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Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS): Fall 2003 Freshmen Transitions Survey

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WESTERN EDUCATIONAL LONGITUDINAL STUDY (WELS): FALL 2003 FRESHMEN TRANSITIONS SURVEY

Prepared by Pamela Jull, Linda Clark, Gary R. McKinney, and Joseph E. Trimble

INTRODUCTION

In Summer 2003 Western Washington University's entire entering Freshman Class had the opportunity to complete highly-customized survey designed during a year-long effort to consolidate and coordinate the information needs of a variety of units that engage students early in their college careers. The survey covered their high school experiences and activities (both academic and personal), their expectations for college, and their family and personal background. In the development of the WELS (Western Educational Longitudinal Study) survey, careful attention was paid to both national and local surveys administered in the past. Nationally, surveys used as guides included: the freshmen and senior surveys (known at Western as the CIRP and CSS surveys) developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI); the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and the College Student Expectation and Experience Questionnaire (CSXQ/

CSEQ). Locally, guides included the following Western surveys: Close-in, Alumni, and Non-Returning Student. Altogether, 1580 in-coming 2003 freshmen participated in the inaugural WELS survey.

WELS researchers felt that a truly effective survey process should be designed to respond relatively quickly to administrative concerns. From the relatively large initial pool of WELS survey participants (the baseline), random samples of students (as few as 200) could be contacted for future surveys. This report on the transition issues of the fall 2003 freshman class is the first of such surveys.

Student success can be partially characterized by the attainment of good grades and the completion of a degree. In fact, completing a degree depends in large part on obtaining good grades—a task that can be particularly difficult for students just starting their college careers. Poor



performance in the first year of college can be the result of a multitude of factors. Recent research from the Office of Institutional Assessment, Research, and Testing suggests that students who did not stay at Western tended to have struggled more with the social and academic challenges they faced in their new life setting, especially during their first quarter of college.^{1&2}

The Fall 2003 Freshmen Transitions Survey was targeted toward freshmen in their first quarter at Western. By exploring prior high school and early college experiences of new freshmen, patterns in student characteristics and behavior may shed light on the problem of first quarter transitions. In turn, findings may help provide insight to leaders of student academic and support services to develop appropriate orientations and interventions that can help students do better in their courses, adjust more successfully to college life and therefore stay in school.

The Transitions Survey items focused on academic and social experiences and engagement as well as challenges they may have faced so far. This report describes their responses to each question. Students' answers to many of the Fall 2003 Freshmen Transitions Survey questions can be paired with students' responses to related items about expectations and high school experiences that were answered as part of the WELS Baseline Survey during the summer of 2003. Future analysis will include evaluating the extent to which expectations predict student experiences, and the extent to which expectations and experiences lead to student retention.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA QUALITY

The transition survey was administered using Web-based survey software with an initial email invitation followed by three reminders. Of the 1444 valid email addresses drawn at random from the student information system database, 613 students responded for a 42.4% response rate. To facilitate university program needs for analysis involving students from low-incidence populations, the following groups were over sampled: those with Running Start credits, those enrolled in Freshman Interest Groups, those with lower high school GPAs, those enrolled in Access, those from minority and/or ethnic backgrounds, and older, out of state, and honors students.

