

## **Two Perspectives on GW Freshmen**

**Freshmen Entering in 1999 v.  
Freshmen Entering in 1989 and  
GW Freshmen v.  
Freshmen at Market Basket Schools**

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# **TWO PERSPECTIVES ON GW FRESHMEN: Freshmen Entering in 1999 v. Freshmen Entering in 1989 GW Freshmen v. Market Basket Freshmen**

## **Summary**

The data collected from the class entering in 1999 coupled with comparative data from eight market basket schools and the GW class entering in 1989 highlight the unique characteristics of GW students. The academic profile and self-perception of students attending market basket schools are stronger, and they were more engaged in their high school educational experiences compared to students entering GW in 1999. The data suggests that while GW99 students may have earned higher grades than their 1989 cohorts, it is not because they spent more time mastering the material or engaged in the subject matter. Instead, their higher grades may reflect a national trend of grade inflation.

GW students distinguish themselves from their peers at market basket schools and nationwide by their strong interest in and commitment to social and political activism. In contrast to a national decline in political and social engagement among college freshmen, GW students' interest and involvement in politics, community action, and social issues has increased in the past ten years.

## **Introduction**

### ***The Freshman Survey***

The freshmen entering in the fall of 1999 completed at Colonial Inauguration an annual national survey of entering college freshmen. The survey, produced by the Cooperative Institution Research Program (CIRP), is a joint venture of the American Council on Education and UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). For over 30 years, HERI has provided institutional participants with normative data within institutional type (e.g., four-year, two-year, doctoral-granting) and has engaged in a longitudinal study of higher education in American. In addition, HERI releases a report annually that describes the characteristics of students attending American colleges and universities and that identifies and discusses major trends found in the data.

Although the monograph is entitled "The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall and [given year]," in actuality, it reports on senior year activity in high school and students' expectations of college. Questions on the survey cover high school experiences, reasons for attending college, expectations of the college experience, degree and career goals, attitudes, values, and life goals. Most of the questions were included in prior iterations of the survey, providing the basis for analyses of trends.

In 1999, over 350,000 new students completed the survey, representing almost 700 institutions nationwide. Included in the sample were surveys from eight of GW's market basket schools: American, Duke, Emory, Georgetown, Northwestern, Southern Methodist, Tulane, and Vanderbilt Universities. Data from these schools were combined and made available to GW through the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium

(HEDS). The eight market basket universities make up one of the two comparison groups presented in the report. Ten years ago, the incoming freshmen at GW completed the 1989 version of the Student Information Survey. Summary data collected from the earlier cohort make up the second comparison group.

The 1999 Student Information Survey was distributed at the five Colonial Inaugurations held in the summer prior to students' matriculation at GW. Of the 2,117 freshmen enrolled at either the Foggy Bottom or Mount Vernon campuses, 1,740 completed the survey, representing 82% of the incoming class.

Given the two data sets, this report will attempt to:

1. summarize and describe any trends found in the data collected from the class entering in 1999,
2. compare and contrast the responses of GW freshmen (GW99) with cohorts entering the eight market basket universities (MBU99), and
3. highlight the differences in the beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and behaviors of freshmen who entered GW in 1989 (GW89) with those who entered in 1999 (GW99).

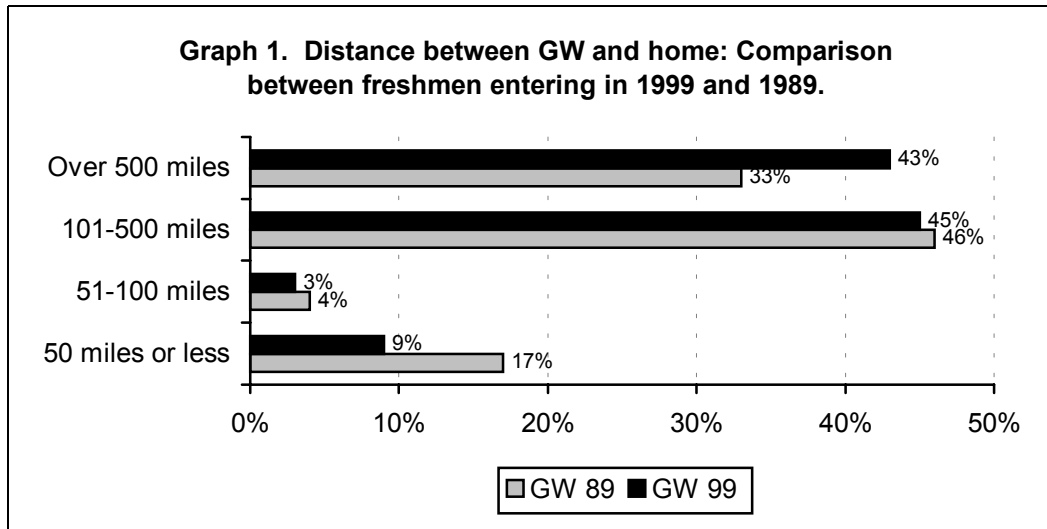
Note that all the information reported below is based on students' responses on the survey, not on institutional data.

### **A Ten-Year Perspective**

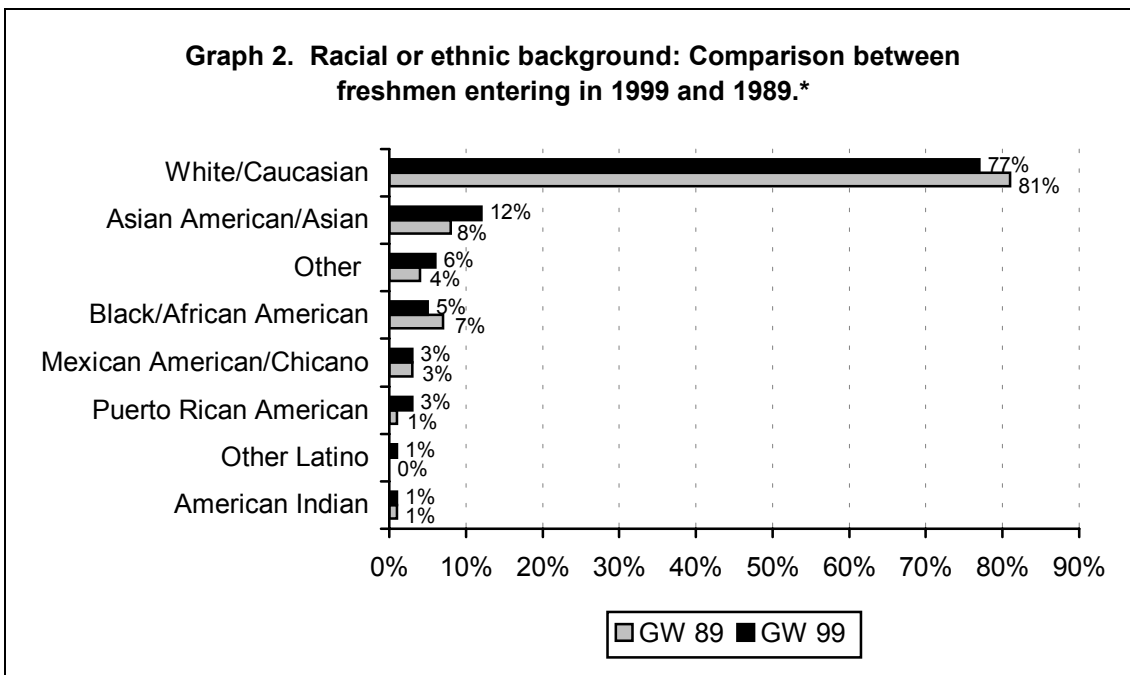
#### ***Diversity***

The typical student who entered GW in the fall of 1989 or 1999 was 18 years old, an American citizen, white, lived at least 100 miles from campus, and expected to live in the residence halls. Most were of the Roman Catholic, Jewish, or Protestant faiths. Within this broad outline, however, GW students have become more diverse geographically and racially, and by religion preferences over the past ten years.

