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WESTERN EDUCATIONAL LONGITUDINAL STUDY (WELS) REPORT SERIES\*

# STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD GENERAL UNIVERSITY REQUIREMENTS (GURs)

Prepared by Ryan Dickson, 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 were administered to samples of these baseline participants, and reports were 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)*.

Among many issues, each of the surveys included questions that probed expectations concerning General University Required (GUR) courses and time to graduation, including attitudes concerning GURs, pedagogy, and overall satisfaction with Western. And, indeed, this report presents findings related to GUR expectations and attitudes, pedagogy, overall satisfaction, and how First-Year Interest Group (FIG) enrollment relates to these factors.

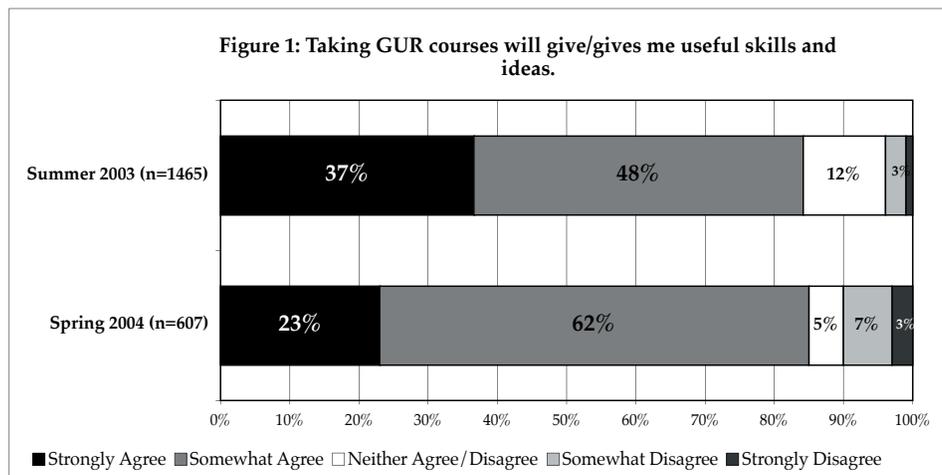


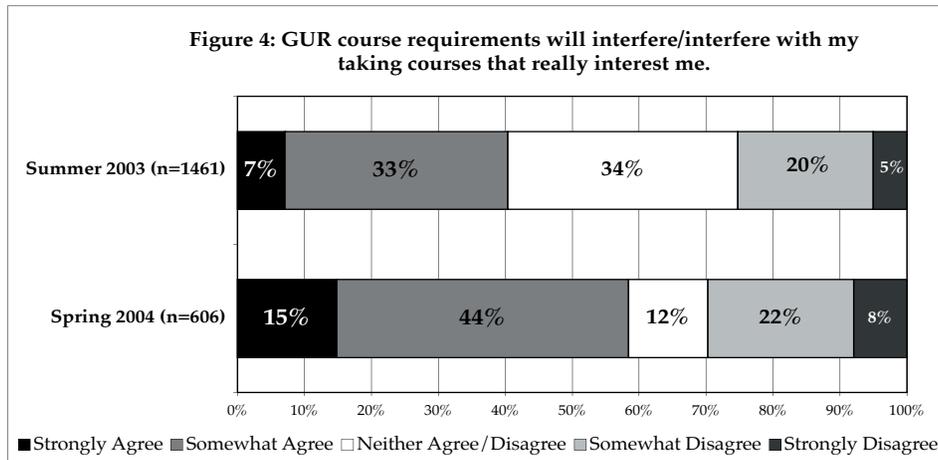
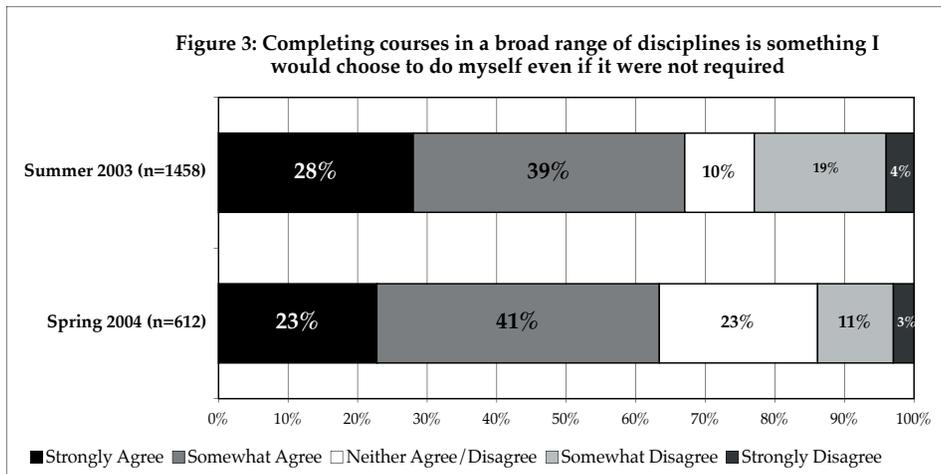
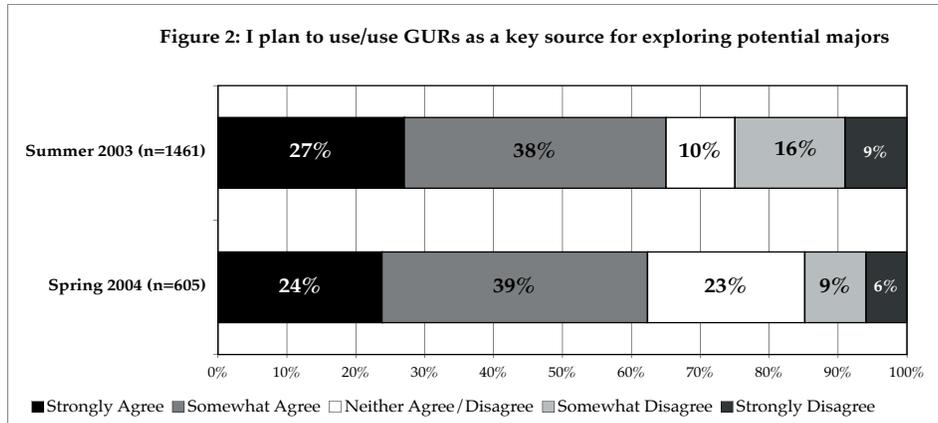
GENERAL UNIVERSITY REQUIREMENTS

