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6-1-1999

A Profile of the 1998 Freshman Class at Western: Comparative Trends and Patterns with a National Sample

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Recommended Citation

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Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing • Western Washington University

Volume 4, Issue 5

June, 1999

A PROFILE OF THE 1998 FRESHMAN CLASS AT WESTERN: COMPARATIVE TRENDS AND PATTERNS WITH A NATIONAL SAMPLE

Prepared by Gary R. McKinney and Joseph E. Trimble,

INTRODUCTION

Commonly known as Western's *Freshman Survey*, Western's study on first-time, incoming freshmen utilizes the Student Information Form questionnaire, developed by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), which is administered nationally by the Higher Education Research Institute located in the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles.

The CIRP (or Freshman) Survey was first administered at Western in 1971. Through 1989, the CIRP was administered every four or five years. Beginning in 1991, the CIRP has been administered annually. In 1998, Western received 925 completed survey forms. In-coming freshmen received CIRP questionnaires in their admissions packets prior to SummerStart, Western's summer freshmen orientation program. Though fall quarter orientation

programs also promoted freshmen survey participation, the majority of completed questionnaires were received during SummerStart.

Nearly all CIRP Survey participants were 18 or 19 years old (97.8%). Females were more to have filled out the surveys than males (63.0% females vs. 37.0% males). Most indicated their ethnicity as "White/Caucasian" (91.5%). The actual ratio of freshman males to females in the fall of 1998 was 56.4% females and 43.6% males, and the actual ratio of white freshmen versus freshmen of color was 84.1% versus 15.9%. Thus both males and students of color were under represented in the findings.

The following pages describe a brief profile of 1998 Western freshmen, sometimes compared and contrasted to previous classes of Western freshmen, and sometimes compared and contrasted to freshmen nationally.



Prior to 1998, the CIRP Freshman Survey asked incoming freshmen only one computer-related question: Have you used a personal computer, and if so, how often. The question was first asked in 1985. In that year, 24.9% of freshmen nationally and 22.1% of freshmen at Western indicated they had used a personal computer frequently. By 1993 those figures had risen to 37.8% nationally and 49.0% at Western, and by 1997 had risen to 56.7% nationally and 76.0% at Western.

COMPUTER AND INTERNET USE INCREASING

NOT ALL TECHNOLOGY SO EMBRACED

Nationally, between 1966 and 1971, the average percentage of freshmen indicating they had typed a homework assignment was 23.3%. Even when asked again in 1991, only 31.1% of freshmen indicated they had typed a homework assignment

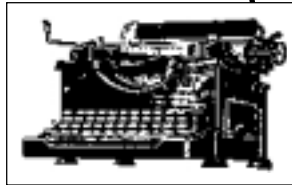
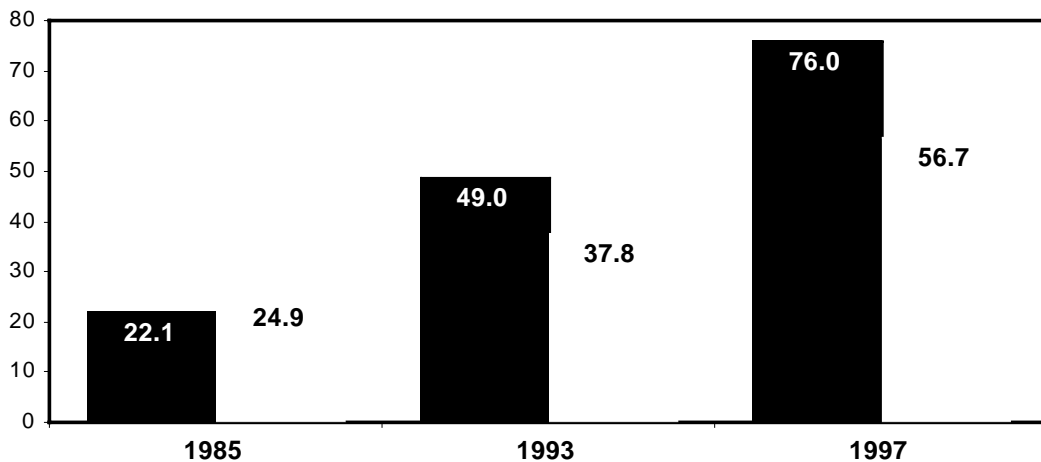


