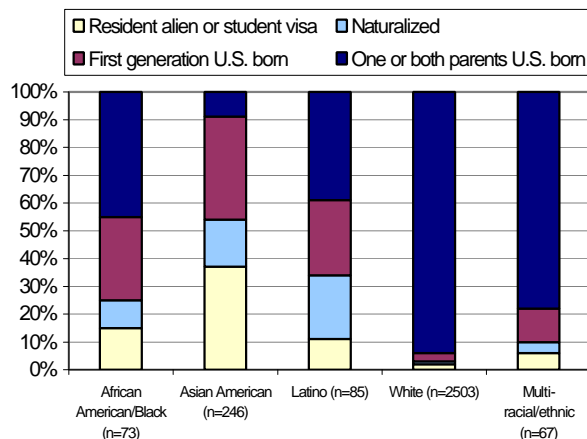
**For additional information about these results contact:** Jenny Goodspeed at OAPA, 545-5148 or [goodspeed@oirp.umass.edu](mailto:goodspeed@oirp.umass.edu)

UMass Amherst is currently one of nine public research universities participating in the Diverse Democracy Project, a national study examining the relationship between diversity and learning on college campuses. The project, directed by Sylvia Hurtado at the University of Michigan and funded by the U.S. Department of Education, incorporates a variety of methods to collect information on student learning outcomes and diversity inside and outside the classroom. (For a more detailed description of the project, see the February 2001 Diverse Democracy Update #1 at [www.umass.edu/oapa/pdf/div\\_dem.pdf](http://www.umass.edu/oapa/pdf/div_dem.pdf), or contact the campus liaison, Ximena Zúñiga at 545-0918 or [xzuniga@educ.umass.edu](mailto:xzuniga@educ.umass.edu)).

An important component of the Diverse Democracy Project is a longitudinal survey of first-year students who entered UMass Amherst in the Fall of 2000. A baseline survey was administered to 3,077 students who attended the New Students Program in the Summer of 2000. A follow-up survey is scheduled for the Spring of 2002 to assess how students' interaction with diverse peers and campus programs and initiatives influenced the development of democratic, cognitive, and social learning outcomes over their first two years of college. Results from the baseline survey have provided valuable information on the background characteristics, experiences, and expectations for college of over 80% of the Fall 2000 entering class.

Of the students we surveyed during the new student program, 3,006 actually enrolled for the Fall 2000 semester. The following figures illustrate differences across racial/ethnic groups for a variety of items characterizing the backgrounds of first-year students. Unfortunately, the number of students who identified themselves as American Indian/Alaskan Native was too small (n=4) for them to be included as a separate analysis group.

**Figure 1: Citizenship Status**



Students come to UMass Amherst from a wide variety of cultural environments. Results from the survey indicated a relationship between racial/ethnic status and variables related to cultural and family background and experience.

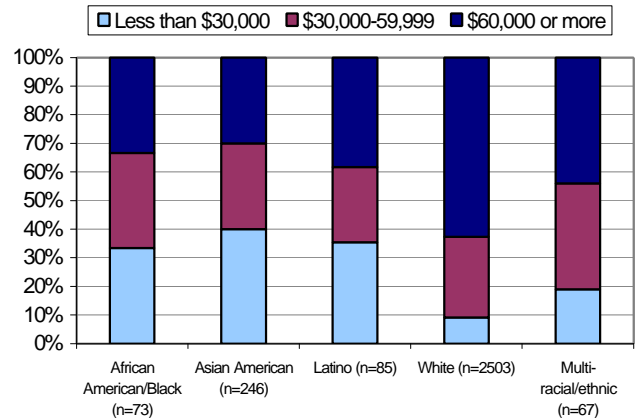
Over 70% of Asian and Latino students spoke another language besides English in the home, a substantially higher proportion compared to African American (34%), multi-racial/ethnic (22%), and white (5%) students (no figure). Relatively more Asian and Latino students also reported having been born in another country (54% and 34% respectively) compared to other racial/ethnic groups, the large majority of whom were born in the U.S. (Figure 1).

