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WESTERN EDUCATIONAL LONGITUDINAL STUDY (WELS) REPORT SERIES*

STUDENT CONTACT WITH THEIR ACADEMIC ADVISORS

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

BACKGROUND

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, 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 the third of these reports, the spring, 2004, follow-up, findings specifically about academic advising. These survey findings were then supplemented with Data Warehouse findings on high school grade point average (hsgpa), first quarter Western grade point average, and SAT scores.

NEW FRESHMEN

Western had 2218 new freshmen in fall 2003: 1899 new freshmen, 315 new running-start freshmen, and 4 freshmen who began in the preceding summer, counted as new freshmen.

ACADEMIC ADVISING CENTER (AAC) AND ASSIGNMENT OF ACADEMIC ADVISORS

New Student Services sends an RSVP card to all confirmed new freshmen, asking them to reserve a spot at Summerstart freshman orientation. On this RSVP card, they are asked to indicate an academic area that best fits their interests. If a student chooses an academic area, they will be assigned a faculty advisor that best matches the area indicated. If they choose 'undecided', they are assigned a professional advisor from the Academic Advising Center (AAC). If a student is unable to attend Summerstart, then they attend a fall orientation scheduled just prior to the start of classes. At this time, advisors are assigned based on the academic area of interest expressed by the student on their admissions application. If no area of interest is indicated, then an advisor from the AAC is assigned. The faculty or AAC advisor serves as the student's advisor until they declare a major, at which time the student will work with an advisor in their major department.

FRESHMAN ORIENTATION

Most new freshmen attend Summerstart (90.8%, or 2015 students)—a program for incoming freshman that takes place typically in early August. (All Summerstart attendees are assigned an advisor based on their RSVP card responses mentioned above.) During fall orientation, another 177 freshmen went to an advising session. There were only 26 new freshmen that did not attend any advising session. Of the Summerstart attendees, 708 (35.1%) chose to attend an 'undecided' advising group and be assigned an AAC advisor. A slightly higher percentage of the fall orientation students (75 of the 177, or 42.4%) chose to attend an advising session with an AAC advisor.

DATA

There were 629 respondents to the spring follow-up of the fall 2003 freshman WELS cohort. Of those respondents, four could not be matched to student characteristic and outcome data using student ID, so this analysis was performed with the 625 students for whom full data was available. For this report, the focus will be on a small group of questions asked in the survey that relate to contact between students and their academic advisor.

WHO IS YOUR ACADEMIC ADVISOR?

During the year, as some students gain contact with academic departments, a few change their advisor to a departmental major advisor. By spring quarter, 57 (9.1%) students had a major advisor, 357 (57.1%) had a faculty advisor as assigned at freshman orientation, and 210 (33.8%) are advised by a professional from the Academic Advising Center. Table 1 shows the responses to the two questions: 1) *Is your academic advisor in the AAC or a faculty member from one of Western's departments?* and 2) *If 'don't know': Do you know who your academic advisor is?*

Table 1: By spring, 2004, who did students' list as their advisor?

| | N | % |
|--|-----|-----|
| Academic Advising Center (AAC) | 195 | 31% |
| Faculty member | 274 | 44% |
| Don't know if ACC or Faculty, but know advisor | 49 | 8% |
| Don't know who advisor is | 104 | 17% |
| No advisor | 3 | 1% |

Table 2 below shows the relationship between who the student *thinks* their advisor is and who their *actual* primary advisor is.¹ If a student thinks their advisor is a faculty member, they are usually correct—only 4% of students who thought their advisor was a faculty member were mistaken. On the other hand, if a student thinks their advisor is from the ACC, about 25% were mistaken. And finally, for students who reported they did not know who their advisor is, most (80%) had been assigned a faculty advisor.

Table 2: Perceived vs. actual advisor

| Students thought their advisor was: | Students' actual advisor was: | |
|---|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| | AAC advisor* | Faculty advisor |
| AAC advisor* (n=195) | 75% | 25% |
| Faculty advisor (n=274) | 4% | 96% |
| Don't know whether faculty or AAC, but know who advisor is (n=49) | 57% | 43% |
| Don't know who advisor is (n=107) | 20% | 80% |

*AAC = Academic Advising Center

¹ Students may have more than one advisor, but this is uncommon in the student's first year.