Figure 1: Percent of frosh reporting they used a personal computer

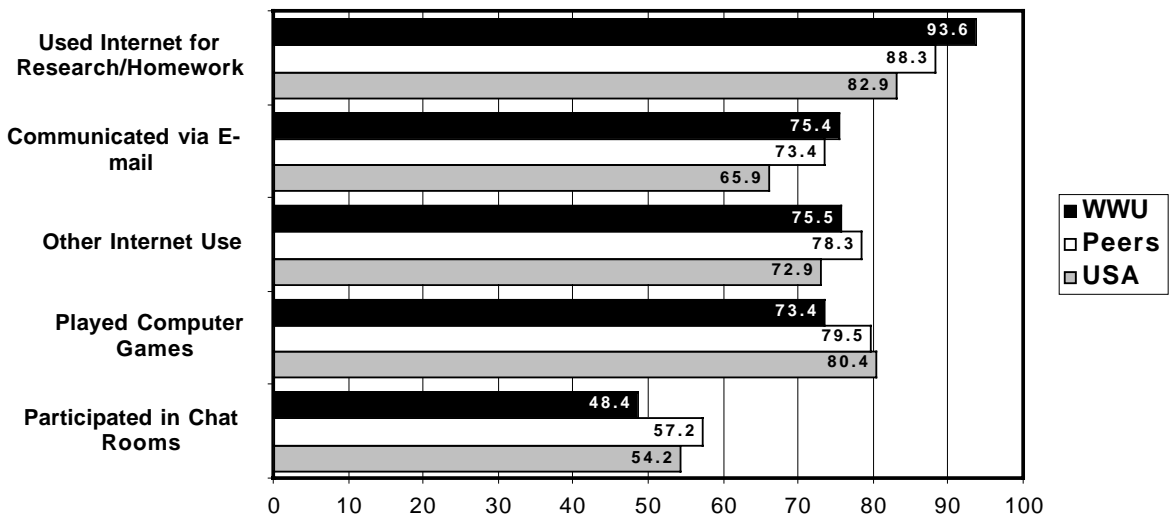


**COMPUTER AND INTERNET
USE (CONT.)**

In 1998, a series of questions related to computer and internet use were introduced. Nationally, most in-coming freshmen indicated they had used the internet for research or homework frequently or occasionally (82.9%). At Western the figure was even higher (93.6%). Nationally, most freshmen indicated they had played computer games frequently or occasionally (80.4%). At Western that figure was somewhat less (73.4%).

Western freshmen were also more likely than freshmen nationally to have used the internet for other uses (75.5% at Western vs. 72.9% nationally), and to have communicated via e-mail (75.4% at Western vs. 65.9% nationally). Western freshmen were less likely than freshmen nationally to have participated in chat rooms (48.4% at Western vs. 54.2% nationally).

Figure 2: Computer Use among in-coming frosh



COMPUTER AND INTERNET USE (CONT.)

While computer use appears to be rampant among in-coming freshmen, use has not spread equally among the various types of institutions. While the percentage of freshmen using e-mail was over three-quarters at private universities and colleges—and at some public universities—the percentage of students at historically black colleges (public and private) who used e-mail was less than half.

On the other hand, across all institutional types, at least three-quarters of freshmen indicated they had used the internet for research or homework. Freshmen entering private universities were the most likely to have used the internet for research or homework (90.2%), compared to freshmen entering public 2-year colleges (75.2%). It may be that while internet research is facilitated across socio-economic backgrounds by computer availability in libraries and school, the use of e-mail is more dependent on owning a computer and having web access via home telephone lines.

Figure 3: Percent of frosh reporting they used e-mail in the last year — institutional differences

