

PROFILE OF ADULT LEARNERS

FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT A FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

Demographics of first-time, first year students

Statistics for three co-ed Texas universities were used to build a picture of the demographics of undergraduate students on Texas campuses: Southern Methodist University (henceforth referred to as SMU), the University of North Texas (from here on referred to as UNT) and the University of Texas at Austin (listed as UTA forthwith), to compare the demographics of a small, private campus with those of a mid-sized public university and a large, flagship state university.

All three campuses have a relatively equal spread of students by gender. SMU is the only campus of the three to have more men than women, although their numbers for degree-seeking, first-time freshmen for the fall 2020 term are close at 772 men to 757 women (50.5% vs. 49.5%) (Southern Methodist University, n.d.b). Both UTA and UNT have more women than men enrolling. UTA's enrollment for degree-seeking, first time freshmen last fall was 56% women (University of Texas at Austin, n.d.), and UNT enrolled 54% women as degree-seeking, first-time freshmen for the same term (University of North Texas, n.d.).

Private university SMU has the least diverse population with 64% white students enrolled as first-time, first year students (Southern Methodist University, n.d.b). The next largest population on campus for undergraduates is Hispanic/Latino, making up 12% of first-time, first year students, and then Asian students contributing to 9% of first-time, first-year students. At both public universities, enrollment is less than 50% white for the first-time, first-year cohort (36% at UTA and 40% at UNT), with the next largest group on campus being Hispanic/Latinx students (29% at UNT and 26% at UTA) (University of North Texas, n.d.; University of Texas at Austin, n.d.) UTA also has a substantial Asian population at 25% of first-time, first-year students, while the UNT enrollment is 14% Black for first-time, first-year undergraduates.

In addition, all three campuses have a small but relevant group of international enrollees. At SMU, non-resident aliens (the term used in these data sets for international students) make up 3% of first-year, first-time students (Southern Methodist University, n.d.b). UNT and UTA has similar ratios of international students in their first-year, first-time cohorts, adding up to 2% at UNT and 4% at UTA (University of North Texas, n.d.; University of Texas at Austin, n.d.). For a more graphic representation of these figures, see Appendix A.

Most first-time, first year students are young at these universities. Only 2% of the undergraduates at SMU are over the age of 25, and none of them are first-time, first-year students (Southern Methodist University, n.d.c). UNT has more undergraduates older than 25 (14% of their undergraduate population), but none of them are first-time, first-year students either (University of North Texas, n.d.). Only UTA has a slight group of first-year students that are older, but it's only 0.02% of their first-year students – which

works out to 2 out of 8170 students – and only 2.6% of their undergraduates are older than 25 (University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).

All three universities require a high school or equivalent education, like a GED or proof of home schooling coursework (Southern Methodist University, n.d.a; University of North Texas, 2021a; University of Texas at Austin, 2021a). Each of the universities requests the submission of test results from the SAT or ACT, but none of the three require them for all admissions. SMU waives SAT or ACT tests for students applying to the Meadows School of the Arts. UNT states that students must either graduate from a Texas high school or prove equivalence, OR submit test scores from the SAT or ACT. And UTA has declared that it will no longer require such test scores, although because their reasoning is tied to the current pandemic, it is unclear if this is a temporary or permanent stance (University of Texas at Austin, 2021b). International students applying to any of these schools must also demonstrate their proficiency in English, through submission of test scores on tests like the TOEFL or a degree from a high school or its equivalent abroad where classes are taught in English (Southern Methodist University, n.d.d; University of North Texas, 2021b; University of Texas at Austin, 2021a).

Finally, all three campuses include first-generation students, who come with their own sets of educational challenges. SMU does not release statistics on their first-generation students, but UTA noted that more than 20% of their fall enrollment for 2018 was for first-generation students (Waldman et al, 2018), and UNT proclaims 45% of their students as first-generation, although the graphic does not clarify how many of those are undergraduate vs. graduate students, or even first-year students (University of North Texas, 2021c).

All of this is to say that undergraduate students at these campuses represent myriad genders and ethnicities, but most first-year, first-time students will be around the age of 18. Students are expected to have the equivalent of a high school education and proficiency in English. And many students will be entering university without the support of parents who completed a college degree.

Characteristics of first-time, first year students

The biggest challenge with this sub-group of adult learners, as with adult learners in general, is understanding what knowledge they are bringing into the classroom. Many articles about first-year students advocate some type of assessment before and after information literacy instruction, allowing librarians and other IL instructors to determine where students have the most weaknesses within the scope of information literacy. Yager et al. (2013) note that the use of assignments to assess student skills give a more thorough picture of a student's skills than a standardized assessment, but standardized online quizzes are a quicker and easier way to measure the skills of a class (p. 60). Using assessments before and after instruction can both help to create lesson plans and to measure the success of instruction afterward; as Bryan and Karshmer (2013) note, "Pre- and post-tests are especially useful in that they can demonstrate the degree to which specific instructional strategies affect student learning," (p. 574).

