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## FIVE-YEAR FOLLOW-UP OF THE CLASS OF 1993: ALUMNI SATISFACTION

Prepared by Pamela Jull, Ph.D., and Gary R. McKinney

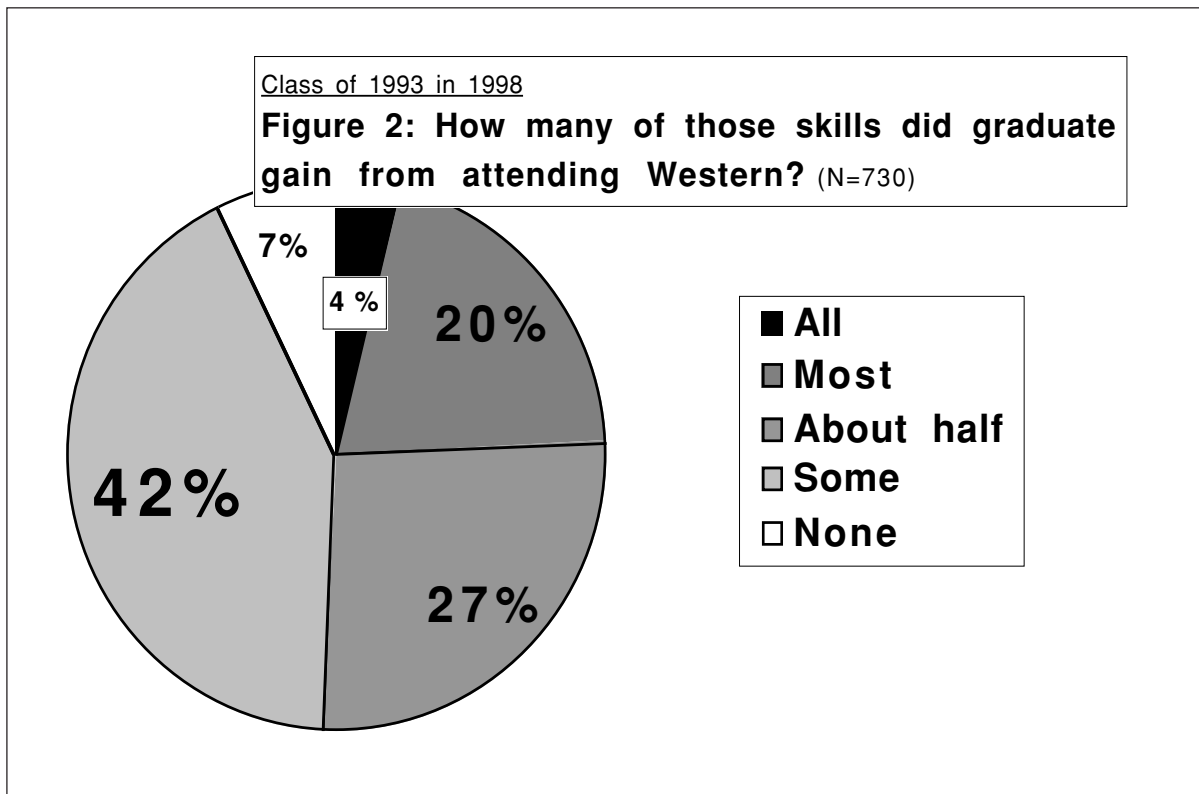
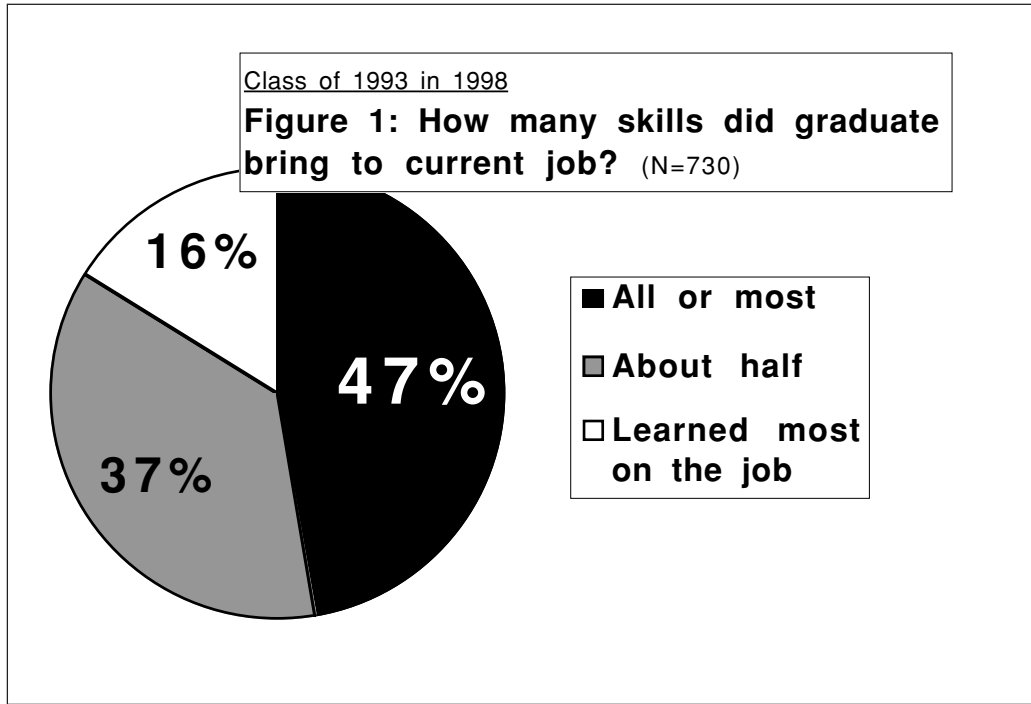
### INTRODUCTION