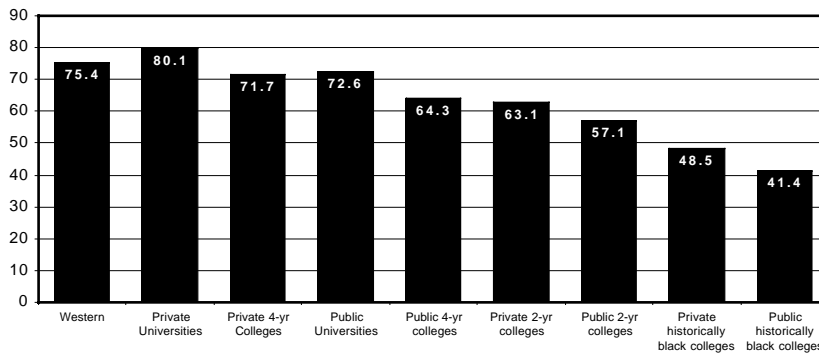
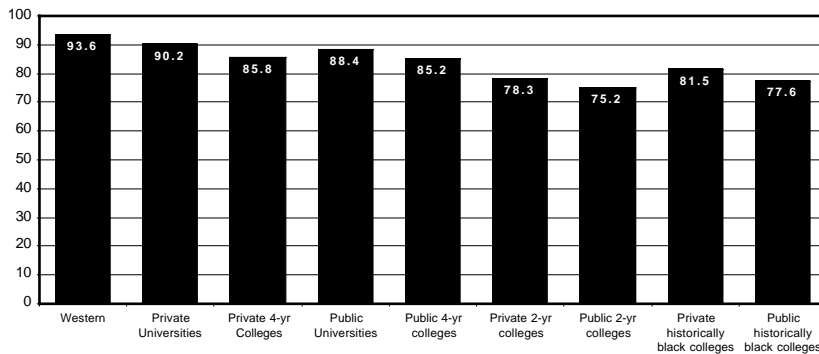


Figure 4: Percent of frosh reporting they used the internet for research or homework — institutional differences



SINCE WESTERN DOES NOT GRANT PH.D.'S, NATIONAL RESEARCHERS CONSIDER IT A PUBLIC COLLEGE. HOWEVER, ITS FRESHMEN APPEAR QUITE INTERNET SAVVY, WITH 75.4% INDICATING E-MAIL USE, SECOND ONLY TO PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES, AND 93.2% INDICATING INTERNET USE FOR RESEARCH OR HOMEWORK, HIGHEST AMONG ALL INSTITUTIONAL CATEGORIES.

ACADEMIC DISENGAGEMENT CONTINUES NATIONALLY

Figure 5: Frequently "bored in class"

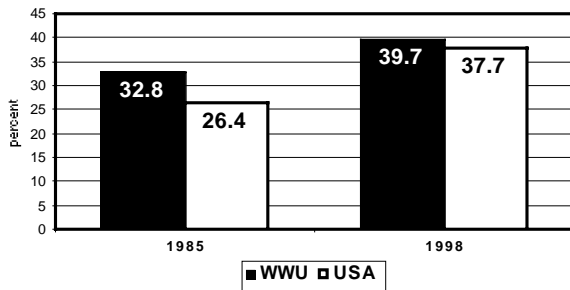


Figure 6: "Overslept and missed a class or appointment"

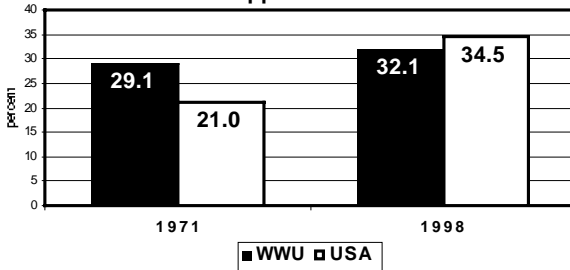
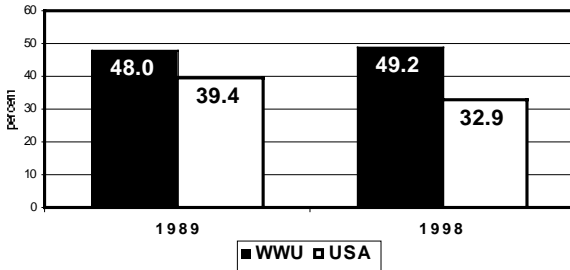


Figure 7: Studied or did homework 6+ hours a week



As noted in last year's profile, incoming freshmen appear to be exhibiting a lack of interest in school—what national researchers refer to as academic disengagement. To support this contention, the following items were highlighted:

- A record high 37.7% indicated they had felt "bored in class;"
- A record high 60.3% indicated they frequently "came late to class;" and
- The percentage who "overslept and missed class or appointment" remained at the record high of 34.5%.

Moreover, the percentage of freshmen indicating they had studied or done homework six plus a week reached a record low of 32.9%.



Among Western's in-coming freshmen, indicators of academic disengagement were less obvious.

- A record high 39.7% reported feeling "bored in class;" and
- A record high 70.7% reported they "came late to class" (70.7%).