Dixon (2017) notes that first-year students at colleges and universities "enter with widely varying levels of information literacy," (p. 32). The author writes about a survey of more than 500 college and

university libraries that asked about the information literacy skills of incoming first-year students. Respondents indicated that the biggest challenges for these students were the evaluation of resources and lack of knowledge about library resources (p. 32). Many of these students have not had prior experience searching databases for resources or even understanding where to begin when writing a research paper. The challenge for librarians here is that instruction often needs to balance an introduction to information literacy skills (selecting and evaluating resources) with an introduction to the academic library's resources, showing how to use the library search, research guides and databases.

One might think that first-generation students will struggle even more with information literacy and research, but Ilett (2019) found that "there were also studies that indicated that first-generation students are capable researchers," (cited in Graves et al., 2020, p. 2). In addition, when pre-testing for a freshman-level research and writing class taught by librarians, Graves et al. (2020) found no statistical difference in the incoming information literacy skills of first-generation students as compared to non-first-generation students (p.4).

Considering the general characteristics of adult learners as compared to first-time, first-year students

Many of the characteristics discussed in our lecture (Elkins, 2021) apply to first-time, first-year students at four-year colleges or universities. Certainly students can be *self-directed but lacking in confidence*. As previously noted, many students are unfamiliar with the range of resources available at an academic library, and might not even know how to begin. Woitte and McCay (2019) point out that "First-year students often suffer from library anxiety, are overconfident about their ability to find reliable information, and have many misconceptions about the academic library," (p. 317). In addition, points out Dixon (2017), "students don't always understand that they need to learn these skills, or how they are helpful," (p. 32), making them apathetic to additional instruction in information literacy, which corresponds directly to another characteristic of adult learners: a desire for control while *resistant to change*.

The examples given by Woitte and McCay (2019), Graves et al. (2020), Yager et al. (2013), and Bryan and Karshmer (2013) all reflect information literacy instruction tailored to a specific class or subject. This correlates to the survey described by Dixon (2020), which notes that most IL instruction is linked to a specific discipline (p. 33), as well as the third characteristic of adult learners, that *learning has to be relevant*. While Dr. Elkins (2021) did point out that theory may help to contextualize the work, for first-year students, they need more practice and less theory.

The wide *variety of experience* held by adult learners points to the need for pre-tests or assessments previously mentioned (Bryan & Karshmer, 2013; Graves et al., 2020; Woitte & McCay, 2019; Yager et al., 2013), allowing instructors to get a sense of prior knowledge before preparing instruction tailored for students. This is also important because we want to consider our students' time. While college students' primary concern is learning, unlike adult learners whose learning is *a secondary role*, we still need to respect their time and the myriad expectations on them on campus – and off. As Dixon points out, "students are being bombarded with other first-time experiences," (p. 33). While this ties back to making the learning relevant, as it may be easier (and quicker) for students to understand the concepts when tied to a specific area of study, Dixon also underscores that many of the librarian respondents link

such lessons to both immediate and long-term learning – being information literate will help students both during their time on campus and long after graduation.

REFERENCES

- Bryan, J. E., & Karshmer, E. (2013). Assessment in the one-shot session: Using pre- and post-tests to measure innovative instructional strategies among first-year students. *College & Research Libraries*, 74(6), 574-586. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl12-369>
- Dixon, J. A. (2017). First impressions. *Library Journal*, 142(8), 32-33.
- Graves, S. J., LeMire, S., & Anders, K. C. (2020). Uncovering the information literacy skills of first-generation and provisionally admitted students. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 102260. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2020.102260>
- Southern Methodist University. (n.d.a). *Admission requirements*. <https://www.smu.edu/Admission/Apply/FirstYear/AdmissionRequirements>
- Southern Methodist University. (n.d.b). *Common data set: 2020-2021, B. Enrollment and persistence*. https://www.smu.edu/-/media/Site/ir/commondatasets/2020/CDS_2020-2021_PartB_Enrollment.pdf?la=en
- Southern Methodist University. (n.d.c). *Common data set: 2020-2021, F. Student life*. https://www.smu.edu/-/media/Site/ir/commondatasets/2020/CDS_2020-2021_PartF_Student_Life.pdf?la=en
- Southern Methodist University. (n.d.d). *First-year international student application*. <https://www.smu.edu/Admission/Apply/FirstYearInternational>
- University of North Texas. (2021a). *Freshman admissions requirements*. <https://admissions.unt.edu/freshman/admission-requirements>
- University of North Texas. (2021b). *International: What are UNT's English language requirements?* <https://admissions.unt.edu/international/english-language-requirements>
- University of North Texas. (2021c). *UNT student demographics* <https://teachingcommons.unt.edu/teaching-essentials/engaged-learning/unt-student-demographics>
- University of North Texas. (n.d.). *Common data set: 2019-2020*. https://institutionalresearch.unt.edu/sites/default/files/cds_2019-2020_unt.pdf
- University of Texas at Austin. (2021a). *Applying for admission checklist*. <https://admissions.utexas.edu/apply/freshman-admission>
- University of Texas at Austin. (2021b). *Standardized testing policy FAQs*. <https://admissions.utexas.edu/standardized-testing-policy-FAQ>
- University of Texas at Austin. (n.d.). *Common data set: 2019-2020*. <https://utexas.app.box.com/s/dg7br334l4bpx26l9qzz8ciws0nh7rol>

Waldman, B., Robberson Lentz, S. & Swofford, T. (2018). *More than 20% of UT undergrads are first-generation college students*. University of Texas at Austin.