In 1998, Western Washington University marked its 100-year anniversary. In recognition of the event, the President and Provost requested an assessment of the university's progress. The so-called "Centennial Project" included a survey of the centennial graduating class, as well as the subjects of this report, the class of 1993. Combined with data gathered from regular alumni surveys, 1993 graduates' satisfaction with their Western education are described one- and five-years out.

### JOB SKILL PREPARATION AND SATISFACTION WITH WESTERN

Respondents were asked to provide information about their work history and current employment. (For detailed information on the employment experiences of Western graduates, see report 2000-03, *Employer Perspectives on Western Graduates*, available through the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing.) These items were analyzed along with measures of satisfaction relating to aspects of their Western experience.

Graduates were asked how well prepared they were for their current jobs, and what was the source of their skill development. Almost 84% said they had at least half of the specific skills they needed when they started their current jobs, and about 50% said they got half or more of the skills and knowledge they use on the job from attending Western. (See Figures 1 and 2).



## ALUMNI SATISFACTION: WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY CLASS OF 1993 IN 1998

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Regarding skill preparation, the strongest predictor of satisfaction was whether or not graduates were currently working in a job related to or in their major field. Those working in the same or related field were more likely to say that their courses *both inside and outside of the major* were “moderately” or “very” valuable in preparing them for their current job. Graduates working in a different field from their major were less likely to say *any* courses were valuable in preparation for their jobs. It’s likely these graduates are in jobs that use few college level skills or jobs that require much more specialized skills than are typically obtained in the course of an undergraduate education.

Graduates were asked to evaluate the importance of various skills to their primary activity—whether used at work or, if continuing their education, in school. Below, in Table 1, these skills are ranked according to the percent of graduates indicating a skill was “very” or “mostly” important. In addition, graduates were asked to rate their satisfaction with Western’s contribution to their academic and personal growth in each of the same skill areas. In Table 1, satisfaction is ranked according to the percent of graduates indicating they were “very” or “mostly” satisfied with Western’s contribution. (Based on a 5-point scale: “very” through “not at all”.)

Table 1: Relative Rankings of Skill Importance and Satisfaction with Western's Contribution to Growth in Each Area (Class of 1993 in 1998)

Skill	% important	Rank	% satisfied	Rank
Speaking effectively	90%	1	55%	9
Learning independently	88%	2	75%	1
Defining and solving problems	86%	3	64%	5
Working cooperatively in a group	85%	4	68%	2
Ability to put ideas together, to see relationships, similarities and differences between ideas	80%	5	66%	4
Acquiring and using computer skills	78%	6	34%	12
Writing effectively	78%	7	67%	3
Critically Analyzing written information	74%	8	64%	6
Understanding different philosophies and cultures	54%	9	61%	7
Understanding the interaction of society and the environment	53%	10	59%	8
Understanding and applying quantitative principles and methods	50%	11	45%	10
Understanding and applying scientific principals	30%	12	40%	11

Note: Percentages represent combined "very" and "mostly" response categories. (N=763)

Table 1 shows four items ranked in the top five of *both* importance and satisfaction with Western's preparation:

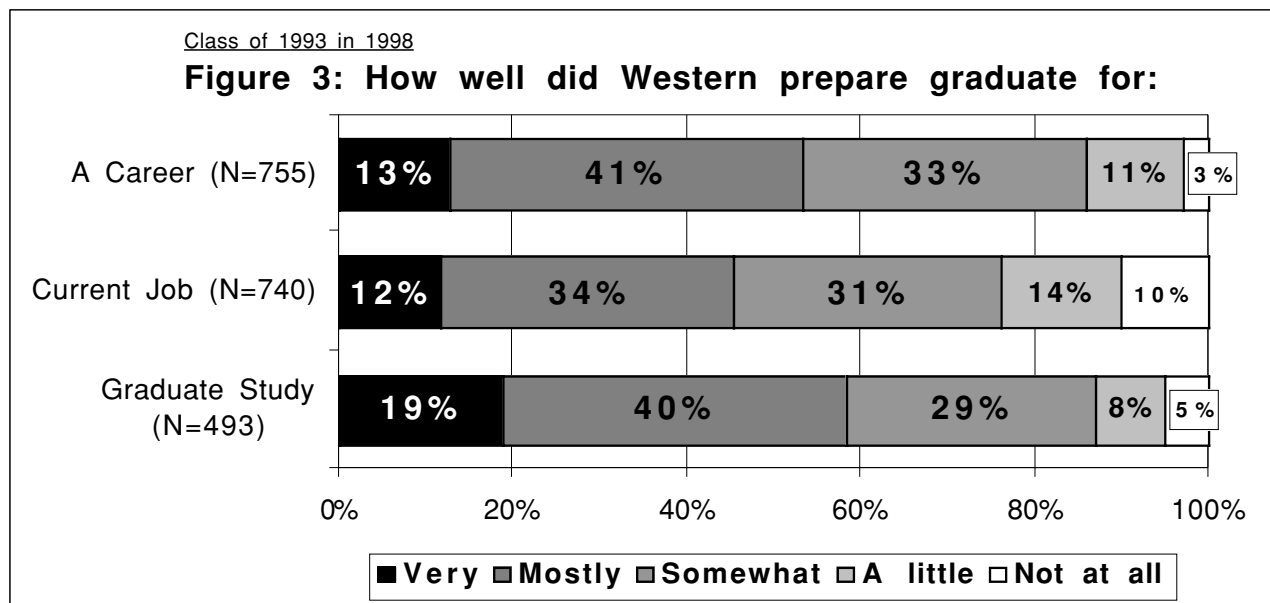
1. learning independently,
2. working cooperatively in groups,
3. being able to put ideas together, to see relationships, similarities and differences between ideas, and
4. defining and solving problems

Differences among the other categories are worth noting. For example, writing effectively, while ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in importance, was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in satisfaction. Speaking effectively, while ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in importance, was ranked 9<sup>th</sup> in satisfaction. A recent survey of employers of Western graduates showed a similar pattern: while employers rated graduates' writing skills high, writing skills were not valued as highly as speaking skills, for which employers rated Western graduates low.

Another key consideration is that while computer skills were ranked 6<sup>th</sup> in importance, they ranked last in satisfaction. This issue, however, may be due to a strong cohort effect. Five years ago computer skills were not yet a major part of the university's curriculum, as indicated by the fact that there was no item asking about computer use on the 1994 one-year follow-up of the class of 1993. Western's extensive investment in computing resources over recent years, its status as a "wired university," and the trend toward integrating more computer use into classes has likely lead to a change in the evaluation graduates would give to their training on computers over time. Indeed, in a survey of more recent graduates, 76% of respondents from the class of 1997 said the use of computers and technology was "very" or "moderately" important in their current activities, and they gave themselves a skill rating averaging 7.7 on a scale from 0 to 10 in the use of computers upon leaving Western. While no comparable rating exists for the class of 1993, it is reasonable to suggest that it would likely be much lower.

Overall, the compared rankings suggest that while Western prepared graduates well in many areas valued at work, there was some incongruence between undergraduates' training and the skills being demanded of them in the workplace or graduate school. The exception was for computer use: Again, it is likely that more recent cohorts will indicate stronger satisfaction with Western in this regard.

Graduates were asked to rate how well Western prepared them for a career, for their current or most recent job, and for graduate study. (See Figure 3.) Ratings for both career preparation and graduate study preparation were quite high, with more than half of graduates saying they were "very" or "mostly" well prepared. Dissatisfaction seems to run highest in preparation for the graduates' current or most recent job, with 23% saying they were prepared "a little" or "not at all." This pattern remained even within groups of students who were working in high skill jobs or jobs that required a four-year degree, though graduates rated their preparation significantly better if they were in such jobs.

