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Office of Survey Research

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# Freshmen First Quarter Credit Load Assessment

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# Freshmen First Quarter Credit Load Assessment

Office of Survey Research (OSR) and Office of Institutional  
Assessment, Research and Testing (OIART)

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# Background

- Recent history of decline in first quarter credit loads.
- Problems
  - Enrollment management and meeting state budgeted FTE
  - Potential increase in time to degree
- Purpose of Focus Groups
  - To obtain student perceptions of reasons for taking fewer than 15 credits during their first quarter
  - To explore potential solutions to low credit loads in the first year of college at Western
  - To ascertain the impacts of taking low vs. high credit loads

# Background

- Two Types of Factors
  - Personal Parameters
    - Student characteristics and life conditions
    - Can't change but may be able to develop programs to accommodate
  - Institutional Parameters
    - Advising, Scheduling, Course Credit Options, ...
    - Potentially changeable

# Focus Groups Methodology

- Construction of Groups and Sampling
  - Commonality based on shared academic ability and experiences with respect to credit loads
    - Ability: GPA & SAT Verbal (1 SD Above/Below Mean)
    - Credit Loads: 12-14 Credits/15 Credits or More
  - Within group variability for representativeness
    - Random selection of students sharing common group traits
    - Stratified sample to assure within group variability on key traits
      - College of Interest, Gender, Students of Color, Transfer Hours, FIG/FYE, Honors, Summer Start, Athletics, Credits

# Focus Groups Methodology

- Group Composition
  - Four Groups Based on Ability and Credit Load
    - Low Credits/Low Ability (11)
    - Low Credits/High Ability (10)
    - High Credits/Low Ability (12)
    - High Credits/High Ability (13)
  - Four Special Groups
    - Low Credits/Undecided (11)
    - Low Credits/High Credit Transfers (11)
    - Low Credits/Math, Health, Science Major (13)
    - Low Credits/Business, Economics Major (10)

# Focus Groups Methodology

- Content of Discussions
  - Registration Experiences
    - Academic Advising
    - Logistics of Registering
  - Potential Reasons for Low/High Credit Load
    - Academic Interest Area
    - Co-Curricular and Extra-Curricular Activities
    - Financial Concerns and Work Schedules
    - Academic and Social Confidence Levels
    - Transfer Credits
  - Impacts: Academic and Social Adjustment
  - Advice for Incoming Freshmen

# Focus Group Findings

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Registration Experiences and Reasons for Low/High Credit Loads



# Focus Group Findings

## Registration Experiences

- Low Credit Load Groups
  - Uncertainty about relationship between classes and credits
  - Sense of flexibility in credit load (12-15 credits)
    - All students knew the minimum for full time status
  - Developed a desirable schedule of 4-5 classes but < 15 credits
    - Advised to settle with fewer credits
  - Concern about personal and academic adjustment
    - Quality vs. Quantity
  - Scheduling conflicts inhibiting the addition of 2-3 credit course
  - Cancelled course or last minute change to lower credit course

# Focus Group Findings

## Registration Experiences

- High Credit Load Groups
  - Many students were focused on fulfilling requirements for their intended major and then “filling out” the rest of their schedule
    - More focused and efficient in selecting courses
    - Many music majors reached 15 through required courses
  - FIGS students only needed one course to get to 15 credits
    - Some with lower credit FIGs ended up with fewer than 15 credits
  - Advisors worked with several students to get to 15 credits
    - Some were advised that they could handle 15 or more
  - Some went below 15 credits after classes started because one class was too difficult

# Focus Group Findings

## Impact of Early Academic Advising

- Low Credit Load Groups
  - No encouragement to register for 15 or more
    - Focus on the 12 credit minimum vs. 15 credit ideal
    - Many claim they were never told 15 was needed to graduate on time
    - Message that the average time to degree is more than 4 years
  - Advised not to register for too many credits ( $> 15$ )
  - Advised that credit load should fit workload and abilities
  - Family and friends advice often took precedence
    - Take lighter credit load to adjust; Don't take morning classes
- High Credit Load Groups
  - Only a few were encouraged by advisors to take full load
  - Many were advised that quality was more important
  - Parental advice to get their money's worth