Yet the percentage who reported they "overslept and missed class or appointment" (32.1%) was well below the record high set in 1971 (40.3%). More importantly, the percentage of Western freshmen reporting they had studied six hours a week or more reached a record *high* of 49.2%—well above the national finding, and much higher than the figure reported at Western as recently as 1994 (33.0%).

Freshmen nationally gave as their top reasons for attending college "to get a better job" and "to make more money" (76.9% and 74.6% respectively), with "to gain a general education" lagging behind at 62.0%. National researcher note these results are not surprising given the high degree of academic disengagement exhibited in 1998 findings. Students appear to be approaching their educations with a practical rather than a scholarly design.



Among Western freshmen, the findings do not indicate quite the same design as found nationally. Though "to get a better job" ranks highest as a reason for attending college, "to gain a general education" ranked second (72.8% and 71.5% respectively), with "to make more money" lagging behind at 62.0%. Western freshmen also ranked "to become a more cultured person" high, at 51.9%.

REASONS FRESHMEN GIVE FOR GOING TO COLLEGE

PARENTAL DEMANDS OR PARENTAL MODELING?

In 1971, only 16.2% of in-coming Western freshmen indicated they opted for college "because my parents wanted me to go." By 1998, that figure nearly doubled, to 30.2%. Concurrently, the percentage of parents of Western freshmen with a Bachelor's degrees rose from 32.8% in 1971 to 56.5% in 1998

Figure 8: Top three "very important" reasons for going to college

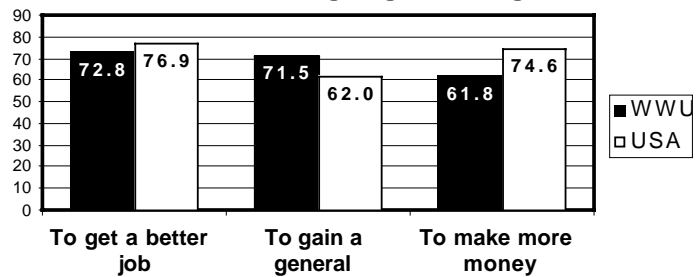
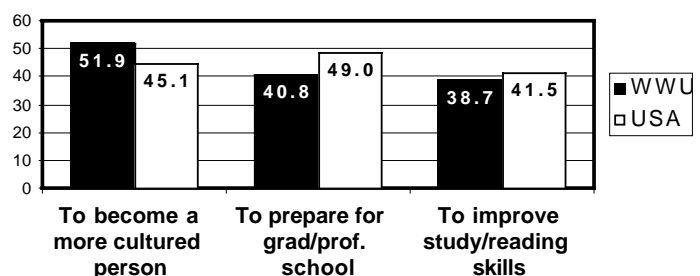