The class entering in 1999 was more geographically diverse than the GW89 cohort. As Graph 1 indicates, 43% of GW99 students lived more than 500 miles from GW compared to 33% of the GW89 cohort. Conversely, 17% of the GW89 group lived within a fifty-mile radius of campus compared to 9% of the GW99 students.

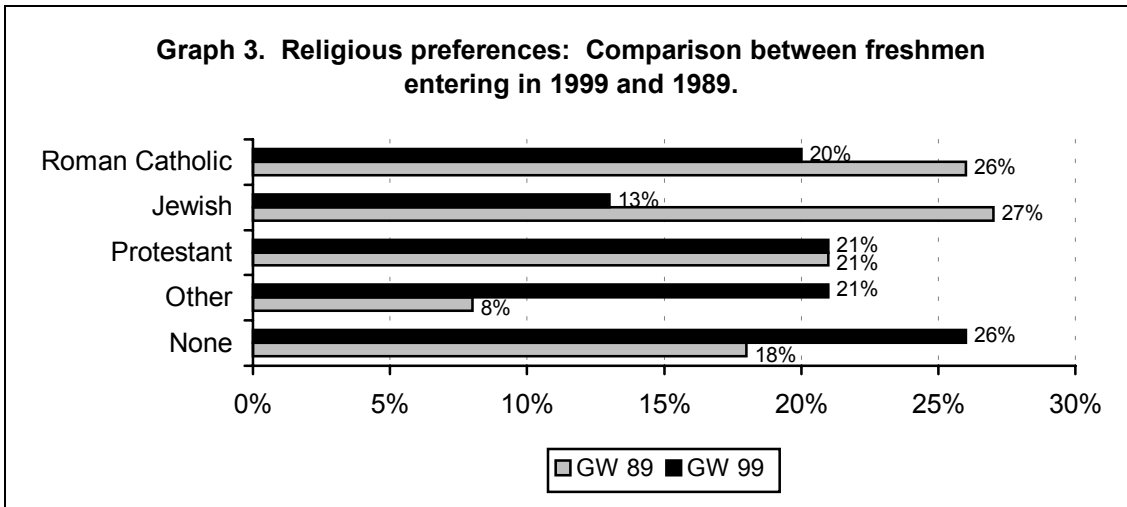


Over the past ten years, the percentage of students indicating they were white or black/African American declined slightly. Those indicating they were Asian/Asian American, Mexican American/Chicano, or Puerto Rican American increased (see Graph 2).



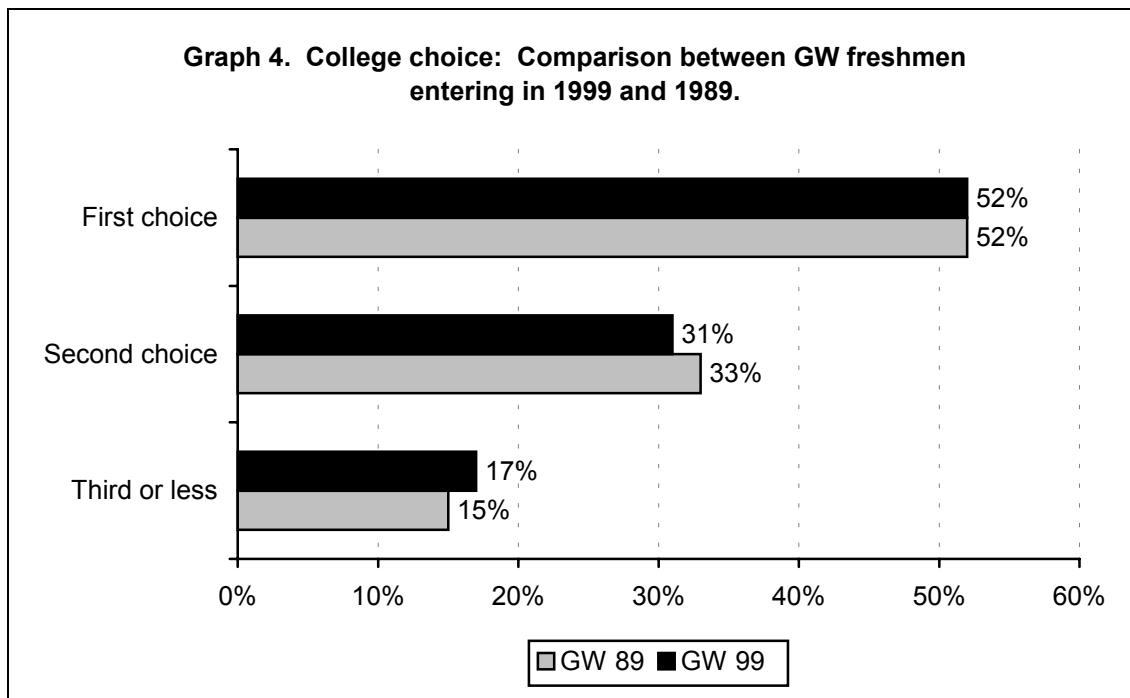
\*Percentages total more than 100% because students could check more than one category.

While the percentages of students indicating they were Roman Catholic and Protestant have remained constant for ten years, the percentage indicating they were Jewish declined from 27% in 1989 to 21% in 1999. Instead, there has been an increase in students professing to be Buddhist, Islamic, or of other Christian and non-Christian faiths (see Graph 3).



**College Choice**

Given the substantial increase in the number of students applying for admission over the past ten years, it is surprising that the percentage of students indicating that GW is their first choice school has remain stable over the same time period. About half (52%) of those who entered in 1999 and 1989 indicated GW was their first choice (see Graph 4). There is a slight decline in the percentage indicating GW is their second choice, and a slight increase in those who listed GW as their third or less choice.

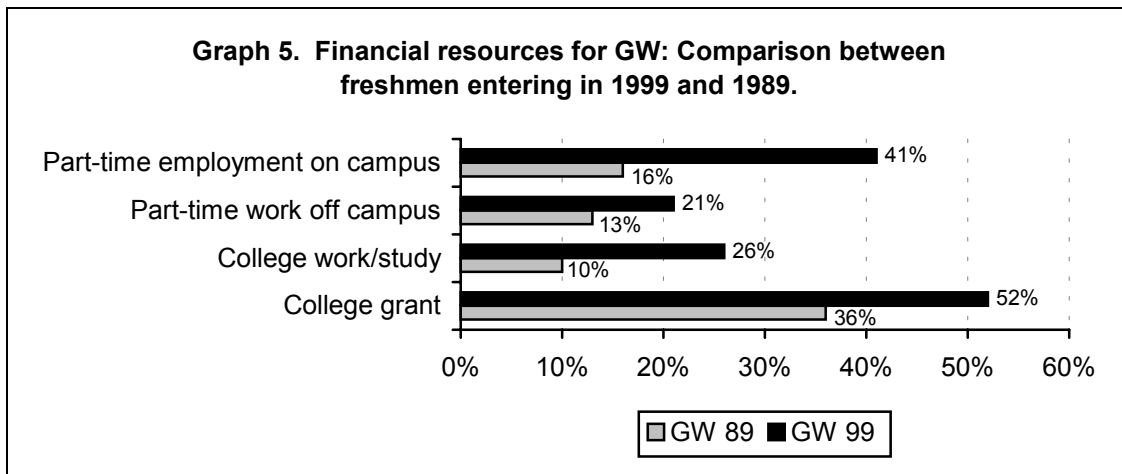


**College Funding**

Over the past ten years there has been a considerable increase in the cost of a college degree. The tuition in 1999 was twice as much as it was in 1989. Freshmen entering in 1989 paid \$11,400; in 1999 the cost was \$22,925. The financial aid budget quadrupled