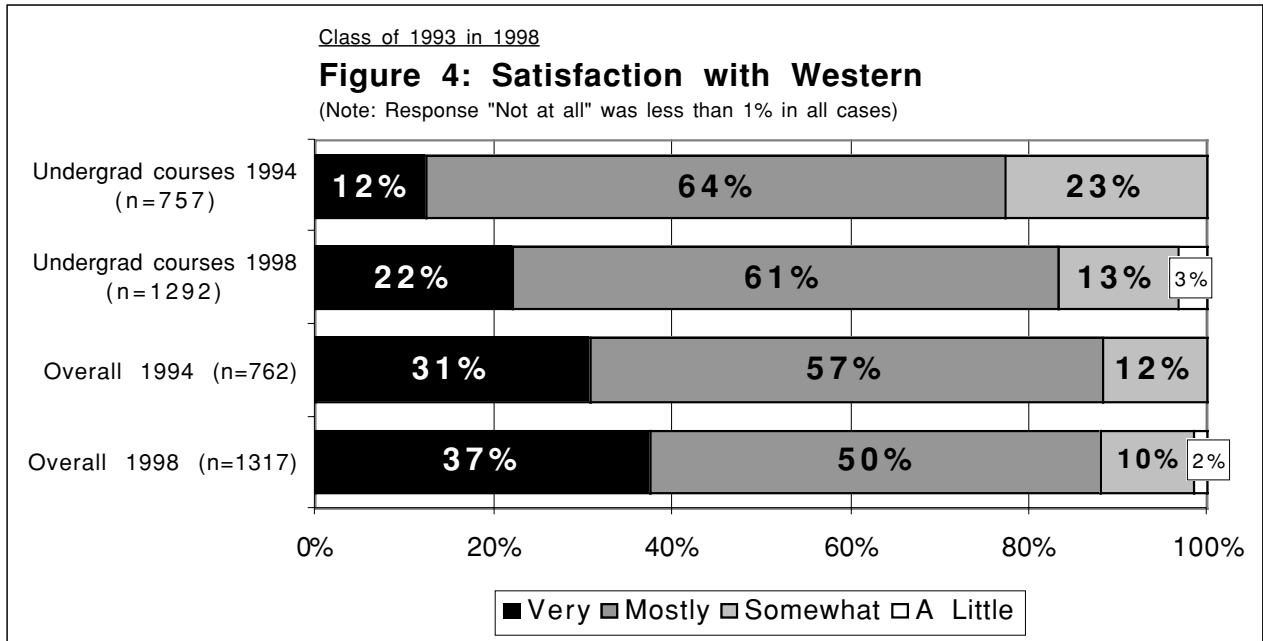


The lower ratings given to preparation may be due to the weaker ties their undergraduate education has to their current job, as compared to their more general careers or their graduate work. Five years after graduation, we would expect students to have had significant training and work experience that would count more heavily toward their preparation for their current jobs than their undergraduate education did.

There was one group of students for whom this pattern did not hold: those who were currently working in jobs that were in the same or a related field to the one in which they studied at Western. These graduates gave high ratings to all three areas of preparation, which would seem to lend credibility to the argument that the more removed one's job is from undergraduate work, the less likely the preparation is to be rated highly.

## SATISFACTION WITH EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE AT WESTERN

One of the benefits of interviewing graduates some time after they graduated is that as they acquire life experiences the value of certain aspects of their education may become more apparent. For instance, 1993 graduates were asked in both 1994 and 1998 to rate their satisfaction with Western's undergraduate courses, and with Western overall. As presented in Figure 4, overall satisfaction with Western increased over time. In 1998, 22% of graduates indicated they were very satisfied with the undergraduate courses they took, compared to 12% in 1994. Similarly, in 1998, 37% of graduates indicated they were very satisfied with Western overall, compared to 31% in 1994.



