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LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS FROM 2003- 2004 WELS SURVEYS

Prepared by Gary R. McKinney

The Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS) was conceived as a process to obtain data more relevant to Western and its mission than survey data had been able to obtain previously. Rather than continuing to rely on outside survey forms, many of which were pricey and often only partially useful, researchers developed a Western-specific survey form. Development of this survey took about three years, with researchers soliciting input from dozens of individuals, departments and offices. Along the way, WELS researchers also noted where data was already being collected so that doubling up on survey questions was minimized.

The final survey form was considered by all participants to be as thorough and Western-specific as it could be. Researchers also decided that yearly survey administrations would be replaced by a six-year survey cycle, with a new cycle beginning every three years. The initial survey of in-coming freshmen was administered in the summer, 2003; the next survey cycle will begin in the summer, 2006. In the inaugural WELS survey, 1580 in-coming 2003 freshmen participated. From this data a baseline report was generated: *Western Educational Longitudinal Study (OIART report 2003-02)*. Within that same 2003-2004 academic year, two other surveys and reports were administered and produced: *Western Educational Longitudinal Study: Fall 2003 Freshmen Transition Survey. (OIART Focus Summary, issue 8, volume 4.)*, and *Western Educational Longitudinal Study: Spring, 2004, Follow-up of Freshmen Entering Fall, 2003 (Report No. 2004-01)*.

This report presents findings from three multi-itemed questions, plus a fourth single-item question, asked in each of the three survey administrations. There are two questions that focus on students' transition to Western, one question that focuses on student expectations, and one that asks how well students thought their high school experience prepared them for college.



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TABLE 1: ISSUES OF PERSONAL DIFFICULTY

In the summer, 2003, before in-coming frosh had arrived at Western, they were asked: How difficult do you think each of the following will be for you personally this fall? Late in the fall quarter, 2003, a cohort of these same in-coming fall frosh were asked: How difficult has each of the following been for you personally this fall? And late in the spring quarter, 2004, another cohort of these same in-coming frosh were asked: How difficult has each of the following personal experiences been for you this year. In Table 1 (below), for all responses students' difficulty was noted as at least "somewhat" difficult. The following bulleted items highlight the responses:

- "Getting enough sleep" ranked as the most consistently difficult personal issue confronting first-time, in-coming frosh. It ranked first in difficulty in the summer survey (reflecting their experience primarily as high school seniors), second in difficulty in fall quarter survey, and again first in difficulty in spring quarter survey. Because the spring percentage was highest among the three surveys, this issue appears on-going among frosh, and unresolved by near the end of their first year at college.
- "Managing your finances" ranked second in difficulty in the summer survey, first overwhelmingly in the fall quarter survey, and third in spring quarter survey. It's important to note that by spring the difficulty in managing finances had fallen to its lowest percentage of the three surveys, and also that the difficulty students noted in "getting the financial support you need" had also fallen. This suggests that over the course of their first year, in-coming frosh began to figure out how to deal with this new responsibility.
- "Managing stress" ranked relatively low for frosh as they prepared to enter college (no doubt they had figured out a way to manage stress through their high school years), but increased as a difficulty through their freshmen year. By the spring survey, "managing stress" had become the second highest ranking difficulty.
- Another stress-related issue—"managing your physical and emotional health"—increased as a difficulty by about 10% between the summer and spring surveys. And related to health, "handling the use of alcohol and drugs", while a difficulty experienced by only 17% of frosh at its highest, nevertheless increased in percentage by nearly 10% from the fall to spring surveys.

QUICK SUMMATION OF TABLE 1 FINDINGS

For first-time frosh, stress—especially as related to time management—is the overarching personal difficulty, and manifests itself in the data as the inability to get enough sleep, to manage finances, and to manage physical and emotion health. To a lesser degree, but notable, some students indicate "handling the use of alcohol and drugs" as a personal difficulty.

Table 1: Rankings across three WELS surveys of personal difficulties.