We asked students to estimate their total family income in the past year. Forty percent of Asian students and one third of African American and Latino students reported an annual family income of below \$30,000 as compared to 19% of multi-racial/ethnic students and just 9% of white students (**Figure 2**).

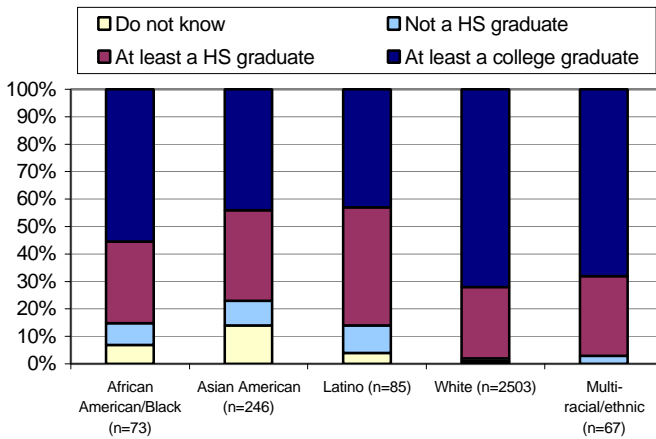
Most students reported having at least one other person in their family who attended college. However, the proportion of students who were the *first* in their family to attend college differed significantly across racial/ethnic groups. A higher proportion of Asian students (30%) were the first in their family to attend college compared to Latino (21%), African American (18%), white (16%), and multi-racial/ethnic (13%) students (no figure).

Approximately 70% of white and multi-racial/ethnic students reported having at least one parent with a college degree, compared to 56% of African American students, and about 45% of Asian and Latino students (**Figure 3**). The proportion of students whose parents attended *UMass Amherst* also varied according to race/ethnicity. Sixteen percent of African American students reported having at least one parent who went to *UMass Amherst*, followed by 13% of white students, 11% of Latino students, 6% of multi-racial/ethnic students, and 4% of Asian students (no figure).

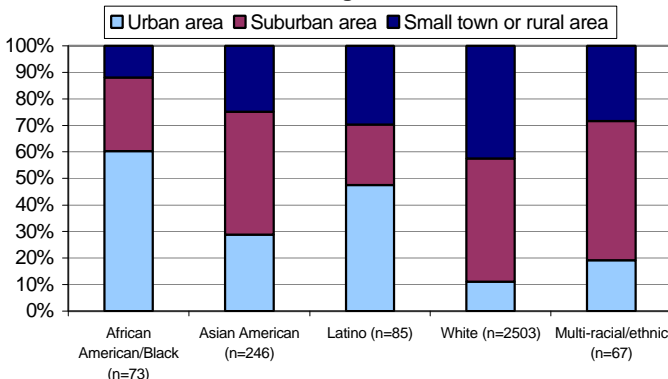
**Figure 2: Reported family annual income**



**Figure 3: Highest parental education level**



**Figure 4: Where did you live most of your life before college?**



As shown in **Figure 4**, the proportion of students who reported having lived most of their lives in urban, suburban, or rural areas varied substantially by race/ethnicity. The majority of African American students (61%) have lived most of their lives in an urban area. Almost half (48%) of Latino students also came from an urban area. In contrast, 29% of Asian students, 19% of multi-racial/ethnic students, and just 11% of white students hail from urban areas.

## Discussion

Though each student in the entering Fall 2000 class came to *UMass Amherst* with his or her own combination of unique experiences, results from this survey clearly indicate that the cultural and familial experiences of *UMass Amherst* students as a whole are very different depending on reported race/ethnicity. Over the course of the study, the research team will be examining how these differences affect the transition of students to *UMass Amherst* who are living and learning with students whose cultural background and prior formative experiences are substantially different from their own. In addition, we will be identifying and describing university programs, initiatives, and courses designed to incorporate student diversity in the enhancement of student learning and personal growth.

For a more detailed description of the entire study, visit the project web site at <http://www.umich.edu/~divdemo>.