Figure 9: Three more "very important" reasons for going to college



REASONS FRESHMEN GIVE FOR COMING TO WESTERN

Figure 10: Good academic reputation "very important" in choosing WWU

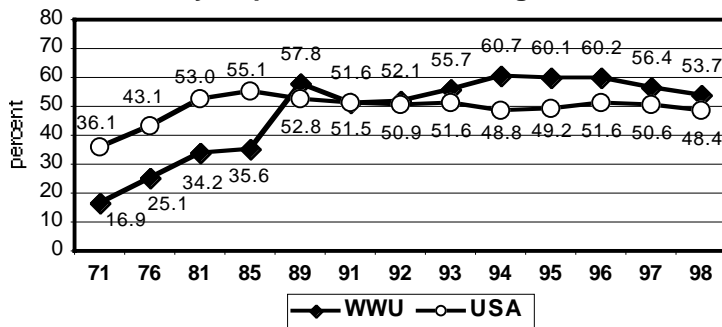


Figure 11: Size of college "very important" in choosing WWU

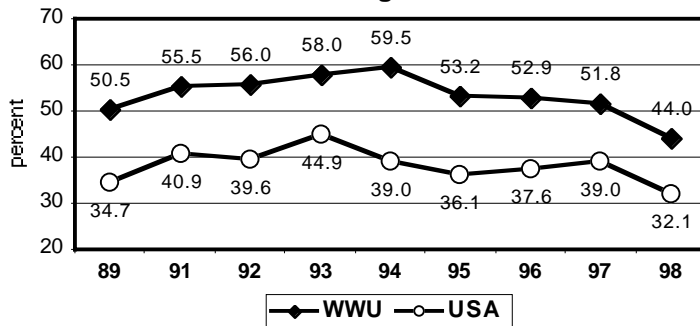
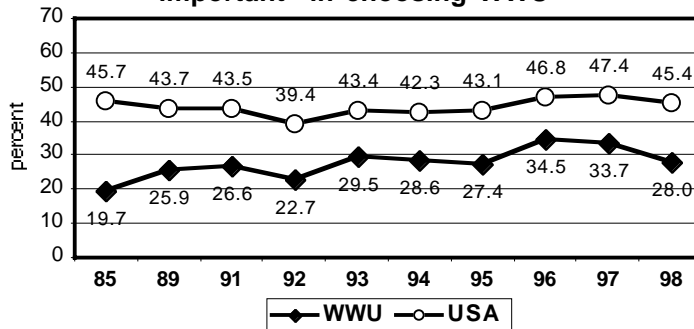


Figure 12: Graduates get good jobs "very important" in choosing WWU



In 1998, academic reputation was listed by incoming freshmen as the most important reason for selecting Western (53.7%). Academic reputation has been cited as the first or second most important reason since 1989.



The second most popular reason freshmen selected Western was its size (44.0%), and the third most important was that its graduates get good jobs (28.0%). Selecting Western because its graduates get good jobs has seen a steady rise in importance to freshmen, though it has never exceeded the importance freshmen nationally have given it.



Other reasons incoming freshmen give for choosing Western included its low tuition (23.5%), good social reputation (16.5%), and that some students want to live near home (15.2%).

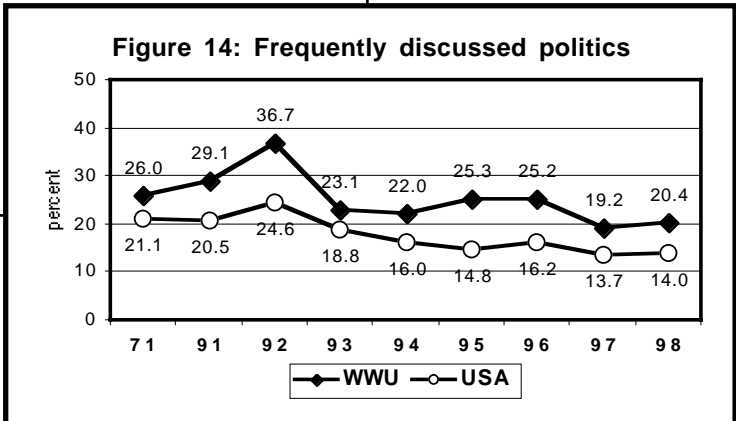
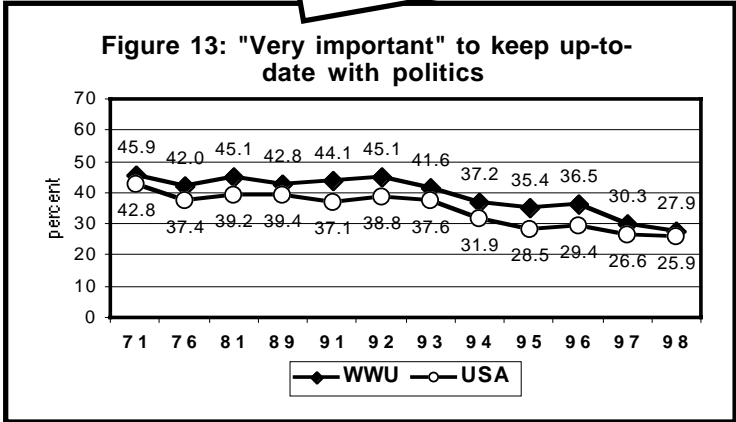
Nationally, and at Western, freshmen interest in politics fell to all-time or near all-time lows. The percentage on freshmen indicating that it was "very important" to "keep up-to-date with politics" was 27.9% nationally and 25.9% at Western—both all-time lows. The percentage of freshmen indicating that they had frequently "discussed politics" in the past year was 20.4% nationally and 14.0% at Western.

While neither was a record low, both were the second lowest percentages on record. In comparison, during the presidential election year of 1992, the percentage of Western freshmen who frequently "discussed politics" was 36.7%, a record high.