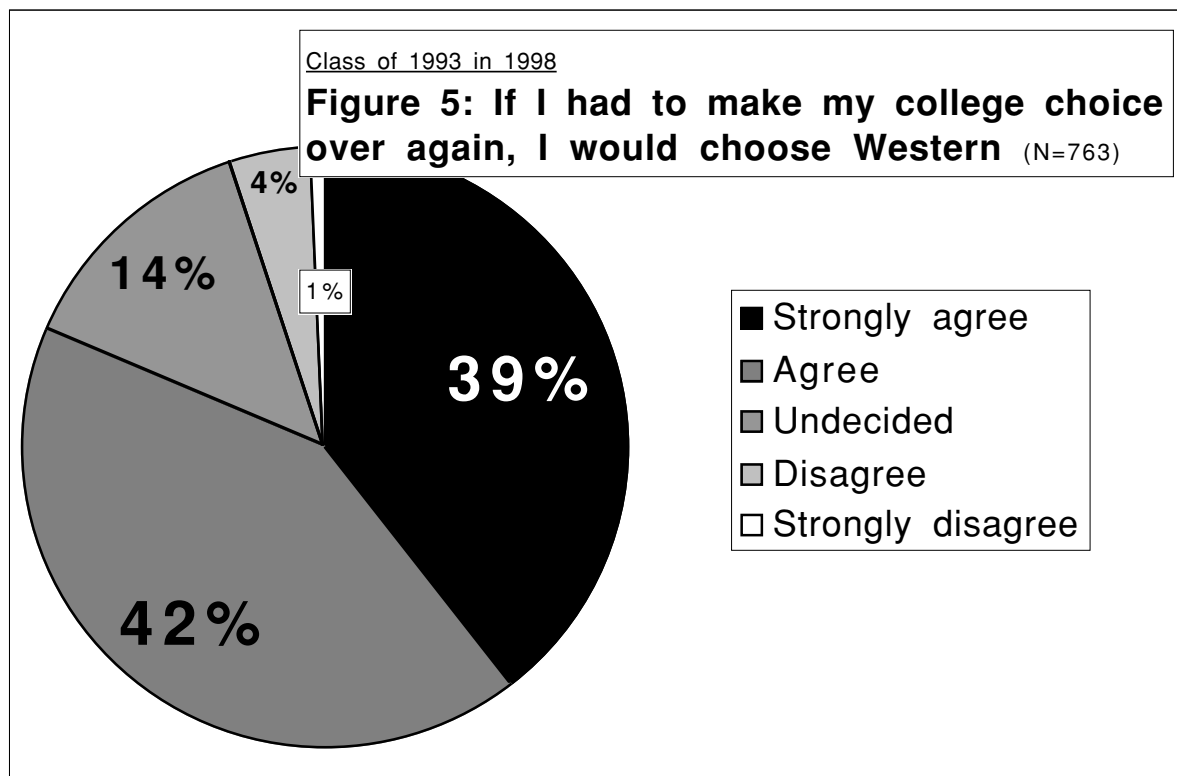
Graduates were also asked to rate how much each of 11 aspects of their experience at Western contributed to their overall education. In Table 2, below, the ranked results show that the most valued aspects were writing assignments and homework (72% said this was “very” or “mostly” a contributor to their overall education) and discussions during class (70%). The lowest ranked item was multiple-choice tests, with only 20% of students indicating it was an important contributor to their education.

Table 2: Contribution of Various Aspects of Western to Overall Undergraduate Education (Class of 1993 in 1998)

Aspect	Percent	Rank
Writing assignments and homework you did for courses	72%	1
Discussions you participated in during class	70%	2
Lectures presented by your professors	67%	3
Interactions with other students outside of class	62%	4
Essay tests you prepared for and took	60%	5
Readings you did for courses	58%	6
Classes that taught specific skills to be applied in the workplace	48%	7
Classes that taught broad, more general knowledge	38%	8
Meetings you had with professors outside of class	38%	9
Social and cultural events you attended on campus	31%	10
Multiple-choice tests you prepared for and took	20%	11

Note: Percentages represent combined "very" and "mostly" response categories. (N=755)

When presented with the statement “if I had to make my college choice over again, I would choose Western,” 39% said they strongly agreed and 42% said they agreed (81% total). Less than 1% said they strongly disagreed. (See Figure 5.).



## DOES FURTHER EDUCATION CHANGE GRADUATES’ RATINGS OF WESTERN?

In two areas—1) having many of the specific skills required to perform their job, and 2) estimating how much of their job uses skills or knowledge gained from attending Western—further education did not affect graduates’ ratings of preparation. However, perhaps because the type of work they do is more likely to be associated with their training at Western, graduates who have pursued further education *were* more likely to report that courses both inside and outside their major were “very” or “moderately” valuable.

Interestingly, graduates who have pursued further education appear to be in somewhat different jobs than those who have not. They were more likely to be in jobs where it was:

- “very important” to be able to write well,
- “very important” to understand relationships between ideas, scientific principals and methods,
- “important” to understand different philosophies and cultures, and
- “important” to understand the interaction between society and the environment.