# Focus Group Findings

## Impact of Registration Logistics

- Low Credit Load Groups
  - Difficult to piece together variable credit courses
    - Made more difficult by no standard set of time slots
  - Difficult to understand the whole process and select enough courses to reach 15 credits in such a short time period
    - Feeling “overwhelmed”, “rushed”
  - Difficult to find classes when the ones you want are filled
- High Credit Load Groups
  - Difficult to have less than 16 when courses in interest area are mostly 4 credit courses
  - Need to know tricks – like using PE courses to get credits to 15

# Focus Group Findings

## Impact of Academic Interest Area

- Low Credit Load Groups
  - Many prerequisites for some majors are 3 credit courses, making it difficult to put together a 15 credit schedule without taking at least 5 different courses.
  - Courses in some areas (science and math) are more difficult and may require more work than the credit value assigned.
  - Undecideds were more focused on types of courses vs. credits
    - Opportunities to explore potential majors through GURs
  - Many undecideds advised to drop course because  $> 15$  credits
    - Dropping a 3 or 4 credit course  $\rightarrow$  Less than 15 credits
  - Many undecideds advised to take fewer credits to adjust to workload and develop good study habits

# Focus Group Findings

## Impact of Academic Interest Area

- Math/Science/Health/Business/Economics: Perceived difficulty of classes made the number of classes more important than credit values
  - Many first year classes in these interest areas are low credit value courses involving higher workload than credits assigned
- Math/Science/Health/Business/Economics: Advisors emphasized doing well vs. full credit loads
  - Difficulty level of courses
  - Need to establish good GPA for later graduate/professional school placement
- Math/Science/Health/Business/Economics: Fewer choices that don't conflict with other course options outside interest area
  - Non-standard scheduling

# Focus Group Findings

## Impact of Academic Interest Area

- High Credit Load Groups
  - Strong motivation to complete pre-requisites prior to registering in more advanced courses in major → Higher credit loads

# Focus Group Findings

## Impact of Extra-Curricular Activities

- Low Credit Load Groups
  - Athletics and expected social club engagement had modest impact on reducing credit loads
    - Most students didn't think these activities had any effect because they didn't get involved in them until after school started.
- High Credit Load Groups
  - Involved in activities but it had no effect on credit loads



# Focus Group Findings

## Impact of Financial Concerns & Work

- Low Credit Load Groups
  - Neither financial strain nor difficulties juggling work and school were perceived to be important in choosing a less than full credit load.
- High Credit Load Groups
  - Concern about “making the most out of their money” lead some in these groups to register for full loads or more.
  - Some had scholarships requiring 15 credit loads.

# Focus Group Findings

## Impact of Academic/Social Confidence

- Low Credit Load Groups
  - Many felt a lack of academic and social self-confidence led to lower credit loads
  - Many were concerned about how much school work would be involved and whether or not they were ready for it
    - A particular concern among students with AP credits
      - Some were warned by AP teachers
- High Credit Load Groups
  - Much higher levels of self-confidence and successful experiences meeting college level course expectations
    - Running Start and AP Credit Students

# Focus Group Findings

## Impact of Transfer Credits

- Low Credit Load Groups
  - Most **didn't** take AP or RS credits in high school in order to finish their college degree sooner
    - Other Reasons: More interesting than other HS courses; Opportunity to experience what college might be like
  - Many students with transfer credits felt as though it gave them more flexibility to take lower loads
    - Some saw their transfer credits as giving them a head start, but not necessarily for graduating much earlier.
    - Concern about making a good adjustment to college
    - Advisors reinforced this perception
- High Credit Load Groups
  - Many students in these groups with high credit loads said that their college level credits prepared them better for taking a full load.