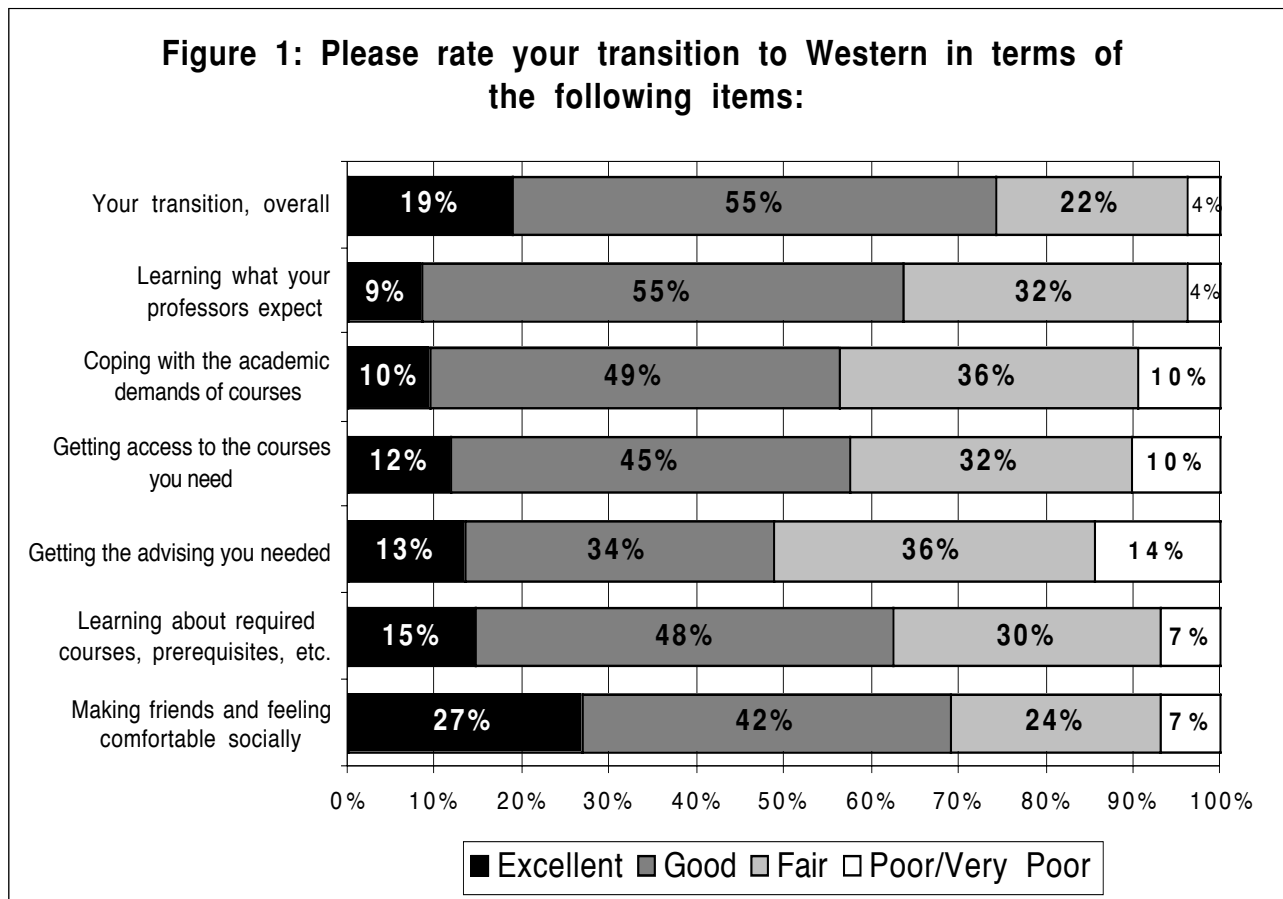
Respondent characteristics matched that of the entering Freshman class in terms of GPA, First-generation status and age. Despite over sampling for males to compensate for their traditionally lower response rates, there were disproportionately more females in the data (67% compared to 58% in the population). Students from low-incidence populations responded at lower rates than their counterparts, but are nonetheless over-represented in the data as a result of the over sampling. Students from out of state (14% compared to 8% in the population), Running Start students (21% compared to 14% in the population) and students from minority ethnic backgrounds (23% compared to 16% in the population) occur at significantly higher proportions than in the population, however, their numbers are not substantial enough to bias the univariate findings.

¹Simpson, C, Clark, L., (1998, March). *First Year Experience Technical Report* (Report No. 1998-03) Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University, Office of Institutional Assessment, Research, and Testing.

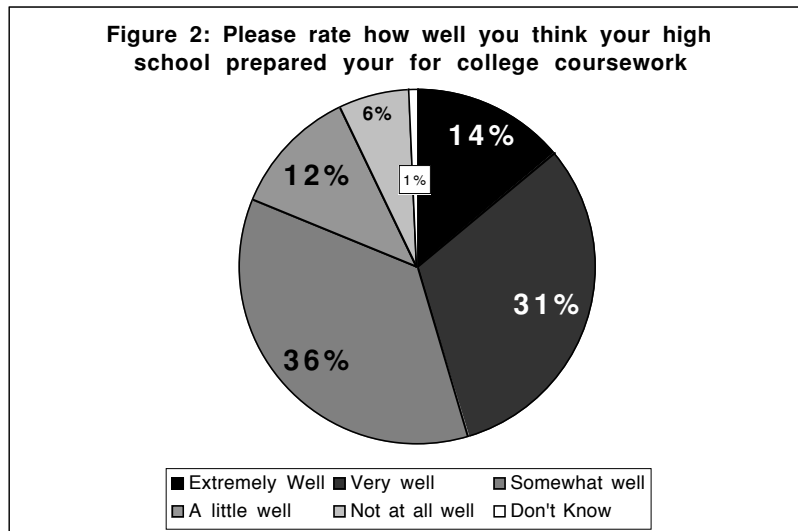
²Frye, R., Simpson, C., and Clark, L. (2001, June). *Survey of Non-returning Students* (Report No. 2001-01). Both are Bellingham, WA: Western Washington University, Office of Institutional Assessment, Research, and Testing.