Falling, also, was the percentage of freshmen who felt it was a "very important" life goal to "influence the political structure: nationally from 16.7% in 1997 to 16.0% in 1998; and at Western from 11.6% in 1997 to 9.6% in 1998

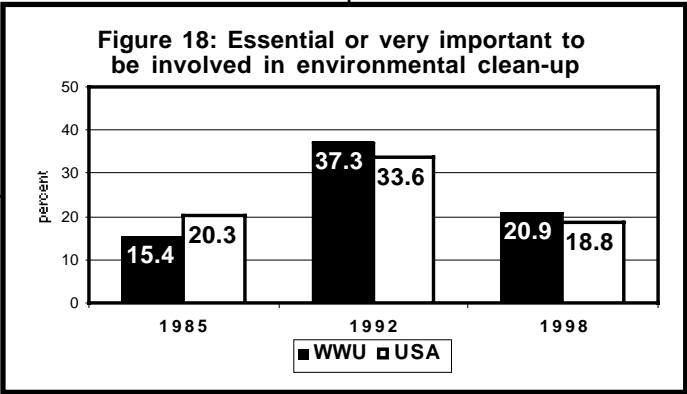
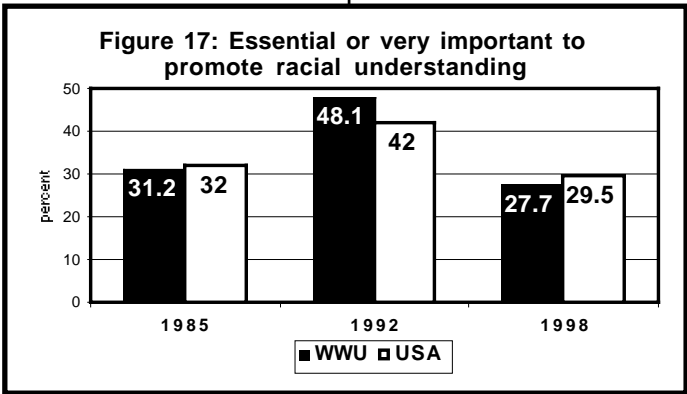
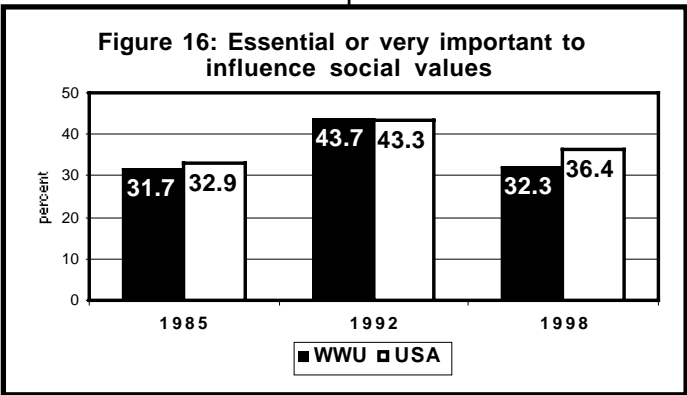
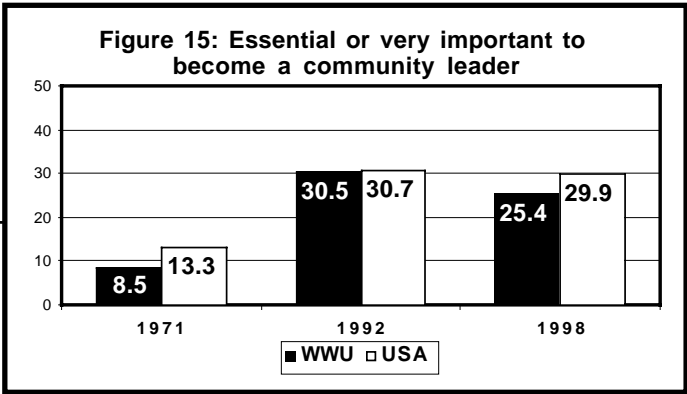
INTEREST IN POLITICS CONTINUES TO PLUMMET

VOTING APATHY LEARNED EARLY?
 The percentage of Western freshmen reporting that they voted in a student election has fallen from 66.2% in 1971 to 40.1% in 1991 to the all-time low of 29.8% in 1998. (Nationally, the figures were 70.7% in 1971, 32.7% in 1991 and 21.1% 1998.)