	Su 03	F 03	Sp 04
Getting enough sleep	58.6%	55.0%	66.0%
Managing your finances	55.0%	84.8%	47.6%
Getting the financial support you need	37.7%	29.8%	27.5%
Managing your physical and emotional health	29.9%	35.3%	40.7%
Meeting your family's expectations	24.4%	17.8%	29.0%
Dealing with homesickness	22.0%	20.0%	17.4%
Managing stress	22.0%	40.8%	49.3%
Fitting in with others at WWU	19.7%	17.0%	20.5%
Getting the emotional support you need to do well in school	19.2%	27.5%	21.8%
Finding people you get along with, making friends	19.0%	21.4%	20.2%
Handling the use of alcohol and drugs	11.3%	7.7%	17.2%
Being able to maintain your spiritual or religious values	10.4%	10.5%	12.9%

NOTE: For all responses, students' difficulty was noted as at least "somewhat".

TABLE 2: ISSUES OF ACADEMIC DIFFICULTY

In the summer, 2003, before in-coming frosh had arrived at Western, they were asked: How difficult do you think each of the following will be for you personally this fall? Late in the fall quarter, 2003, a cohort of these same in-coming fall frosh were asked: How difficult has each of the following been for you this fall? And late in the spring, 2004, another cohort of these same in-coming frosh were asked: How difficult has each of the following been for you this past academic year. In Table 2 (below), for all responses students' difficulty was noted as at least "somewhat" difficult. The following bulleted items highlight the responses:

- "Managing your coursework" ranked as the most consistently difficult academic issue confronting first-time, in-coming frosh. It ranked first in difficulty in the summer survey (reflecting their experience primarily as high school seniors), second in difficulty in fall quarter survey, and again second in difficulty in spring quarter survey. The slight decrease in the percentage of students noting this as an issue of academic difficulty suggests that while it remained an issue throughout the school year, students did begin to make some progress towards resolving the problem.

- “Managing your time effectively” ranked second in difficulty in the summer survey, became the first ranking academic difficulty in the late fall survey, and remained the first ranking academic difficulty in the late spring survey. Indeed, if personal and academic difficulties share a theme, it is time management.
- Other time-management issues that in-coming frosh noted as academic difficulties included: “balancing your coursework with social life” and “balancing your coursework with personal activities”.
- “Getting to class consistently”, while ranked lowest amongst the list of academic difficulties, also increased in percentage between the summer and spring surveys. Undoubtedly, this issue is also related to both personal and academic time management difficulties.

QUICK SUMMATION OF TABLE 2 FINDINGS

For first-time frosh, time management is the most difficult issue in regards to academics. When combined with personal difficulties—most of which are also related to time management—the data indicate frosh struggle with a combination of new found freedom and more responsibility than they may have ever faced before.

Table 2: Rankings across three WELS surveys of academic difficulties.

	Su 03	F 03	Sp 04
Managing your coursework	77.9%	67.7%	68.7%
Managing your time effectively	76.9%	73.1%	73.6%
Preparing for and presenting your work in front of a class	72.0%	23.8%	47.7%
Balancing your coursework with social life	64.2%	60.2%	61.2%
Balancing your coursework with personal activities	63.9%	60.4%	57.7%
Paying attention in large lecture classes	62.4%	61.9%	64.2%
Writing papers as part of your coursework	51.1%	42.4%	48.7%
Doing well on multiple choice tests	42.6%	50.2%	47.0%
Completing reading and coursework on time	41.1%	53.2%	49.5%
Sharing with other students in a discussion group	35.0%	25.1%	31.4%
Balancing your coursework w/ family or community obligations	32.4%	27.1%	28.6%
Getting to class consistently	15.8%	27.9%	30.2%

NOTE: For all responses, students' difficulty was noted as at least "somewhat".

TABLE 3: ISSUES OF ACADEMIC DIFFICULTY

In the summer, 2003, before in-coming frosh had arrived at Western, they were asked: “Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.” The questions were posed in terms of what they anticipated would happen to them at Western. For instance, they were asked to agree or disagree that, “I expect to have important new friendships with other Western students.” Late in the fall quarter, 2003, and in the spring quarter, 2004, a cohort of these same in-coming fall frosh were asked to respond to agree or disagree with the same list of items, only this time the questions were posed in terms of what had happened to them since they arrived at Western. For instance, they were asked to agree or disagree that, “I have important new friendships with other Western students.” The following bulleted items highlight the responses:

- “Feeling comfortable talking to professors after class and during office hours” ranked a tie for first as the issue that saw the most dramatic change during a student’s first year at Western. Coming in this item ranked high, fell by approximately 20% in late fall, then rose again by late spring to a higher percentage than what respondents had indicated before arriving at Western.
- “Feeling a part of the university community” was the other issue that saw the most dramatic change in a student’s first year at Western. Again, coming in this item rank high, fell by approximately 20% in late fall, then rose again by late spring to a higher percentage than what respondents had indicated before arriving at Western.
- “Having the study skills needed to be a succesful students” ranked third as an issue that saw dramatic change. The pattern was similar to the previous two issues: a high percentage coming in, a dramatic tapering off (approximately 17%), then a equally dramatic increase.
- Some less academic issues were also noted. For example, the percentage of students indicating they had made friendships with other Western students was lower than anticipated in late fall, but higher in spring. Also, the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed that “concern for my family has interfered with my academic work” increased steadily over the course of the three survey administrations.

QUICK SUMMATION OF TABLE 3 FINDINGS

Transition issues were abundantly clear, as early in the academic year students’ expectations were clearly unmet. Yet by the end of the year, most of the expectations issues—feeling comfortable with faculty, feeling a part of the Western community, etc.—began not just to meet but exceed students’ expectations.

Table 3: Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements

	Su 03	F 03	Sp 04
I expect to be a very successful student at Western	94.5%	84.0%	97.3%
I have important, new friendships with other Western students	89.7%	72.4%	94.2%
I feel Western's campus is a safe place to live	87.8%	83.0%	90.9%
I feel comfortable talking to profs after class and during office hrs.	83.4%	63.1%	91.7%
I feel I am a part of the university community	78.3%	58.0%	82.4%
I have the study skills I need to be a successful student	73.7%	57.0%	85.3%
My long-term education plans are very clear to me	53.7%	40.6%	65.4%
I am very certain of my major field of interest	47.1%	42.5%	60.6%
Concern for my family has interfered with my academic work	7.3%	11.9%	20.0%

NOTE: questions in the summer, 2003, administration were phrased as expectations; for example: "I expect to have important, new friendships with other Western students." For all responses, students' agreed or agreed strongly.

TABLE 4: HOW WELL STUDENTS THOUGHT HIGH SCHOOL PREPARED THEM FOR COLLEGE

In the summer, 2003, WELS survey respondents were asked: "Please rate how well you think your high school prepared you for college coursework." Late in the fall quarter, 2003, and in the spring quarter, 2004, a cohort of these same in-coming fall frosh were asked this same question again. As findings in Table 4 indicate, most students coming into college thought their high school had prepared them at least "somewhat well". By late in the fall quarter, this attitude had changed only marginally; by the end of the school year, this percentage had decreased, but only slightly.

Table 4: Please rate how well you think your high school prepared you for college coursework.

Su 03	F 03	Sp 04
80.2%	81.3%	76.0%

NOTE: For all responses, students' ratings were noted as at least "somewhat well".

CONCLUSIONS

As might be expected of 18- and 19-year-olds—many of whom were away from home for the first time of real significance in their lives—transitions issues abounded for these WELS survey respondents. They had difficulties managing their finances, coursework, stress levels, and time. Fall to spring, they struggled fall to get enough sleep and to manage their physical and emotional health. Yet as the year progressed, they also became more comfortable with the Western community and their professors; moreover, they made friends and developed better study skills. As might also be expected of first-time, incoming frosh, what their major and/or long term education goals would be became somewhat less certain.

Indeed, longitudinally, most students appeared to be figuring out how to make Western work for them. Yet it might also be important to note that about one in five WELS survey respondents indicated at least some difficulty fitting in with others, getting the emotional support they needed to be successful, and finding friends and/or connections.

On the other hand, incoming frosh appeared a determined group, with nearly all respondents (97%) indicating by the end of the year that they expected to be very successful students at Western. And though the aforementioned one in five indicated they had at least some difficulty making friends, nearly all respondents (94%) also indicated they had important, new friendships at Western. These two findings in juxtaposition might indicate that while making friends might have been difficult for some students, they nonetheless persisted.

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