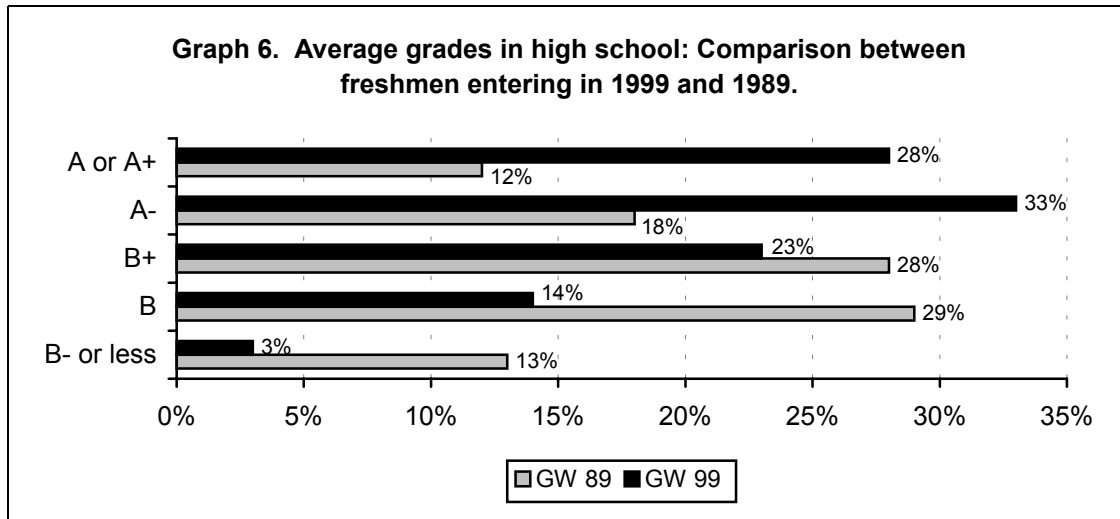
over the past ten years to accommodate the greater financial need of the freshman. Moreover, there is a shared expectation among families that students will contribute to their college fund by working part-time, either through work-study or with other part-time employment. In fact, students' earnings are part of the accounting used in developing financial aid packages.

Funding for college comes from a variety of sources including grants, loans, and student employment. Parents remain the primary source of funding for at least nine out of ten students who enrolled in 1989 or 1999. However, over two and a half times as many students in 1999 (41%) expected to work on-campus part-time compared to 16% of their cohorts entering in 1989, and a higher percentage entering in 1999 expected to work off-campus compared to those entering in 1989 (see Graph 5). Moreover, 68% of those entering in 1999 expected to experience some or major financial concerns, a percentage that is higher than the 62% who expressed similar concerns in 1989.



### ***Academic Profile***

The academic profile of the GW99 group is stronger than the GW89 cohort. Over half of the former earned average grades of A- or above in high school (see Graph 6) and averaged 1255 (self-reported) on the SATs. Only 12% of the GW89 group indicated they had earned A or A+ grades in high school compared to 28% of the GW99 cohort, and 30% of those enrolling in 1989 earned an A-, A, or A+ grade compared to 61% of those entering in 1999. Average SAT scores are not comparable due to the recentering of the scores in 1995.



***Disengagement from the Academic Experience***

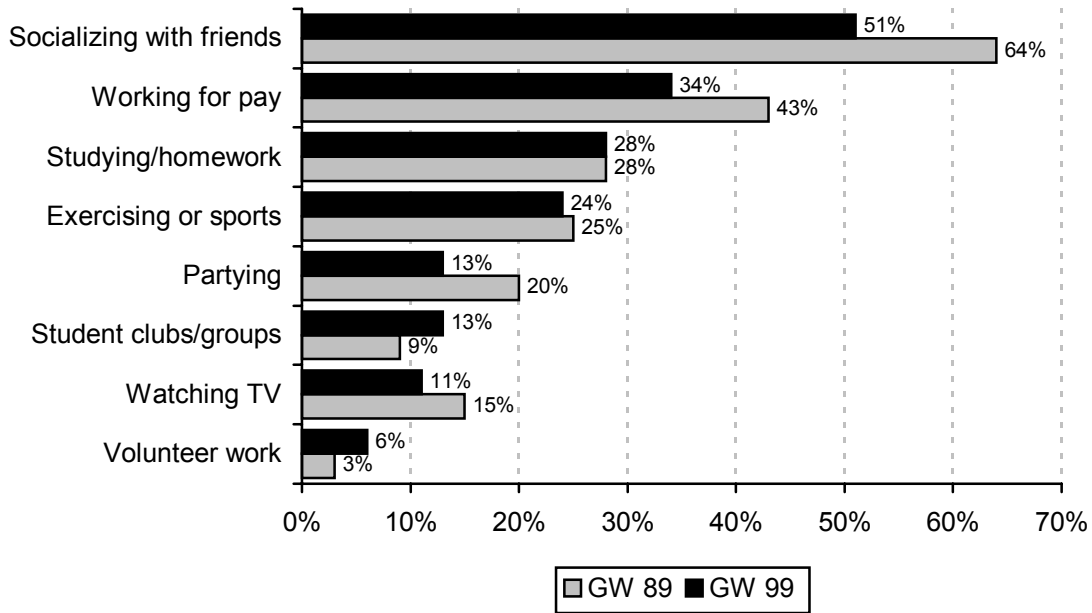
In its press release on the national norms of college freshmen, the Higher Education Research Institute stated: “Today’s college freshmen appear to be more academically ‘disengaged’ than ever before” (HERI, 2000, p. 2). The report cited the record high percentages of students who indicated they were frequently bored in class and who occasionally or frequently came late to class, and the increase in the percentage of students who overslept or missed a class or appointment. Moreover, a record low percentage of students reported spending six hours or more per week studying or doing homework.

Similar patterns of disengagement are found in GW99 students as well (see Graph 7). About half the incoming class reported studying less than six hours a week in high school, and only one-quarter indicated they spent more than 10 hours a week studying or doing homework. Instead, much of their out-of-school time was spent socializing, partying, relaxing (e.g., watching television, playing video games) or working for pay. Over two-thirds of GW99 students indicated they frequently or occasionally came late to class, and over one-third overslept and missed a class or appointment in high school. One-third were employed at least ten hours a week, another third worked less than ten hours a week, and only one-third were *not* employed during their senior year in high school. In fact, the percentage of students who worked more than ten hours a week was higher than those who studied the same amount of time!