FINDINGS

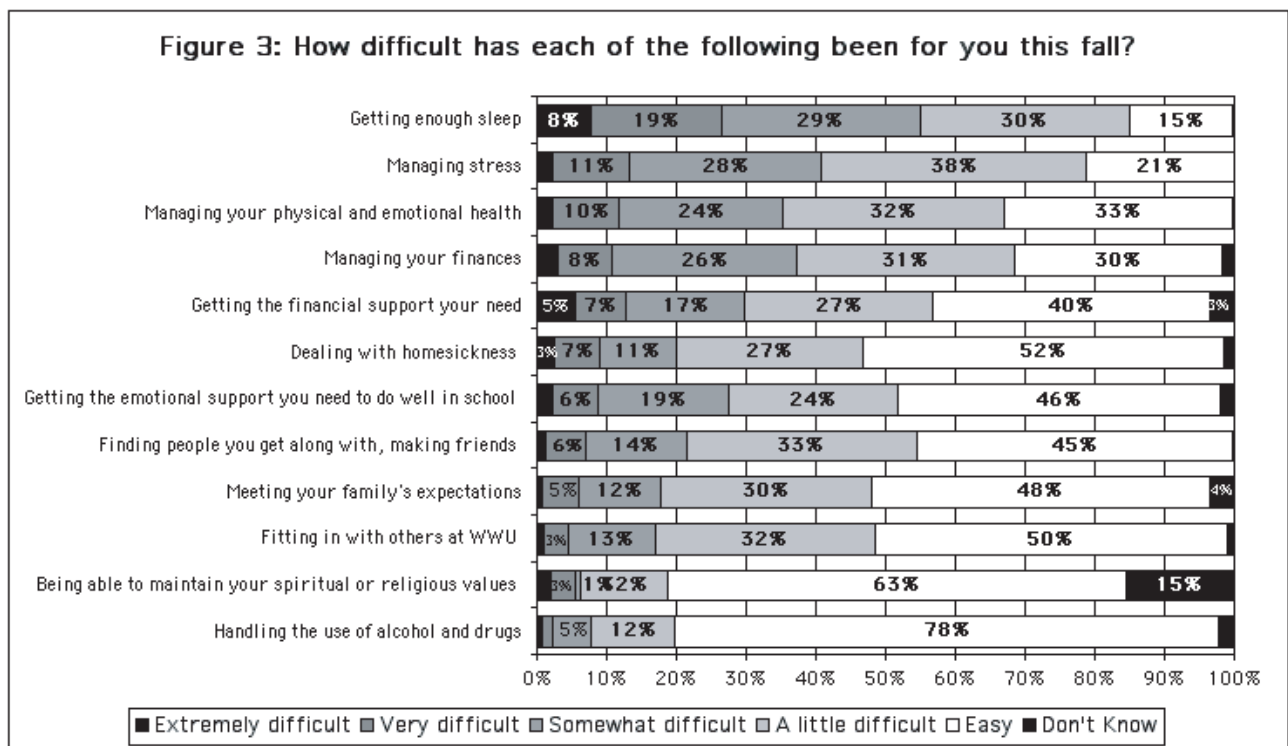
Overall, most in-coming fall 2003 freshmen rate their transition to Western as “excellent” or “good” (74%). Most also rate their ability to “make friends and feel comfortable socially” high (69%). A majority rate the following items as “excellent” or “good”: “learning what your professors expect” (64%), “learning about required courses, prerequisites, etc.” (63%), “coping with the academic demands of courses” (59%), and “getting access to the courses you need” (57%). Getting access to courses, however, also had a fair number of students reporting “poor” or “very poor” (10%). The only item that did not have a majority reporting “excellent” or “good” ratings was “getting the advising you needed” (47%). This item also received the highest number of students giving a “poor” or “very poor” rating (14%). (See Figure 1.)