# Focus Group Findings

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Impacts of Low/High Credit Loads on First Year Adjustment

# Focus Group Findings

## Academic and Social Adjustment

- Low Credit Load Groups
  - Low credit load not seen as a reason for not doing well
    - Time of day (early morning) and spacing of classes (far apart) were more problematic
  - Many planned to catch up by taking CC courses in summer
  - Many saw taking fewer credits to be a benefit – academically and socially
    - Fewer than 15 credits was seen as reducing stress
    - More time to do other things

# Focus Group Findings

## Academic and Social Adjustment

- High Credit Load Groups
  - Many initially experienced difficulties (academic and social) but then were able to adjust.
    - Problems stemmed from poor study habits and poor time management skills more than credit load.
    - FIGs was credited with being helpful in managing high credit loads
      - Study skills
      - Social connections
      - Contact with professors

# Summer Start Advisors Comments

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# Focus Groups

## Advisors Comments

- Reasons for advising less than 15 credits
  - Students often come into SS with planned schedule of 4 courses worth 13-14 credits
    - Difficult to advise student to replace desired course to get to credit value of 15
      - Parents and friends collaborated before hand
  - Limited time for advising large groups of students leads to “settling” for 13-14 credits
  - Strategy of finding 1 or 2 credit class (PE) to “fill out” credit load only works if enough of these classes are available
  - Class difficulty and class work loads exceeding credit value
    - Philosophy, History, English
  - Student abilities (Math Scores; GPA)



# Focus Groups

## Advisors Comments

- Difficult to pressure student if transferring in college credits and feels like there is a cushion
- Student plans extracurricular activities (e.g., athletics)
- Concern about students acclimation to college
- Certain majors have pre-requisites in first quarter that don't add up to 15 credits (e.g., Music Vocal majors)
- Many students have been told by others (parents, friends) to be careful about getting too committed their first quarter

# Focus Groups

## Advisors Comments

- Problem of variable credit values
  - Many 3 and 4 credit courses in some fields makes it difficult to add additional course without going over 15 credits.
    - Especially problematic if 4 credit courses are challenging
      - ENG101, CHEM101, BIO101
    - Three-credit labs make scheduling additional courses problematic
  - Harder to put together 15 credit schedule of 5 courses vs. 4
  - Two alternative solutions
    - More 5 credit courses and fewer 4 credit courses
    - More 2 and 3 credit courses as fillers

# Focus Groups

## Advisors Comments

- Problem of logistics of registration at SS – Too little time
  - Students do not appear to absorb much of the information presented during Power Point presentation
  - Too few sections available in popular courses at popular times
    - Spanish, English, Math
  - Could use more 2 and 3 credit courses in areas of interest
- Problem of low self-confidence
  - Direct students to FIG or FYE Seminar
  - Focus more on interests and strengths vs. credit load
  - Look for smaller classes even if credit value is lower
  - Encourage remedial courses (e.g., MATH99)
  - Suggest objectively strong students to challenge themselves

# Policy Implications and Suggestions

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# Policy Implications and Suggestions

- Summer Start Organization and Advising
  - Increase time for course planning and registering during Summer Start to reduce pressure and enhance processing of information
    - New two day sessions should help students find a full schedule\*
  - Better training of Student Advisors (ASAs) to push 15 credit ideal
    - Stronger message from advisor without back channel contradiction from ASAs\*
  - Preregistration for ENG101 and MATH might also reduce time pressure to find full credit load
  - Better education about course-credit relationship
  - Encourage registration for 17credits to leave room to drop\*
    - May have more negative consequences than positive ones
  - Recognize the needs and abilities of students and advise to meet students' needs vs. arbitrary credit load values\*

# Policy Implications and Suggestions

- Curriculum Changes
  - More uniformity in course credit values to make it easier to put together a 15 credit schedule without going over
    - Especially more 5 credit courses and fewer 4 credit courses\*
  - More FIGs with high credit value to facilitate registration for full credits and address low confidence issues\*
- Scheduling Changes
  - More seats in popular 5-credit first year courses during Fall term\*
    - Especially in prime time slots\*
  - More 1 and 2 credit classes to help fill gaps
  - More block scheduling and strategic lab scheduling

# Policy Implications and Suggestions

- Other Changes
  - Work to get more “buy in” to the 15 credit ideal among students AND parents\*
  - Emphasize the cost of their education more\*
  - Work with HS AP and CC Running Start instructors and advisors to emphasize the 15 credit load as realistic and build confidence levels prior to college.