Given the high academic profile of GW freshmen and the increase in average SAT scores and high school rank since 1989, one would have expected the current freshmen to have spent more time engaged in academic pursuits during high school compared to the 1989 effort. Instead, the percentage of GW99 students who studied more than 10 hours a week is comparable to the GW89 cohort. The two classes differed in the amount of time socializing and working for pay: a higher percentage of GW89 students spent 10 hours or more a week doing both.

**Graph 7. How students spent their time as high school seniors:  
Comparison between GW students in 1999 and 1989.**

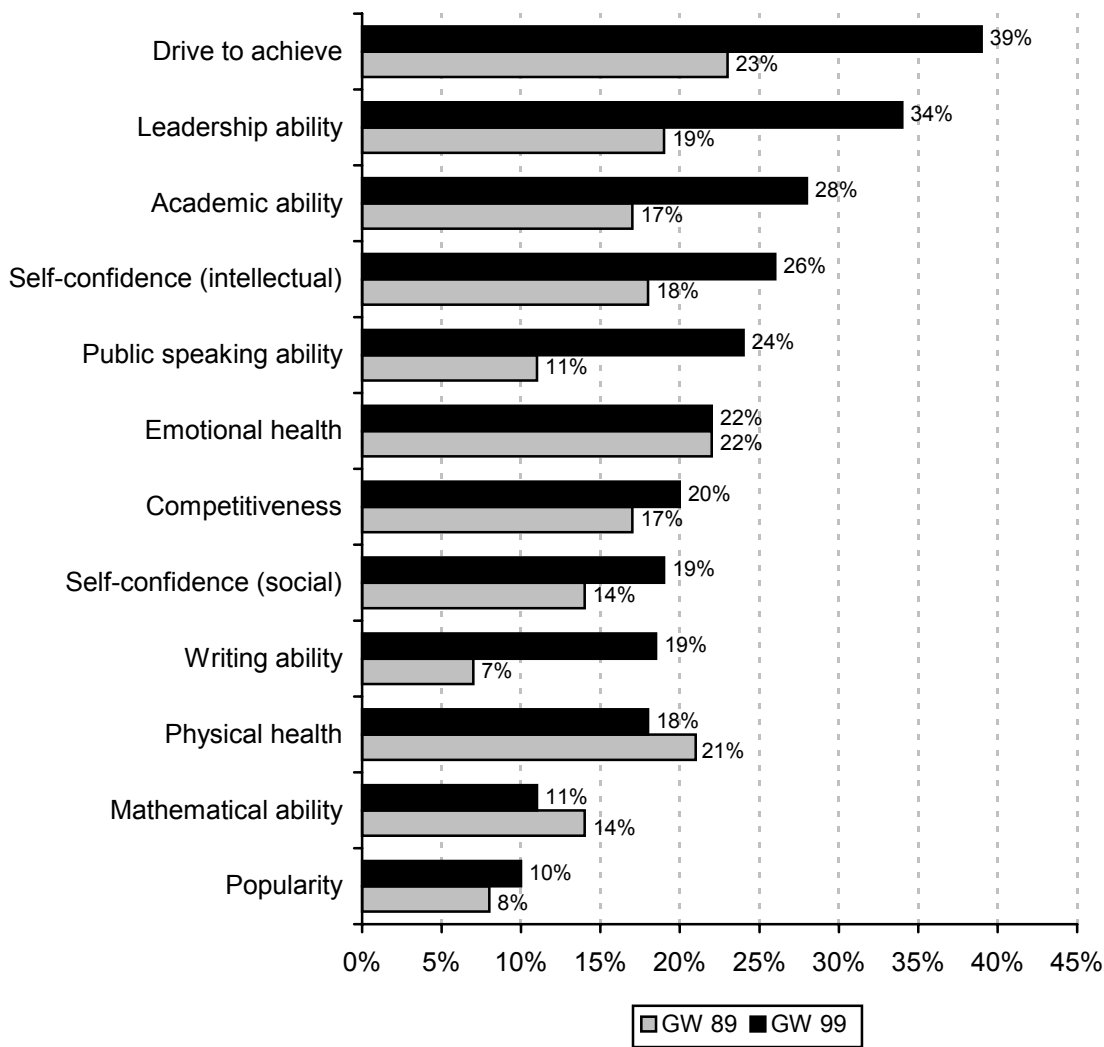
*Percent indicating more than 10 hours per week:*



The HERI report suggests that grade inflation may be a contributing factor in another trend: the rise in students' levels of academic self-confidence. Thus, students may be internalizing the characteristics associated with high grades. The GW99 students possess more self-confidence than those who enrolled ten years earlier (see Graph 8). Compared to the GW89 cohort, a higher percentage of GW99 students rated themselves above average or in the top 10% in many of the characteristics listed in the survey. The most appreciable increases are found in the self-ratings in drive to achieve, academic ability, public speaking, writing ability, leadership, and intellectual self-confidence. Conversely, there is a slight decline in the percentage of students who gave themselves high ratings in physical health and mathematical ability.

**Graph 8. Students' self-perceptions: Comparison between GW students in 1999 and 1989.**

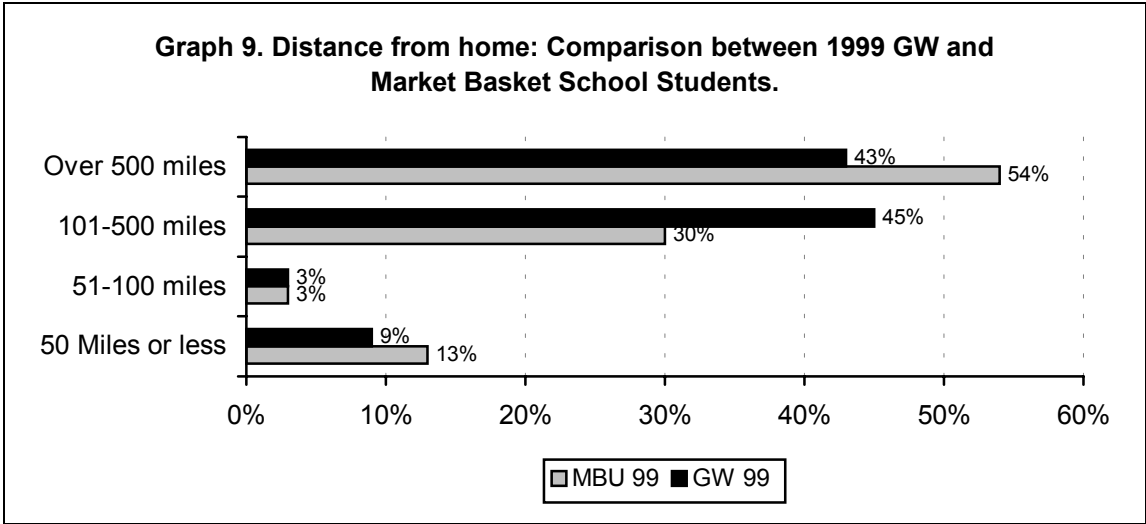
*Percentage who rated themselves in highest 10%:*