In the summer before coming to Western, freshmen entering in the fall of 2003 were asked several questions concerning their expectations for GUR courses. Generally, incoming freshmen had high expectations for these courses.

- Over 80% either strongly or somewhat agreed that: *Taking GUR courses will give me useful skills and ideas.*
- Over 60% either strongly or somewhat agreed that: *I plan to use GURs as a key source for exploring potential majors.*
- Over 60% either strongly or somewhat agreed that: *Completing courses in a broad range of disciplines is something I would choose to do myself even if it were not required.*
- Approximately 40% strongly or somewhat agreed that: *GUR course requirements will interfere with my taking courses that really interest me.*

At the completion of spring quarter, 2004, Western students were again asked these questions to see how the actual experience of GURs impacted their attitudes. Their answers reflect a modest decline in positive attitudes concerning GURs. For example, fewer students strongly agreed that: *Taking GUR courses will give me useful skills and ideas.* Furthermore, more students agreed that: *GUR course requirements interfere with my taking courses that really interest me.* There was no change in the other GUR-related items. The shift in students' expectations of GURs to their actual perceptions of GURs may simply represent an adjustment based on experience with college courses and associated coursework. It will be interesting to see if these perceptions change with continuing GUR exposure (to be assessed by later iterations of the WELS), or as a result of GUR changes.