About one out of six students responding to a survey in their third quarter at Western say that they do not know who their advisor is. About ten percent (10%) of students with AAC advisors indicated they did not know who their advisor was, while 22% of students with faculty advisors say that they do not know who their advisor is. Yet whether they know who their advisor is or not, all frosh have been assigned an advisor, either at Summerstart or fall orientation.

CONTACT WITH ACADEMIC ADVISORS

The freshman orientation is the student’s first contact with their advisor. Throughout the year there can be many more contacts. In the fall, AAC may email students with information pertaining to academic planning. In winter quarter the focus is on students who had a difficult academic transition to Western, achieving low academic standing in their first term (less than 2.0 GPA). Again in spring, AAC counselors focus on low-performing students. Additionally, freshmen who have not declared a major receive AAC contacts.

Students were asked: *How many times during the year, if at all, have you received email/paper mail/a phone call from your (faculty) Academic Advisor?* Tables 2, 3 and 4 below show the number of times students say that they were contacted by email, regular mail, or phone.² As indicated, almost two-thirds of students say that they were contacted by email, about half say that they were contacted by regular mail, and roughly ten percent they received at least one phone call from an advisor.

Table 3: Email contacts by students’ advisor

| | N | % |
|---------------|-----|-----|
| No email | 234 | 37% |
| 1 or 2 emails | 153 | 25% |
| 3 or 4 emails | 68 | 11% |
| 5 to 9 emails | 104 | 17% |
| 10+ emails | 66 | 11% |

Table 4: Regular mail contacts by students’ advisor

| | N | % |
|-------------|-----|-----|
| no mailing | 311 | 50% |
| 1 mailing | 143 | 23% |
| 2 mailings | 102 | 16% |
| 3+ mailings | 69 | 11% |

Table 5: Telephone contacts by students’ advisor

| | N | % |
|----------------|-----|-----|
| no phone calls | 551 | 88% |
| 1 phone call | 46 | 7% |
| 2+ phone calls | 28 | 5% |

Findings indicate that students are more likely to be contacted via e-mail, regular mail and/or telephone if they have an advisor from the Academic Advising Center (AAC). (See Table 6.) This finding makes sense as the AAC, by their mission, is much more proactive in contacting students than faculty advisors. For students with a faculty advisor, face-to-face contacts are more likely. (See Table 7.)

² Note that data were entered only for responses that were greater than zero—since no zero responses were entered, a zero response here indicates that either the student did not respond to the question, the student received no contact, or the student doesn’t recall being contacted.

Table 6: Contacts with advisor (e-mail, regular mail, telephone)

| Advisor Type | Percent of advisees with at least one contact | | | If contact, average number of contacts | | |
|--|---|------|-------|--|------|-------|
| | E-mail | Mail | Phone | E-mail | Mail | Phone |
| AAC advisor (n=208) | 88% | 64% | 22% | 8.6 | 3.1 | 2.2 |
| Faculty major advisor (n=58) | 53% | 43% | 3% | 5.8* | 1.6 | 1.5 |
| Faculty advisor from Orientation (n=357) | 50% | 44% | 8% | 2.7 | 1.8 | 1.7 |

*Excluded one student response of 100 e-mails received from faculty advisor.

Table 7: Contacts with advisor (face-to-face conversation)

| Advisor Type | Percent of advisees with at least one contact | If contact, average number of contacts |
|--|---|--|
| | Talk | Talk |
| AAC advisor (n=208) | 66% | 2.5 |
| Faculty major advisor (n=58) | 76% | 2.0 |
| Faculty advisor from Orientation (n=357) | 47% | 2.3 |

*Excluded one student response of 100 e-mails received from faculty advisor.

WHAT DOES THIS CONTACT INFORMATION MEAN?