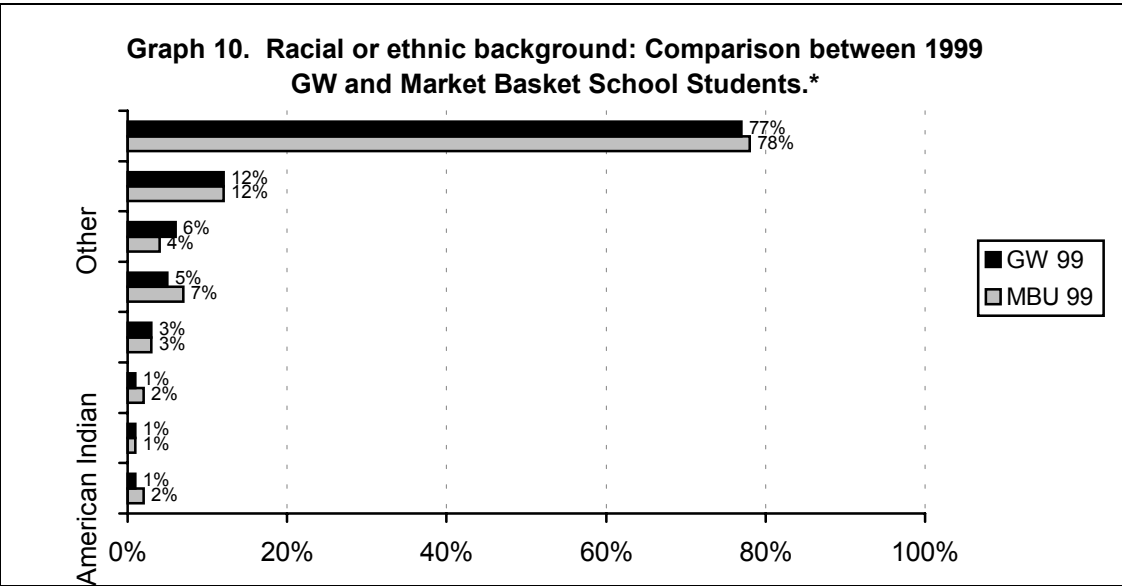
**How Far GW Needs to Go:  
GW v. Market Basket Freshmen**

***Diversity***

The 9,933 freshmen entering GW's market basket schools in 1999 form a profile different from the GW students. The MBU99 group traveled greater distances to enroll at their respective universities. As Graph 9 indicates, over half of the MBU99 students live over 500 miles from their university compared to 43% of the GW99 students. GW attracts a higher percentage of those living within 101-500 miles from their university.

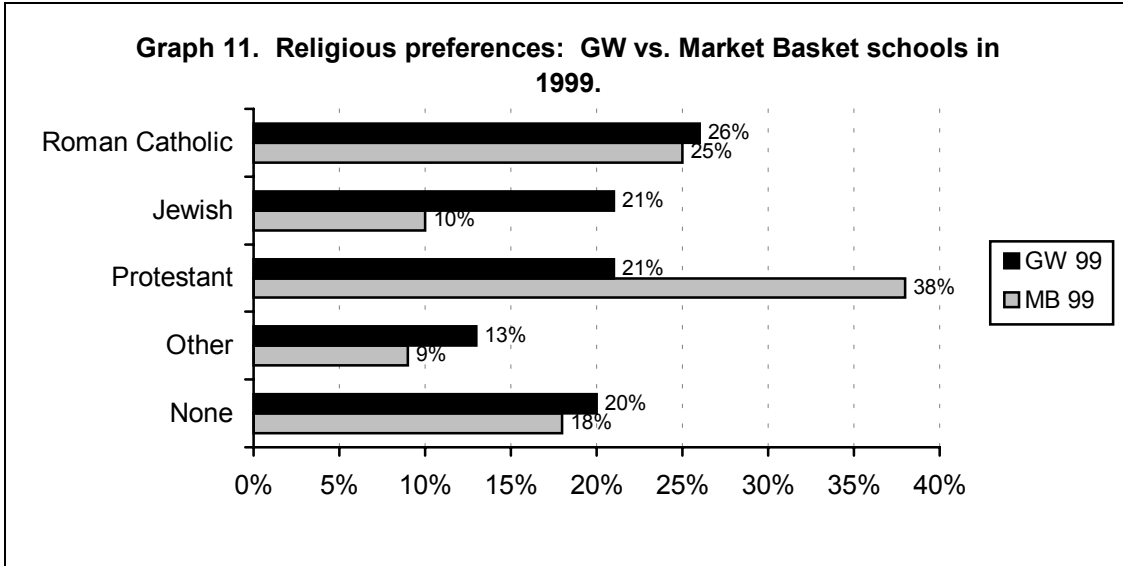


While the percentage of white students enrolled at both GW and MBUs is similar, the MBUs attract a slightly higher percentage of students indicating they are Black/African American, Mexican American, and American Indian (see Graph 10).



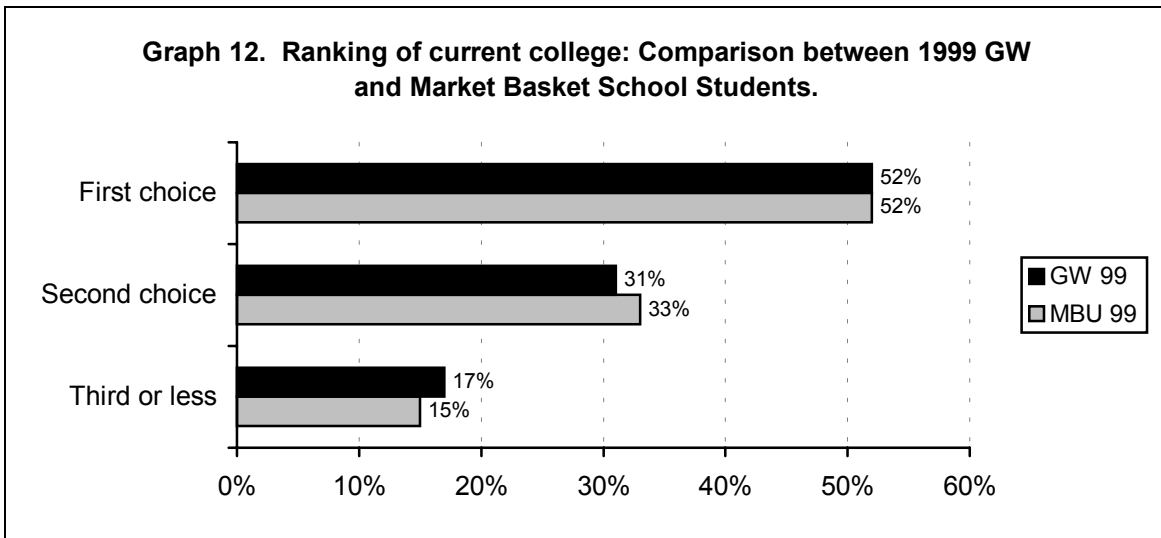
\*Percentages total more than 100% because students could check more than one category.

The main differences in religious preference between GW99 and MBU99 are the percentages indicating they are either Protestant or Jewish. As Graph 11 indicates, almost twice as many MBU99 students indicated they were Protestant compared to GW99 students, and twice as many GW99 students compared to those at MBU99 institutions were Jewish. The percentage of students indicating they were Roman Catholic was similar for both groups.