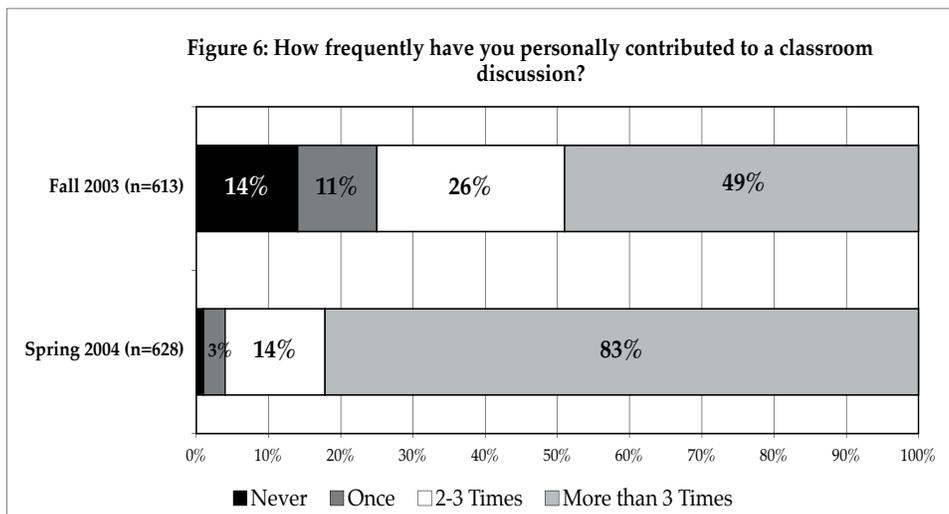
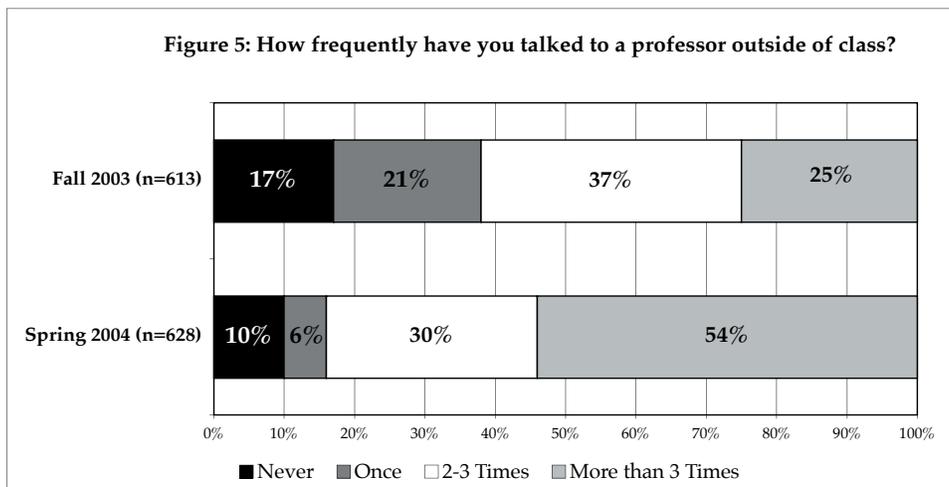




PEDAGOGY

Freshmen entering in fall of 2003 were asked in their first quarter and again at the end of their first academic year (spring, 2004) about different educational activities in which they had engaged. Among the questions asked in the fall, 2003, survey were the frequency with which students *talked with a professor outside of class*, and *personally contributed to classroom discussion*.

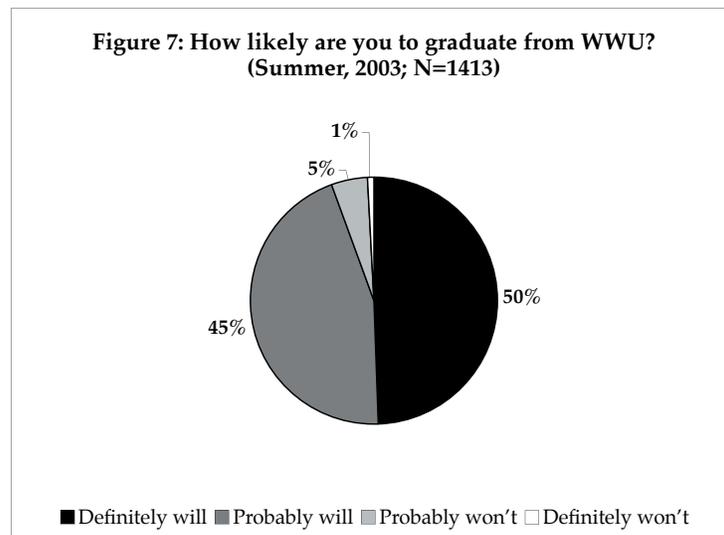
At the end of their first academic year (spring, 2004), freshman were again asked the frequency with which they had *talked with a professor outside of class* and *personally contributed to classroom discussion*. Students reported an increase in these two pedagogic activities from their first quarter to the end of that academic year. (See Figures 5 and 6.) The percent of students who reported that they had talked with a professor outside of class more than 2 times increased from approximately 60% in fall, 2003, to over 80% in spring, 2004. Furthermore, students personally contributing to classroom discussions more than 2 times increased from 75% in fall, 2003, to 96.7% in spring, 2004. Increases may be the result of students having completed a wider variety of course types or styles, and thus having engaged in a broader range of educational experiences. Additionally, over the course of the academic year, students may have become more comfortable in academic situations and gained an understanding of how to appropriately engage in educational activities.