With only the current data sets available, this question is quite difficult to answer. By design, low-performing students receive more contact from their advisor than average- or high-performing students; as well, undeclared students receive more contact than declared students. Thus parsing out the positive effects of the advising contacts on performance for all students is currently impossible. Moreover, compounding the problem, the Office of Student Life also provides outreach to several groups of at-risk students—the student respondents may or may not be reporting contact with this office. For these reasons, results that seek to show causality between contact with academic advisors and student outcomes are outside the scope of the current data sets.

AT-RISK STUDENTS

There are many reasons that a student can get in academic trouble in their first term—reasons not limited to academic preparedness. For fall, 2003, new freshmen, 303 or 14% received a fall GPA of less than 2.0 and were placed in low academic standing. Table 8 below shows some groups that have a higher rate of low academic standing after their first term.

Table 8: Students in low standing after first term

| | Number in Group | Number in Low Standing | Percent of Group in Low Standing |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| All new freshmen | 2218 | 303 | 14% |
| Low AI students (AI <= 50)* | 290 | 90 | 31% |
| Ethnic minority students | 336 | 74 | 22% |
| Male students | 935 | 173 | 19% |
| First generation students | 755 | 131 | 17% |

*AI = Admissions Index. This is a formula combining high school grade point average and SAT scores, which has a scale of 1 to 100.

Using the above four student groups as variables in a logistic regression to predict the probability of being on good academic standing after the first term—and controlling for academic preparedness (high school gpa and SAT scores)—each one point increase in high school gpa increases the probability of being in good standing by 10 times, a very powerful finding. A higher SAT score also corresponds with a higher probability of academic success in the first quarter.

Findings confirm what is already known: students who come to Western with low preparedness are more likely to become academically at-risk. Indeed, based on their hsgpa and SAT scores, all students coming in to Western have what could be called a preparedness level. The lower the hsgpa and/or SAT score, the higher the risk to students of falling into low academic standing after the first term.

However, first generation students and male students are at risk over and above their preparedness level. First generation students have only 68% the probability of being in good academic standing their first term as others, even after taking their preparedness into consideration. Similarly, male students have only 52% the chance of females of being in academic standing—again, even after taking their preparedness into consideration.

Interestingly, there is no special risk for being ethnic minority. In other words, when ethnic minorities fall into low academic standing after the first term, it can be explained by hsgpa and/or SAT scores alone. Simply the fact of being in this group adds no further explanation.

SUMMARY

In the spring quarter, most freshmen (82%) knew who their academic advisors were. On the other hand, many of them (18%) said they did not know who their advisors were, or that they had no advisor. In truth, however, all frosh are assigned an advisor, either at Summerstart or during fall orientation.

For students indicating they knew who their advisor was, findings indicated that if a student thought their advisor was a faculty member, they were usually correct. Only 4% of students who thought their advisor was a faculty member were mistaken. On the other hand, if a student thought their advisor was from the Academic Advising Center (AAC), they were less likely to be correct. About 25% of students who thought their advisor was from the AAC were mistaken.

Contact with advisors took the form of face-to-face meetings, and also via email, regular mail, and/or telephone. Students with AAC advisors were most likely to have had contact by email, secondly face-to-face. Students with faculty advisors were most likely to have had contact face-to-face, secondly by email. What remains elusive, however, is knowing what the number and/or kinds of contacts might mean regarding policy change and/or procedure effectiveness. Contacts are numerous, spread among both advisors and faculty, and often aimed at specific populations (low achieving, undeclared). The available data sets are simply too indefinite for conclusions.

Researchers were, however, able to identify that among at-risk students, lower achievement (i.e., lower Western grade point average) could be explained by academic preparedness (i.e., the lower a students' SAT scores and/or high school gpa, the more likelihood of academic risk). Exceptions to this finding were that first generation students and male students are at risk over and above their preparedness level. This finding was not true for ethnicity, where all risk could be explained by academic preparedness.

* This report is among a number of OIART reports based on findings from the Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS), a long-term, as well as longitudinal, study of Western Washington University students that began in the summer of 2003.

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