**College Choice**

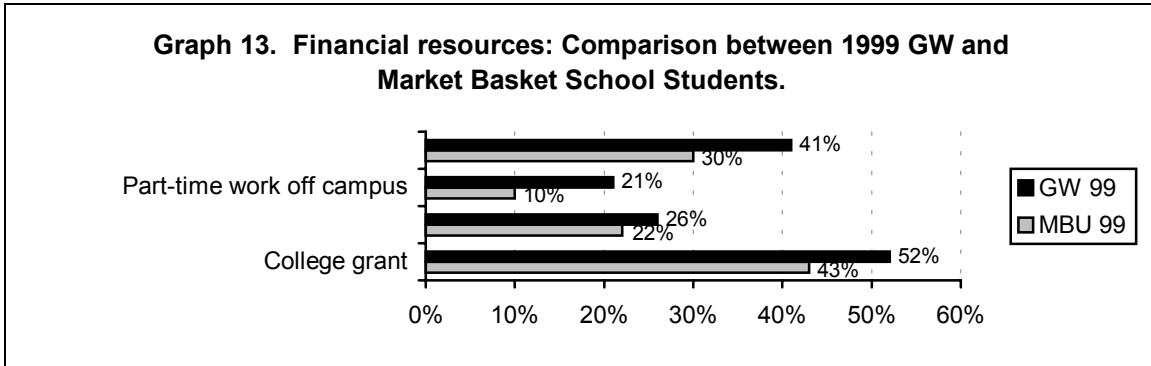
While not everyone at MBUs is enrolled at his or her first choice university, the percentage is higher compared to those at GW. Two-thirds of the MBU99 students attend their first choice school compared to half of those at GW (see Graph 12). A higher percentage of GW99 students ranked GW as their second choice compared to those at market basket schools.



**College Funding**

At least nine out of ten students in both groups expect their parents to finance their education. However, a higher percentage of GW99 students (68%) expressed concern about financing their education compared to 54% of those enrolled at MBUs. Moreover, a higher percentage of GW99 students expect to contribute to their education either through a grant or part-time employment. Over half those at GW99 received college

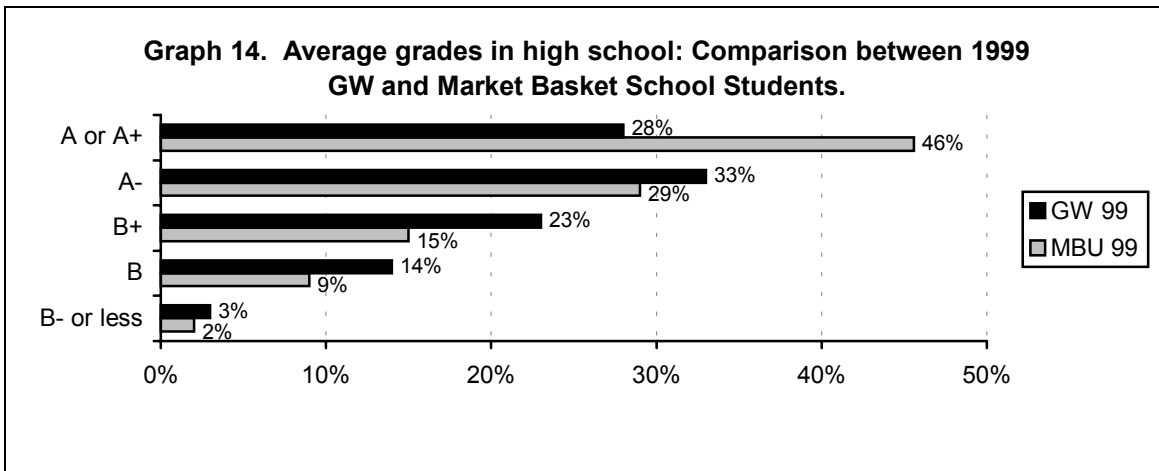
grants compared to 43% of the MBU99 group (see Graph 13), and 62% of the GW99 cohort expected to work part-time compared to 40% of the MBU99 group.



Not only do GW students expect to work during the school year, but also a higher percentage had been working in high school compared to the MBU99 cohorts. Only half of the MBU students worked while in high school compared to two-thirds of those attending GW.

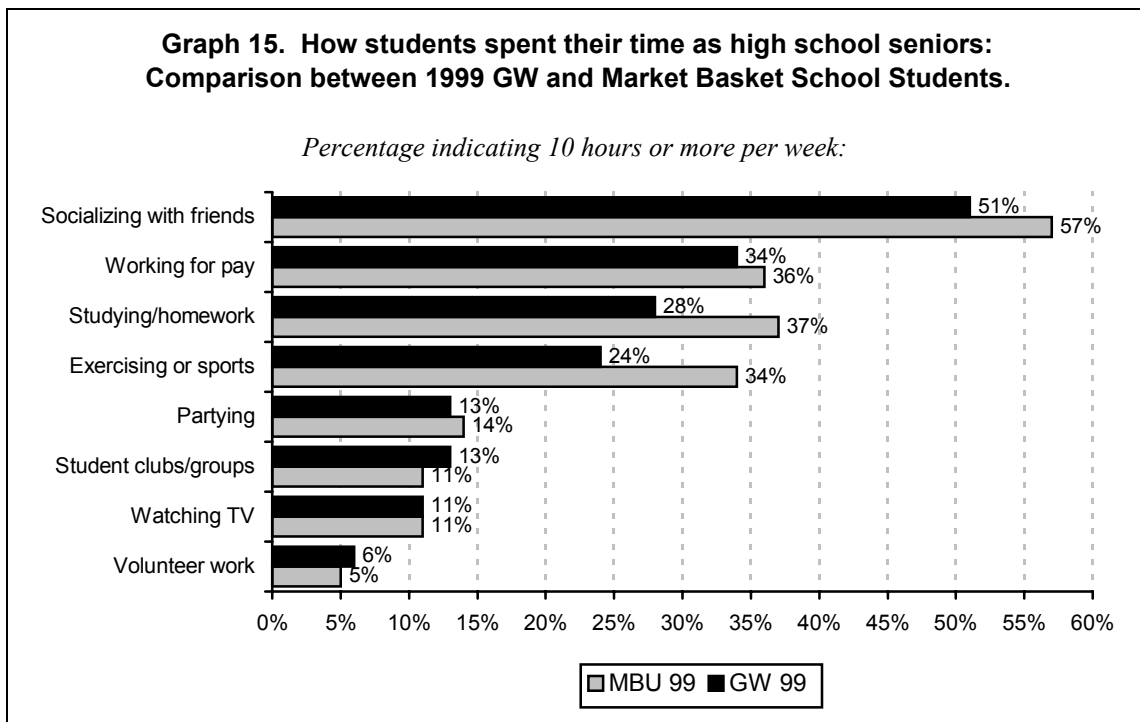
**Academic Profile**

The self-reported academic profile of students entering market basket schools in 1999 is much stronger than those entering GW. Almost half of the MBU99 students earned an average grade of A or A+ in high school compared to only one-quarter of the GW99 group (see Graph 14). A higher percentage of GW99 students had average high school grades in the B/B+ range.