**INTEREST IN
ACTIVISM
DECREASES
ALSO**

As with interest in politics, the 1998 Freshman Survey noted that interest in activism continued to wane, among in-coming freshmen nationally and at Western. For example, 30.5% of entering Western freshmen noted it was essential or very important to become a community leader in 1992, but only 25.4% in 1998. Similarly, 43.7% noted it was essential or very important to influence social values in 1992, it was only 32.3% in 1998. Also, 48.1% noted it was essential or very important to promote racial understanding in 1992, but only 27.7% in 1998. And finally, 37.3% noted it was essential or very important to be involved in environmental clean-up in 1992, but only 20.9% in 1998.

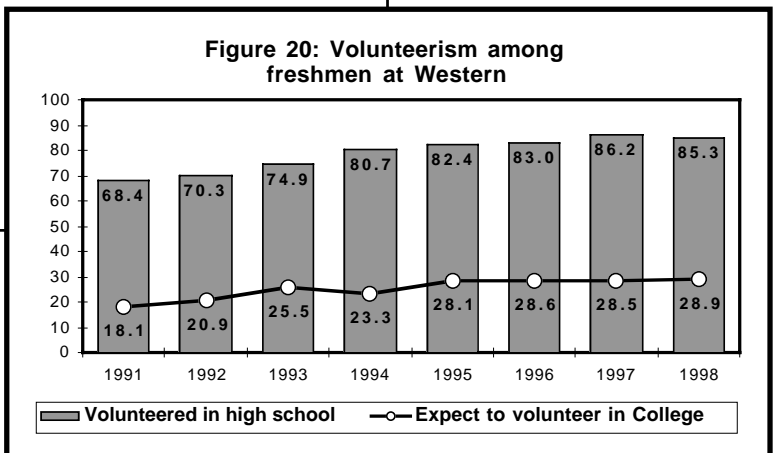
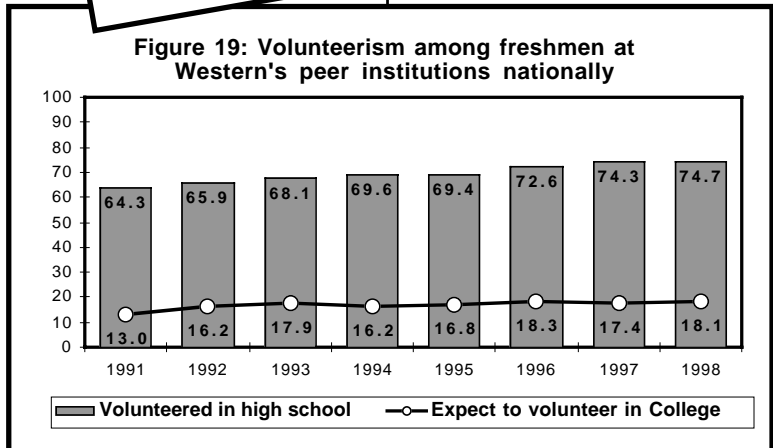


Volunteerism, especially during high school, continues to increase, both nationally and at Western. Nationally, the percentage of freshmen who volunteered while in high school increased from 64.3% in 1991 to 74.7% in 1998. Among Western freshmen, that increase was from 68.4% in 1991 to 85.3% in 1998. Some speculated that rates of volunteerism were due to community service requirements, so the 1998 Freshmen Survey asked students if community service was part of their graduation requirements: nationally, 21.3% indicated they had attended schools with such a requirement; at Western, the finding was 30.4%.