<https://news.utexas.edu/2018/11/14/more-than-20-of-ut-undergrads-are-first-generation-college-students/>

Woitte, S., & McCay, K. (2019). How cyclical assessment can guide information literacy instruction to best serve first-year students. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 45(3), 315-317.

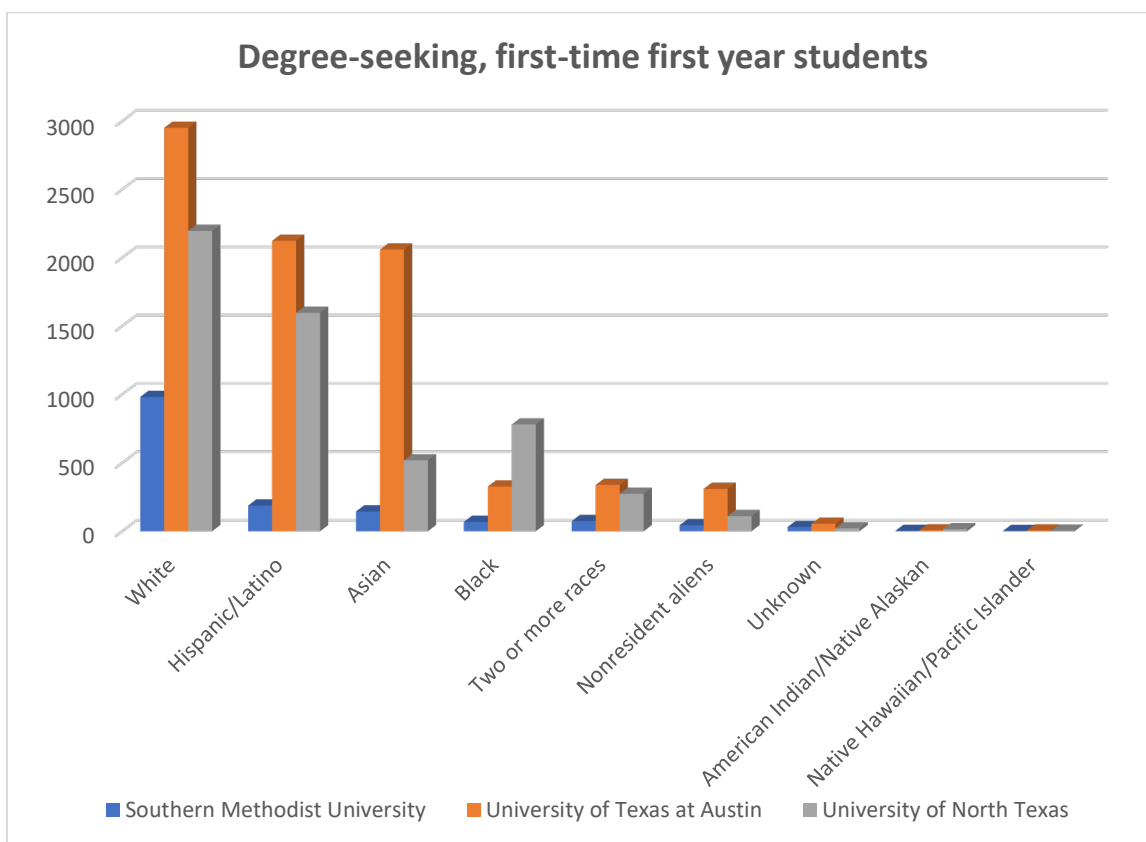
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2019.01.006>

Yager, Z., Salisbury, F., & Kirkman, L. (2013). Assessment of information literacy skills among first year students. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 4(1), 59-71.

<https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v4i1.140>

APPENDIX A

ENROLLMENT BY RACIAL AND ETHNIC CATEGORIES



	Southern Methodist University		University of Texas at Austin		University of North Texas	
White	981	64%	2950	36%	2195	40%
Hispanic/Latino	187	12%	2123	26%	1596	29%
Asian	144	9%	2059	25%	518	9%
Black	68	4%	326	4%	780	14%
Two or more races	74	5%	338	4%	273	5%
Nonresident aliens	44	3%	309	4%	110	2%
Unknown	30	2%	54	1%	21	0%
American Indian/Native Alaskan	2	0%	6	0%	14	0%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	0%	5	0%	3	0%
Total enrolled	1531		8170		5510	

(Southern Methodist University, n.d.b; University of North Texas, n.d.; University of Texas at Austin, n.d.).