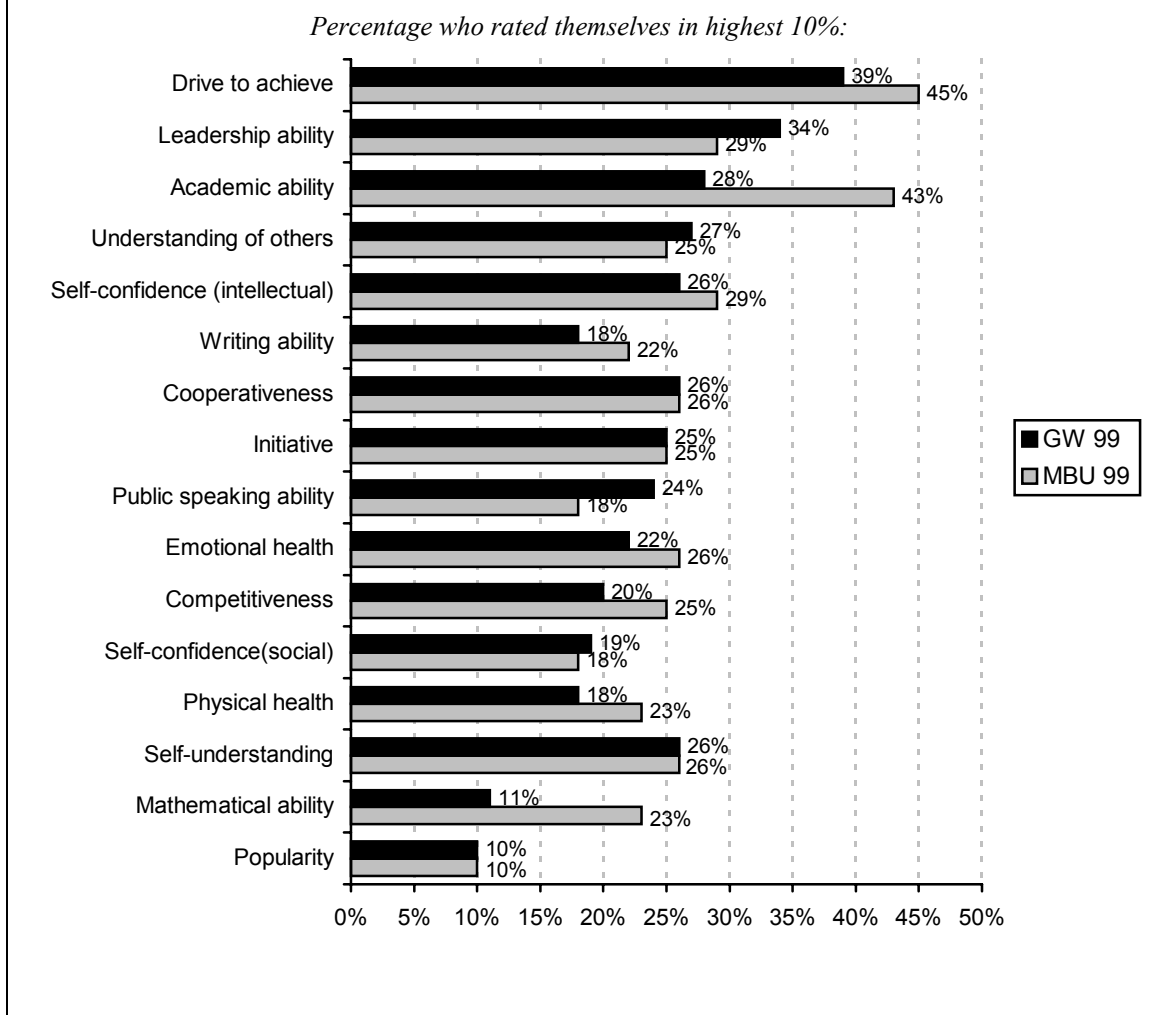
Those enrolled in market basket schools produced higher scores on standardized tests as well. The self-reported average SAT score for MBU99 was 71 points higher than the mean for GW99. The average SAT math score for MBU99 students was 667 compared to 626 for GW students; the average SAT verbal score was 659 for MBU99 students compared to 629 for GW99 students. The ACT composite score for MBU99 students was two points higher than GW99 students' composite of 27.

GW students differed from MBU students in the amount of time devoted to studying or doing homework, exercising, and socializing. As Graph 15 shows, over one-third of the MBU99 cohort studied over 10 hours a week compared to one-quarter of the GW99 students. Moreover, 57% of MBU99 students socialized more than ten hours a week compared to 51% of GW students. The biggest difference between the two groups is in the amount of time students spent exercising or engaged in a sport. Over one-third of the MBU99 group spent at least 10 hours a week working out compared to one-quarter of the GW99 group. There was little difference between the two groups in terms of the percentage working for pay, partying, or watching television.



While a higher percentage of GW99 compared to GW89 students placed themselves in the top ten percent of their peers, their ratings lagged compared to those at MBUs. A higher percent of MBU99 compared to GW99 students rated themselves in the top tenth in drive to achieve, academic ability, intellectual self-confidence, emotional and physical health, competitiveness, self-understanding, and mathematical ability (see Graph 16). Of note are the differences between the two groups in their self-perceptions about their academic and mathematical ability. Forty-three percent of the MBU99 group indicated they were in the top ten percent in academic ability, and 23% rated themselves that high in mathematical ability. Comparatively, only 28% of the GW99 group put themselves in the top tenth in academic ability, and 11% placed themselves there in math skills. Compared to their MBU99 cohort, a higher percentage of GW99 students rated themselves in the top tenth in terms of leadership ability and public speaking.