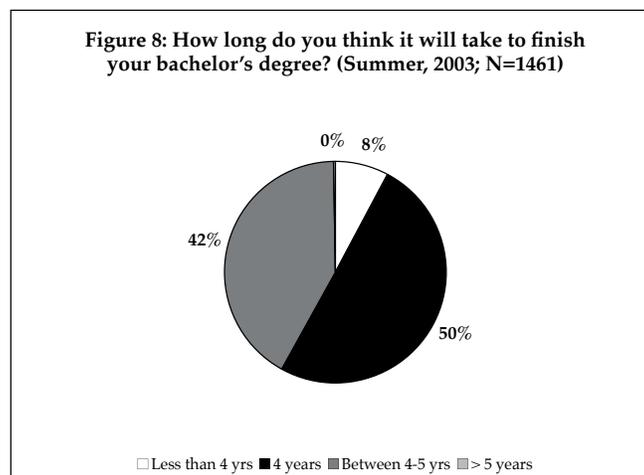
GRADUATION EXPECTATIONS AND SATISFACTION

*Graduation Expectations.*

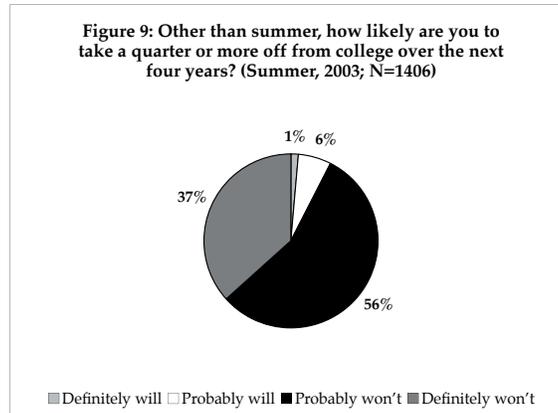
Incoming students (summer, 2003) were asked several questions concerning their graduation expectations. The vast majority of students reported either that they definitely would graduate from WWU (49.5%) or that they probably would (45.1%). Students were asked to estimate their likelihood of graduation again in fall, 2003, and spring, 2004, and there were no significant changes. (See Figure 7.)



Over half of incoming freshmen (summer, 2003) expected to graduate in four years or less (58%) with a large minority expecting to graduate between four and five years (42%). There was no significant change in students' estimates of time to graduation between summer, 2003, and fall, 2004.

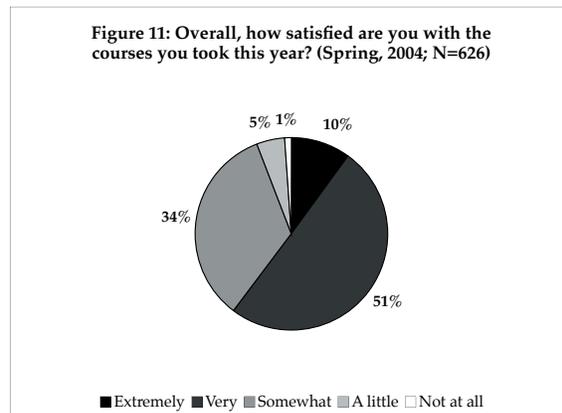
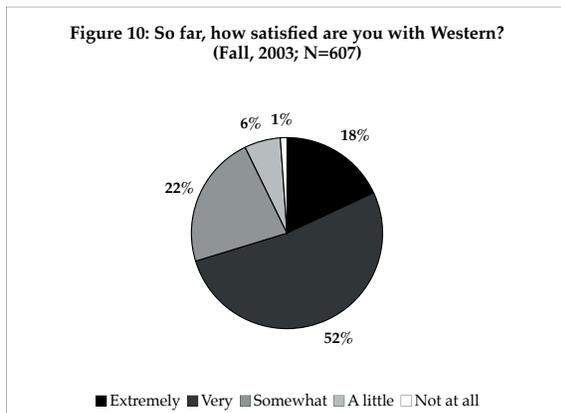


Over half of incoming freshmen (summer, 2003) reported that they probably wouldn't take a quarter or more off from college (56%) and roughly a third (37%) reported that they definitely wouldn't. Interestingly, incoming freshmen, who said either they probably would or probably wouldn't (indicating uncertainty) take a quarter or more off (62%), reported a lower estimated likelihood of completing their bachelor's at WWU (spring, 2004) and reported longer expected time to graduation estimates (fall, 2003). (See Figure 9.)