On the other hand, the pursuit of further education did not affect the degree of *satisfaction* with Western's contribution to the preparation or growth in these same areas. This evidence suggests graduates who have pursued further education are in more complex, specialized jobs, where it may be harder for them to discern between the skills they learned at Western and the skills they learned after leaving Western, especially those who pursued advanced education. Furthermore, these graduates evaluated Western differently in terms of the value of different aspects of their education. Compared to those who have not pursued further education, they were:

- more disparaging of multiple choice tests,
- more likely to be "very satisfied" with the preparation they received at Western for their current job, and
- "very satisfied" with their preparation for graduate study.

For more information about the advanced education of Western graduates of the class of 1993, see the report "Five-Year Follow-up of the Class of 1993: Advanced Education (Focus Summary, Volume 6, Issue 1).

## DISSATISFACTION WITH WESTERN

Respondents who said they were "not at all satisfied" with any particular aspect of their experience at Western were invited to explain why they were dissatisfied, and 118 of the respondents gave explanations. These open-ended responses were classified into 33 categories, and then these categories were further collapsed into six themes. If respondents mentioned multiple reasons, up to two reasons were coded.

Among 1993 graduates, the largest source of dissatisfaction was skill development, with 56% of those listing a dissatisfaction (66 respondents) indicating they felt inadequately trained in some skill area. Among those for whom skill development was an issue, 58% (38 respondents) identified computer skills as the particular area in which they felt dissatisfied. Other skill areas identified included reading, writing and speaking skills. This information is strongly similar to what was learned from the close-ended items noted previously in this report.

The next largest source of dissatisfaction was related to classes and courses, such things as course content or testing procedures. For those graduates listing a dissatisfaction, 32% (38 respondents) gave this reason. Other issues included dissatisfaction with extracurricular or personal life, feeling that career preparation was poor, that faculty or staff members were problematic, and general comments about the university, not pertaining to the above-mentioned categories.

## QUALITATIVE RESPONSES

At the end of the survey, respondents were invited to answer four open-ended questions. Nearly half chose to respond to at least one of these questions. Their answers were classified in as many as 60 different categories, which were then collapsed into eight general themes. The following is a description of their comments.

*What would you want to see changed at Western?*

By far the most frequent comments concerning changes at Western were related to courses and characteristics of their major or minor (41%), including specifics of the program and courses. Items like availability of classes, having smaller classes, the types of testing procedures used were common in this category.

The need for better advising, guidance, and career center services were commonly mentioned. Advising stood out as a concern frequently voiced by graduates (7%). Better placement, career planning and job searches were also mentioned (5%).

*What would you be sure not to change about Western?*

Of the 43 categories established, 23% of responses fell into a single category: "Social climate, community surroundings/location." Graduates liked Bellingham and the campus community. When collapsed with other general comments about Western, these constitute 54% of all responses to this question. There are no close second-place categories. Among other key collapsed categories are statements relating to major or minor program (19%) and faculty and staff (12%).

*If you were to go through college all over again, what would you do differently in your academic pursuits than you did while you were at Western?*

Students have stronger feelings about their major and minor programs, and the classes and courses they took within the major than any other area. It was the most common category mentioned, both for what graduates would have changed and what they would not want to change. Many mention choosing a different major or minor (12%), that they would take a wider variety of classes (10%), or that they would have been more careful about the courses they chose to take.

Personal items were also ranked high (21%), with graduates citing things like studying more (8%) and being more socially active (2%).

*What would you be sure not to change?*

Many responses focused on their program and the variety and quality of classes at Western (42%). Personal items like living arrangements and social life made up 20% of responses, and praise for Faculty and staff made up 11%.

## SUMMARY

This research shows that overall satisfaction with Western was high for respondents from the class of 1993. Graduates' in jobs related to or identical to their major were the most likely to express strong satisfaction with their undergraduate experiences. Those pursuing advanced education also tended to rate Western more highly than others.

While there was a strong correlation between graduates' job requirements and the skills with which Western provided them, there was some incongruence. In particular, writing skills ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in importance for their work, while preparation ranked high (3<sup>rd</sup> relative to 12 total skills). By contrast, graduates ranked speaking effectively first in importance but 9<sup>th</sup> in preparation.

Computer skill development was a problem for graduates who finished their education before Western had fully invested in its current, extensive computer lab, network and system of student support. By contrast, more recent graduates give themselves high ratings in computer competency.