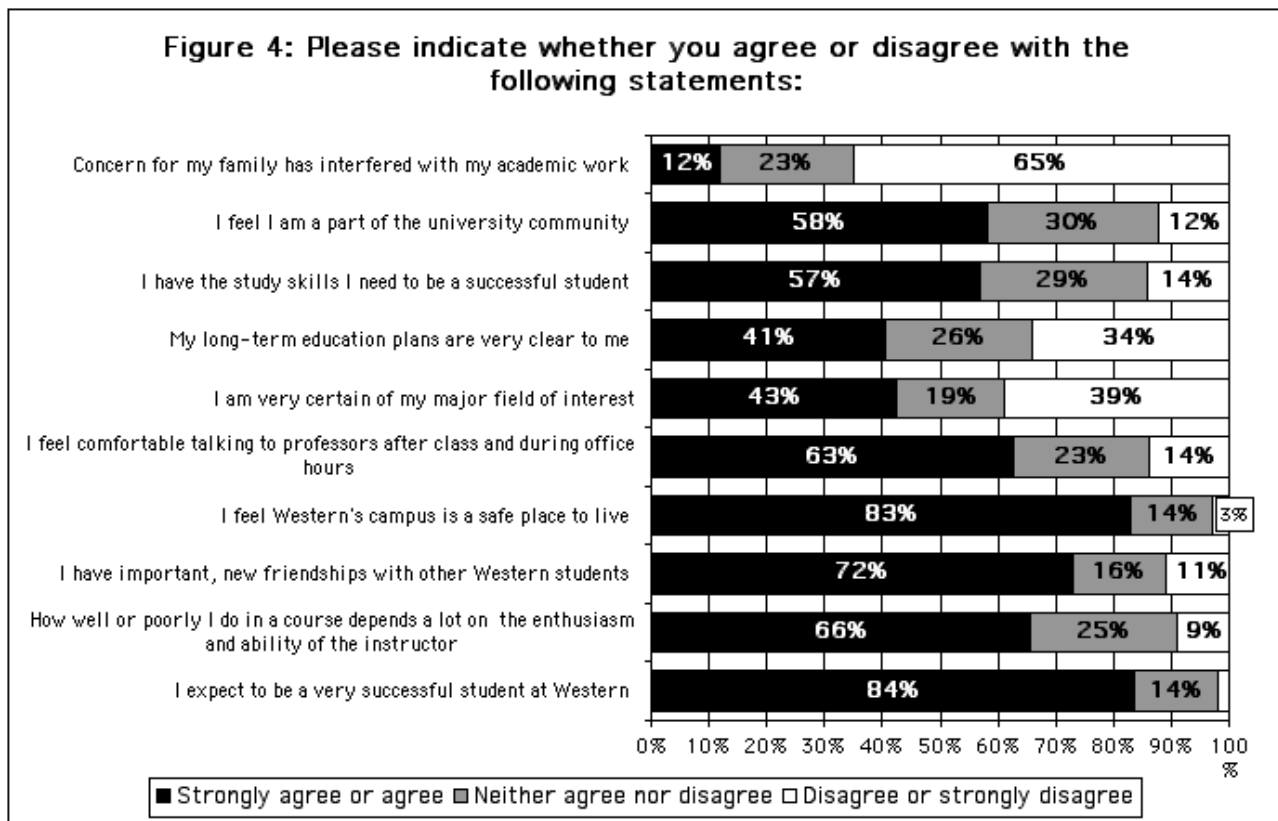
When asked how well fall 2003 freshmen thought their high school prepared them for college coursework, 45% indicated “extremely well” or “very well”. In the middle range, 36% indicated “somewhat well”. In the lower range, 18% indicated “a little well” or “not well at all”. (See Figure 2.)



Most in-coming fall 2003 freshmen found easy: “handling the use of alcohol and drugs” (78%); “being able to maintain your spiritual or religious values” (63%); and “dealing with homesickness” (52%). Issues less likely to elicit responses of “easy” included: “managing your finances” (30%); “managing stress” (21%); and “getting enough sleep” (15%). This last issue also had the highest percentage of “extremely difficult” or “very difficult” responses (17%). (See Figure 3.)