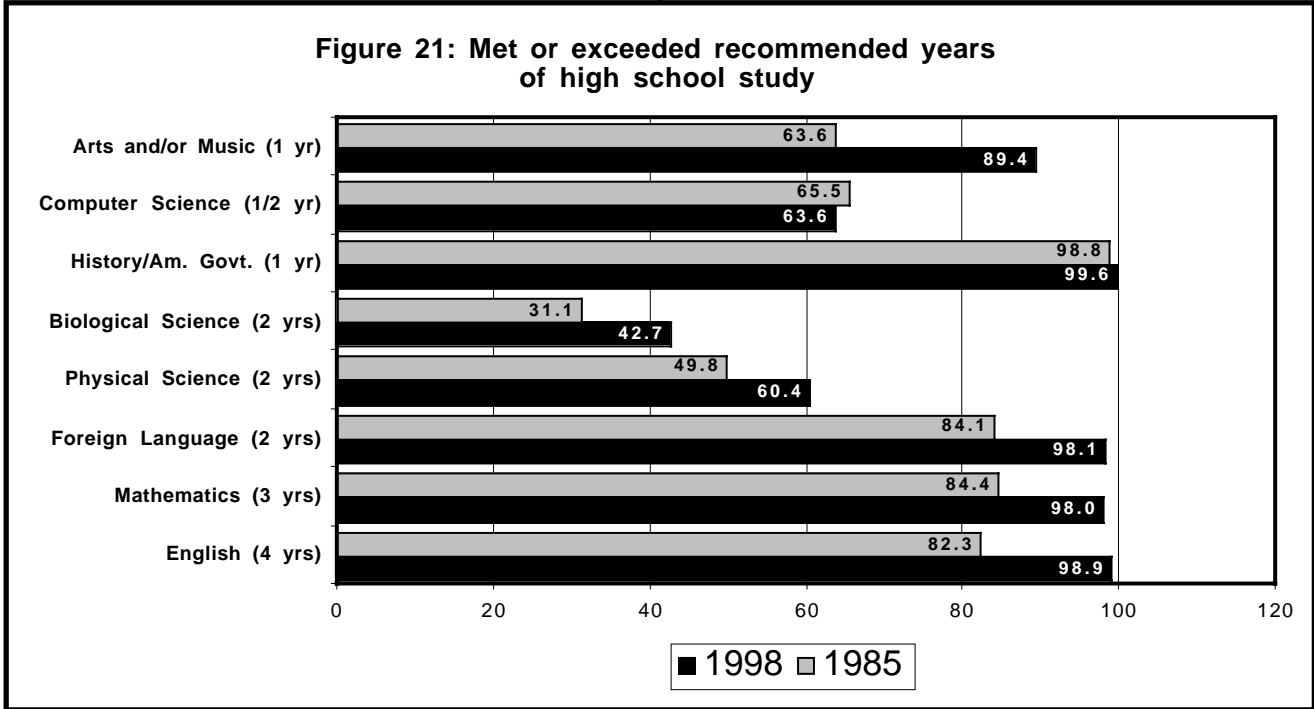
Despite such high levels of volunteerism during high school, many fewer freshmen believe they will continue volunteering. For instance, among 1998 in-coming Western freshmen 85.3% had volunteered in high school, while only 28.9% anticipate that they will volunteer in college. Between 1991 and 1998, there was a 16.9% increase in the percentage of freshmen who volunteered while in high school, but only a 10.8% increase in the percentage who believed they would continue volunteering in college.

VOLUNTEERISM MORE LIKELY IN HIGH SCHOOL THAN IN COLLEGE

STUDENT VOLUNTEERS ARE LOGGING MORE HOURS THAN TEN YEARS AGO
 In 1989, 3.3% of Western's in-coming freshmen noted they had volunteered six or more hours a week; by 1998, that figure had more than doubled, to 7.5%.



INCOMING FRESHMEN MORE PREPARED FOR COLLEGE



A higher percentage of Western's 1998 in-coming freshmen than 1985 in-coming freshmen have met or exceeded the recommended number of years of study in nearly all academic areas: arts and/or music, biological science, physical science, foreign language, mathematics, English, and history/American government. The one exception was a half-year of computer science, whose percentage dropped slightly between 1985 and 1998. In light of earlier findings that show Western's in-coming freshmen as being quite computer savvy, this figure might seem strange, but most likely reflects a couple of trends: first, the growing popularity of computers in the home; and second that students are taking a practical, not technical, approach to computer use. As long as they can use software, surf the net and send e-mail, they are probably not so concerned about computer languages and/or the technical trouble-shooting associated with the actual study (or science) of computers.

AFTERWORD

The 1998 CIRP Survey had 383,815 participants from 668 two- and four-year colleges and universities. National norms were based on the responses of 275,811 participants from 469 two- and four-year colleges and universities. The data were statistically adjusted to reflect the responses of the 1.64 million first-time, full-time freshmen entering college in the fall of 1998.

1998 marks the thirty-third annual national CIRP report on the characteristics and attitudes of students entering colleges and universities as first-time, full-time freshmen. The series was initiated in the fall of 1966 and is a project of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, a continuing longitudinal study of the American higher education system. The program is sponsored by the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Since 1973, the CIRP Survey has been administered through the Higher Education Research Institute.

Western began participating in the CIRP Survey in 1971. Since 1991, it has administered the CIRP survey annually. The Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing maintains complete records of CIRP Surveys administered at Western.



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