**Graph 16. Students' perceptions: Comparison between 1999 GW and Market Basket School Students.**

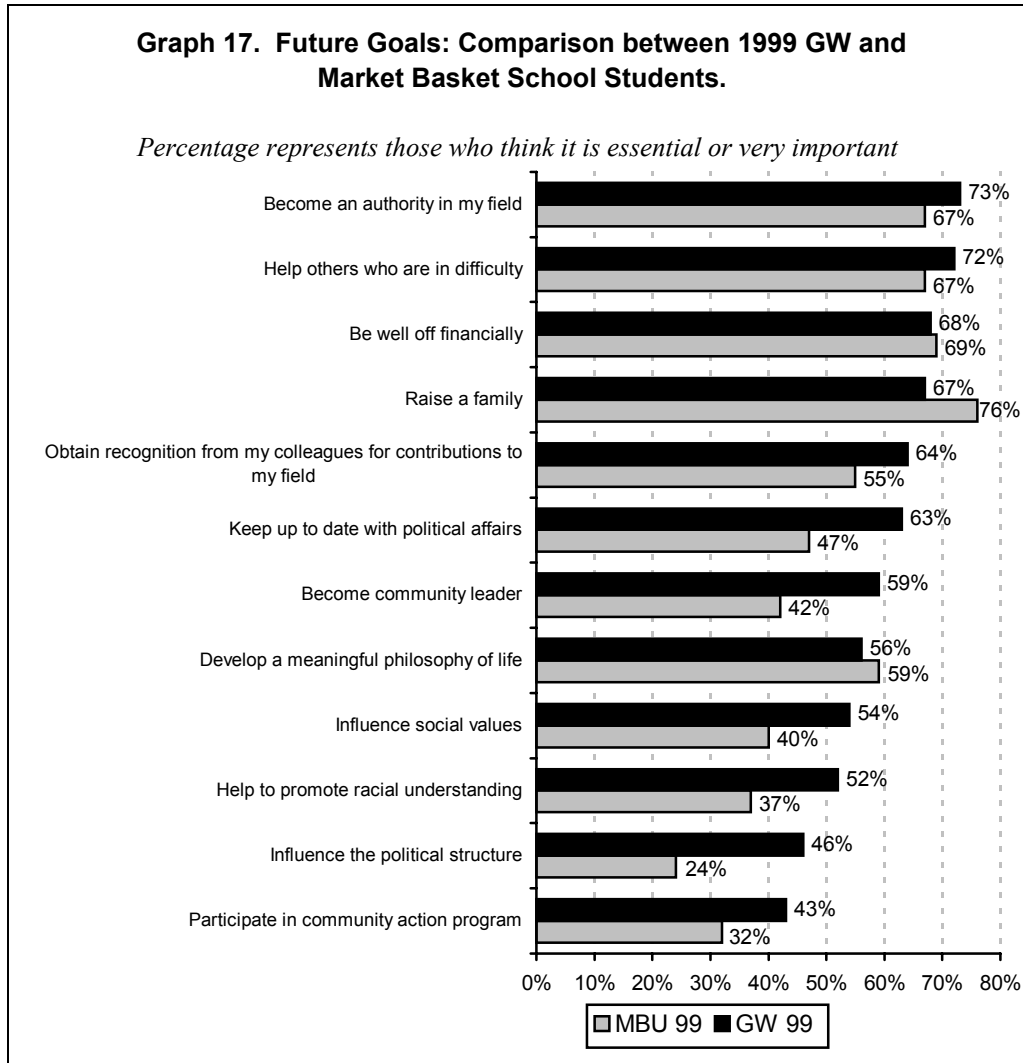


***Ambitions and activism***

GW students share some of the same goals and aspirations as those attending market basket schools. As Graph 17 illustrates, over two-thirds of both groups indicated that it is very important or essential to become an authority in their field, be well-off financially, and to help others who are experiencing difficulty. Over half of both groups think it important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life, and over one-third want to be successful in their own business. However, it is in the areas of community action, political affairs, and social values where the similarities end and the unique qualities of GW students are apparent.

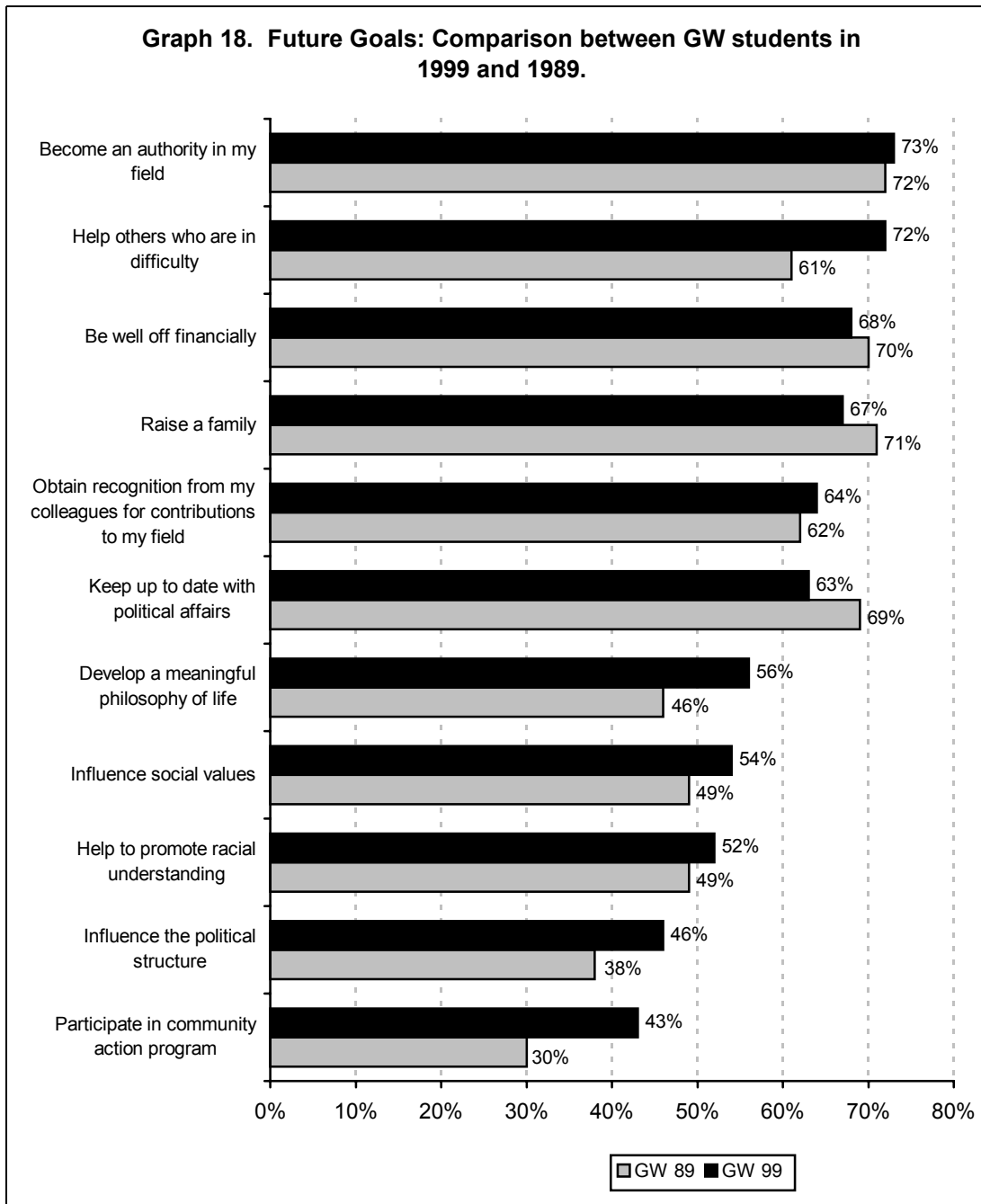
Compared to MBU99 students, GW99 freshmen are more interested in politics, community service, and influencing social values. Almost twice as many GW99 students think it very important or essential to influence the political structure (GW99: 46% vs. MBU99: 24%), and 43% of those attending GW hope to participate in a community action program compared to 32% of those at MBUs. Two-thirds of the GW99 cohort

thinks it very important or essential to stay current with political issues compared to half of those at MBU (GW99: 63% compared to MBU99: 47%). Over half those enrolled at GW are interested in helping to promote racial understanding and influencing social values compared to over one-third of those at MBUs. The only value that a higher percentage of market basket students think essential or very important is raising a family (MBU99: 76% compared to GW99: 67%).



The importance placed on political and social involvement differentiates GW99 freshmen from their peers at market basket schools and nationwide. In a report summarizing changes in the attitudes and values of American freshmen over the past 30 years, Astin et al. (1997) noted that in the 1990s there was a sharp decline in political and social engagement. Sax et al. (2000) reported in *The American Freshmen: 1999* that the commitment to influence social values, to participate in community action programs, and to be a community leader fell to its lowest point since the mid-1980s. For GW students, the opposite is true.

Over the past ten years there has been an *increase* in the percentage of GW freshmen viewing these values as very important or essential. As Graph 18 indicates, the percentage of GW students who placed great importance in participating in a community action program and in influencing the political structure increased. Similarly, a higher percentage of GW99 students thought it very important to help others who are in difficulty compared to their counterparts in 1989. Finally, there has been a small increase in the percentage of students who think it very important to influence social values.



A second characteristic that differentiates GW99 students from their MBU99 peers is their political views. A higher percentage of GW99 students indicated they were political liberal compared to the MBU99 cohort, and fewer GW99 freshmen indicated they had conservative political views.

Interestingly, the political attitudes of GW freshmen have changed in the past ten years. A higher percentage of GW99 students indicated they have liberal views and a lower percentage indicate they have conservative views compared to the GW89 cohort.

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Astin, A. W., Parrott, S. A., Korn, W. S., Sax, L. J. (1997). *The American Freshman: Thirty Year Trends*. UCLA: Higher Education Research Institute.

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