Most in-coming fall 2003 freshmen “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they would “...be a very successful student at Western” (85%); moreover, most felt that “...Western’s campus is a safe place to live” (84%). Already, most indicated that they “...have important, new friendships with other Western students” (72%). Most in-coming freshmen also placed an onus on faculty when they agreed that “how well or poorly I do in a course depends a lot on the enthusiasm and ability of the instructor” (66%). Fewer, however, feel that their “...long-term educational goals are very clear to me” (30%). (See Figure 4.)



During fall quarter, most in-coming fall 2003 freshmen “personally contributed to a classroom discussion” at least twice (75%). Moreover, most “talked to a professor outside of class” (62%), although to what extent and depth is not known. Maybe surprisingly, most freshmen wrote at least one substantial paper, defined as 5 pages or more (62%). (It may be that many of these students took English 101, a common freshmen class.) Most freshmen “talked to an advisor about your courses” (59%), although this might have been construed as the interaction they had with an advisor during Summerstart. And while a few freshmen “used tutoring services for help” at least once (35%), most did not (66%). (See Table 1.)

Table 1: How many times this quarter, if at all, have you...

	Never	Once	2-3 times	More than 3 times
Used tutoring services for help	66%	14%	9%	12%
Talked to an advisor about your courses	41%	39%	16%	4%
Written a substantial paper (5 pages or more)	38%	25%	23%	14%
Talked to a professor outside of class	17%	21%	37%	25%
Personally contributed to a classroom discussion	14%	11%	26%	49%

Few in-coming freshmen “sought help from a counselor for something personal” (7%). But a quarter have already changed their major plans (25%). A little over a quarter of freshmen have “volunteered on or off campus” (26%), which might be a bit surprising considering they’ve just arrived in Bellingham and wouldn’t be expected to know where volunteering opportunities exist. (See Table 2.)

Table 2: Have you done any of the following so far this quarter?

	Yes	No
Volunteered on or off campus	26%	74%
Changed your plans, if any, for your major field	25%	75%
Sought help from a counselor for something personal	7%	93%
Sought help from a disability resources service	3%	97%

As as been noted in survey findings from the College Student Engagement Questionnaire (CSEQ: OIART Focus Summary, volume 8, issue 2), fall 2003 freshmen were not too likely to have worked a job for pay during the fall quarter (No job = 78%). And for those who did hold jobs, whether a work-study or regular job, nearly all worked less than 20 hours a week (87%). (See Figures 5 and 6.)

Figure 5: Have you worked at a job on a regular basis for pay or work study this quarter?

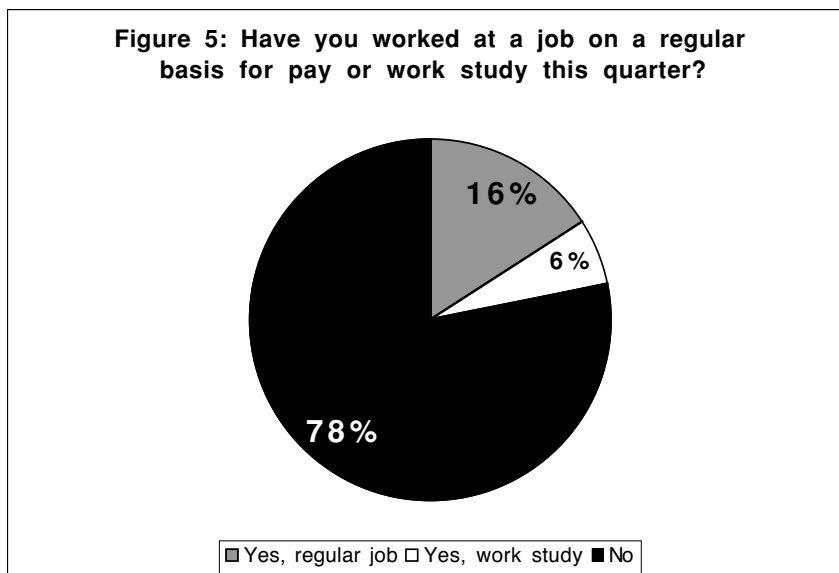
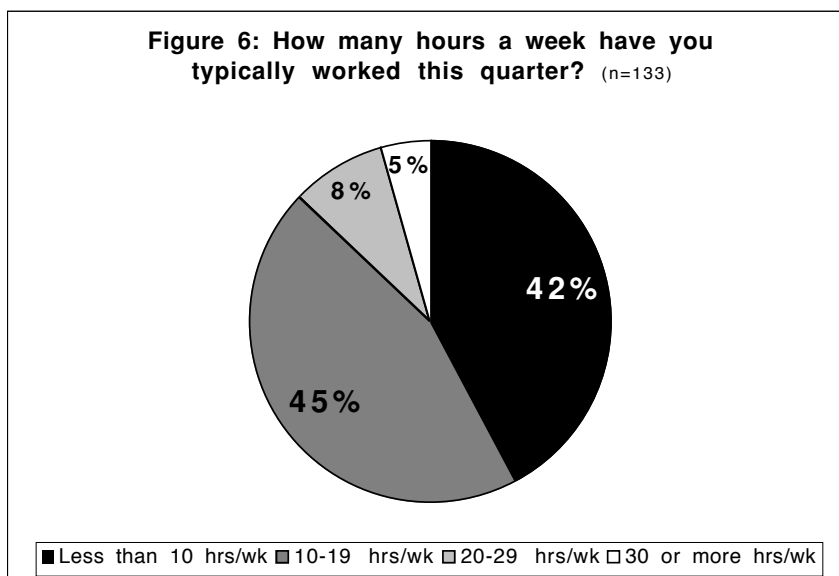