*Satisfaction.*

Freshmen were asked in fall, 2003, as to their satisfaction with Western. As noted in Figure 10, 70% reported that they were either extremely or very satisfied with Western and 22% were somewhat satisfied. As noted in Figure 11, freshmen satisfaction for all courses completed over the first academic year (assessed spring, 2004) was similar. Approximately 60% were either extremely or very satisfied and 34% were somewhat satisfied. Additionally, there was a significant correlation between satisfaction with Western and course satisfaction.



FIRST-YEAR INTEREST GROUP

Approximately 10% of first-year students are enrolled in a FIG course. Did enrollment in a FIG course affect students' experiences with pedagogy, attitudes toward GURs, in addition to overall satisfaction with Western and first-year classes? Results are interesting and should be noted. However, the WELS samples included only about 10% students enrolled in a FIG course.<sup>1</sup> As a result, low cell numbers in certain analyses reduced the power of the statistics. Therefore, differences between students enrolled in a FIG course and those not enrolled should be interpreted with caution.

First, there were no differences between FIG-enrolled students and other first-year students either in their estimated likelihood of graduation (FIG N=15, other first-year students N=111) or their expected time to graduation (FIG N=33, other first-year student N=359). However, there were several significant differences in experience with pedagogy and satisfaction. Specifically, in the fall quarter, 2003, FIG-enrolled students reported that they:

- talked to professors outside of class more often (FIG = 91%; non-FIG = 82%);
- volunteered on or off campus more often (FIG = 34%; non-FIG = 25%);
- were more satisfied with Western (extremely or very: FIG = 79%; non-FIG = 69%); and
- volunteered in the community as a part of coursework more often (at least once: FIG = 46%; non-FIG = 27%).

Also, for the entire academic year, FIG-enrolled students were more likely to have presented information in front of class (at least once: FIG = 93%; non-FIG = 76%). Moreover, by year's end FIG-enrolled students had a cumulative Western gpa of 2.94, compared to 2.85 for other first-year students.

Furthermore, although there were no significant differences in GUR attitudes between FIG-enrolled students and other first-year students, FIG-enrolled students consistently reported more positive views (spring, 2004). Taken together with the other findings, results suggest that FIG-enrolled students are more academically engaged than non-FIG students, which may contribute to their higher GPA, course satisfaction, and overall satisfaction. However, due to the low power of the analyses (disparate numbers of participants), further research will be necessary to determine the extent to which FIG enrollment leads to higher levels of academic engagement, class, GUR, and overall satisfaction, and experience with pedagogy.

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<sup>1</sup>The approximate percentage of FIG-enrolled students at Western overall is also 10%.

SUMMARY

- Before entering Western, incoming freshmen reported strong positive expectations concerning GUR courses. These attitudes were slightly dampened by the end of their first academic year. Specifically, fewer students felt that taking GUR courses would give them useful skills and ideas and more students felt that taking GUR courses would interfere with their ability to take courses that really interested them.
- Freshman reported an increase from Fall, 2003 to Spring, 2004 in the frequency with which they spoke with a professor outside of class and the frequency with which they personally contributed to a classroom discussion.
- Approximately 95% of freshman reported that they either definitely or probably would graduate from Western. Although half of the students surveyed estimated their time to graduation at four years, 42% estimated that it would take them between four and five years. These estimates did not change over the course of the year.
- Satisfaction with courses and Western overall was high.
- FIG enrolled students reported higher levels of academic engagement compared to non-FIG freshmen, such as speaking with a professor outside of class more often, volunteering on or off campus more often, and volunteering in the community as part of coursework more often (fall, 2003). Although the findings were not statistically significant—due to the imbalance of respondents: 10% FIG vs. 90% non-FIG—FIG-enrolled students were also more satisfied with Western overall, had a higher cumulative gpa at the end of spring quarter, 2004, and consistently reported more positive views concerning GUR courses. Although these results are promising, the sample included a low number of FIG-enrolled students (10%), so further research is necessary.

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