Figure 6: How many hours a week have you typically worked this quarter? (n=133)

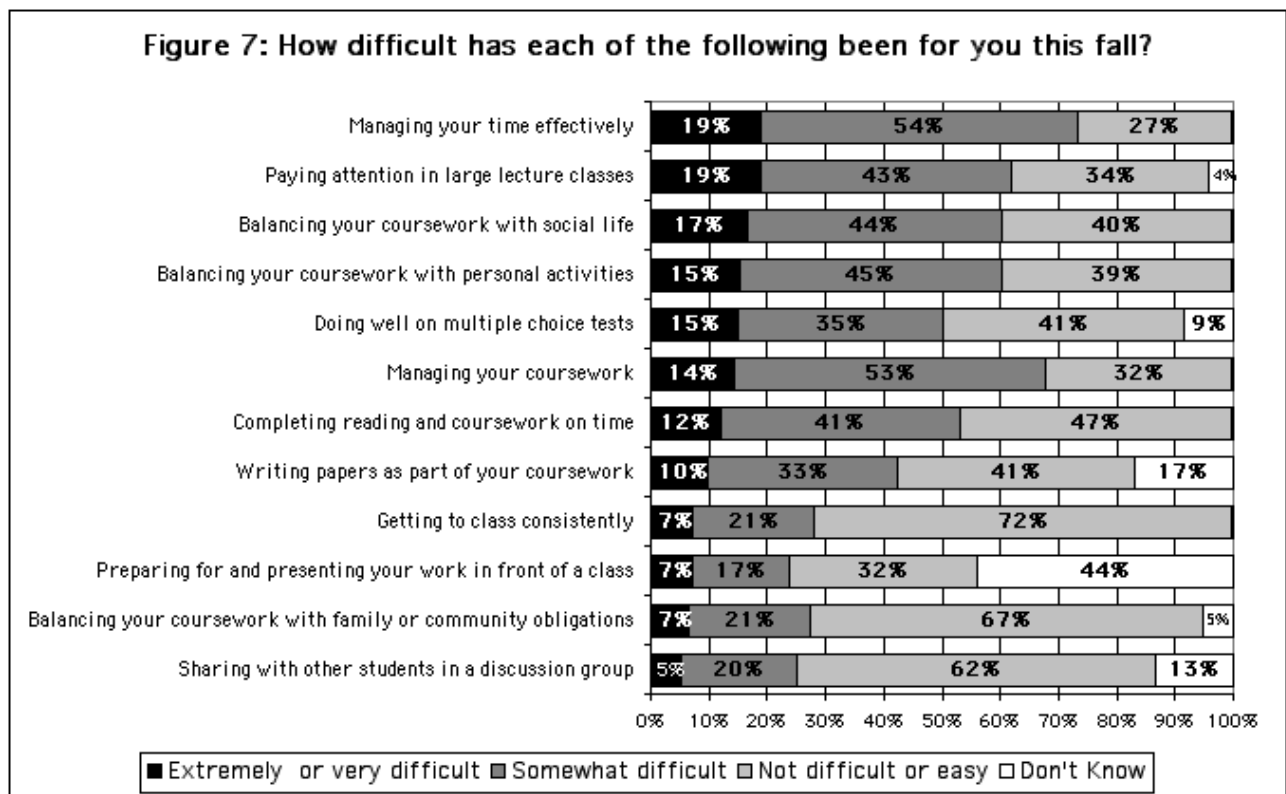


Most of Western's fall 2003 freshmen participated in a least some "sports, exercise or other recreational activities" (72%). Fewer participated in some sort of club, whether "academic, political, ethnic, religious or social" (37%). Fewer yet participated in some sort of "performing or fine arts activities" (22%). (See Table 3.)

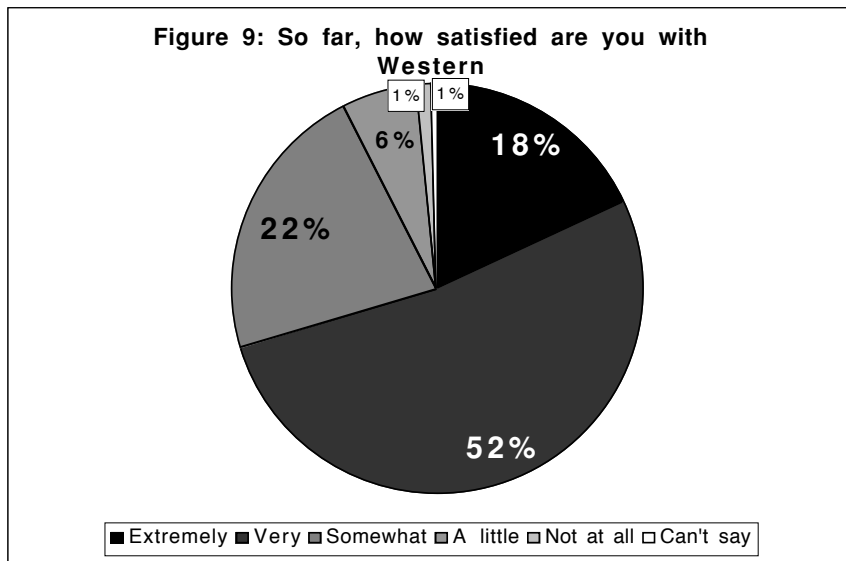
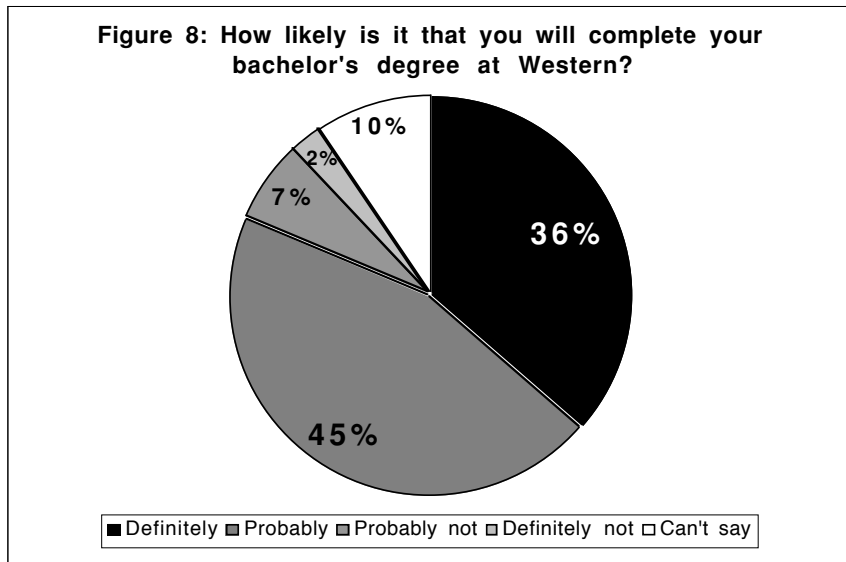
Table 3: During this quarter, about how much time, if any, have you spent engaged in:

	A great deal	Quite a bit	Some	A little	None
Sports, exercise or other recreational activities	18%	24%	31%	20%	8%
Academic, political, ethnic, religious or social clubs	8%	15%	14%	17%	43%
Performing or fine arts activities	4%	7%	11%	19%	59%

For many freshmen, time management was difficult during their first quarter. It was at least “somewhat difficult” for most to manage their time effectively (72%), and to manage their coursework (67%). Freshmen also noted that it was at least “somewhat difficult” to: “pay attention in large lecture classes” (62%); “balance coursework with social life” (60%), and “complete reading and coursework on time” (53%). Freshmen were a little less likely to find it difficult to “write papers as part of your coursework” (43%). (See Figure 7.)



While most fall 2003 in-coming freshmen anticipate they will graduate from Western (81%), some “can’t say” yet (10%), while others think they probably won’t (7%) and a very few think they definitely won’t (2%). And so far, most are either “extremely” or “very” satisfied with Western (70%). A little less than a quarter are “somewhat” satisfied with Western (22%). Hardly any freshmen are “not at all” satisfied with Western (1%). (See Figures 8 and 9.)



OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

We asked students to respond to two open-ended questions. We asked students 1) what one thing they would have done differently in their first term at Western, and 2) what they thought Western should have done differently. Quite a number of students said that they would change nothing (n=99). For those making recommendations for change, the bulk of the comments fell into four categories: academics, advising, transition, and social issues.

ACADEMICS

The greatest number of responses were directed toward classes—mostly that students would have taken different classes (n=155). This included such responses as taking *a different sequence of classes, a different math class, more interesting classes, and more credits (to be more busy)*. Students also indicated they would have improved their study habits (n=110). This included having *studied more and tried harder, been more ahead on homework and readings, and not procrastinated*.

TRANSITION

Respondents felt Western could have provided better transition for freshmen, starting with more freshmen orientation (n=21). This included such responses as helping freshmen *get acquainted with the college atmosphere and knowing what to do, expectations for college and class work, time management, and preparation for the kind of work that college requires*. Another suggestion was for Western to *advertise events better* (n=23).

ADVISING

Many students felt Western should could have provided better (more thorough and accurate) academic advising (n=46). This included providing *friendly, individualized advising, and advisors who are active in students lives*. Students also suggested that advisors *reach out to students and show they are interested in student's well-being*. Students said Western could *assist more with registration and simplify the process* (n=22)—for example, explaining sequencing and major restrictions, and making registration less stressful.

SOCIAL

A number of respondents said they wished they had attended functions or joined clubs, activities, or sports—some say for the purpose of meeting people (n=53). Others would have *tried to be more social or made an effort to meet more people* (n=51). Students also noted that Western could *promote activities, events, clubs, sports, and reach out more to get students involved*.

Students provided several other open-ended comments. For the full table of responses, please contact: Linda.Clark@wwu.edu.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

Successful transitions to college require students to settle in socially while managing their new independence. In addition, they need to learn to negotiate the new climate of academic challenges they face. Overall, most in-coming fall 2003 freshmen reported that their transition to Western was going well. They especially appeared to be doing well when it came to making friends and fitting in socially. Most did not report having problems handling homesickness, nor handling the use of drugs and alcohol. The most common difficulties they faced were getting enough sleep, and managing stress, finances and their personal health.

The pull students feel between academics and social aspects of college was evident in the survey findings. These freshmen reported having some difficulty balancing coursework and social life and managing their time effectively. Students were positive about having learned how to get around academically, though academic advising and course access were challenges for these students, perhaps in part because of the numbers who were not yet sure of their major or their long-term education plans. Yet most freshmen felt they would be very successful students and that they understood their professors' expectations. However, most also placed the onus of their success in a course on the enthusiasm of the professor teaching it.

Since freshmen inevitably take large lecture courses, it might be surprising to see that many had written a substantial paper (possibly in an English 101 course), and that many had talked to a professor outside of class. About a quarter of Western's freshmen had performed volunteer work (either on or off campus). As other recent data also indicated, freshmen were not so likely to have worked for pay, and for the few that did, the vast majority worked under 20 hours a week.

Most freshmen (81%) anticipated that they would graduate from Western, and most (70%) were "extremely" or "very" satisfied with their experience at Western so far. About a quarter (22%) indicated they were only "somewhat" satisfied; fewer still (6%) were only "a little" satisfied. Hardly any (1%) said they were "not at all" satisfied.



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