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Profile of the 1996 Freshman Class at Western: Comparative Trends and Patterns with a National Sample

Prepared by Gary R. McKinney and Joseph E. Trimble

Introduction

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Survey series is a continuing study of college freshmen. Nationally, this project was initiated in 1966, and enters its 31st year. Sponsored by the American Council on Education, and the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, CIRP Survey data profiles the characteristics, attitudes, values, educational achievements, and future goals of first-time, in-coming freshmen. Western has administered the CIRP since 1971. Since 1991, the CIRP has been administered annually at Western; previously, the CIRP was administered in four- to five-year cycles.

For the 1996 administration at Western, 969 completed questionnaires were received. Admission packets sent to in-coming freshmen included a CIRP Survey form. Students were asked to fill it out and bring it with them to SummerStart, a freshman orientation program offered during August, or to regular freshmen orientation just before classes began in September. The majority of completed questionnaires were received from SummerStart participants. Females were more likely to have filled out questionnaires than males (63.0% females vs. 37.0% males). Nearly all CIRP Survey participants were 18 or 19 years old (99.6%). Most were “White/Caucasian” (92.5%).

In the following pages is a brief profile of 1996 Western freshmen, sometimes compared and contrasted to previous Western freshmen, and sometimes compared and contrasted to freshmen nationally.

Findings

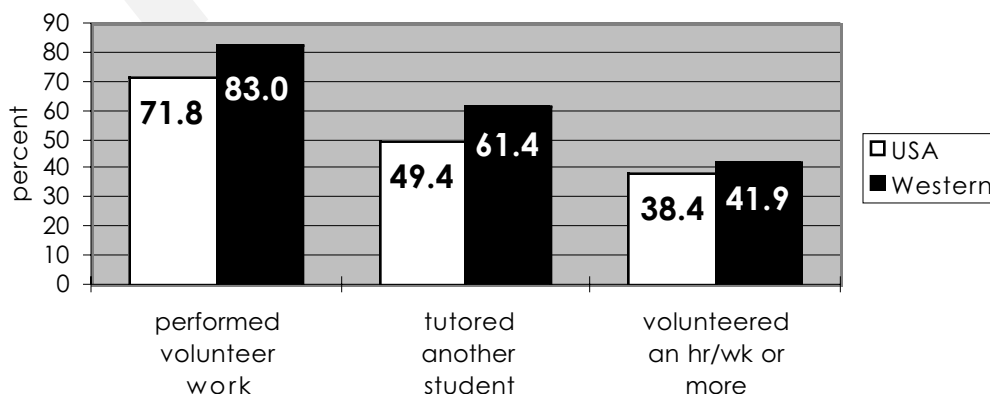
VOLUNTEERISM UP AMONG COLLEGE FRESHMEN

Nationally, certain CIRP Survey findings indicated that student volunteerism had never been more evident. For instance, the percentage of in-coming freshmen reporting they had performed volunteer work in the year previous to the CIRP Survey (their senior year in high school) was 71.8%--a record high. Moreover, the percentage reporting having volunteered an hour or more a week was 38.4%--also a record high. Relatedly, 49.4% reported they had tutored another student, and 32.1% reported that becoming a “community leader” was an “essential” or “very important” life goal. Again, both figures were all-time highs.

Findings were both similar, yet subtly different for Western freshmen. Like their national counterparts, the percentage of Western freshmen who had performed volunteer work as high school seniors was an all-time high, 83.0%--a figure also quite a bit higher than found nationally. Moreover, the percentage reporting having volunteered an hour or more a week was 41.9%, slightly lower than findings for 1995 Western freshmen, though, again, higher than national findings. Relatedly, 61.4% of Western freshmen reported having tutored another student. This figure was about the same as found for Western freshmen in 1995, but much higher than found nationally in 1996. Finally, the percentage of Western freshmen reporting that becoming a “community leader” was an “essential” or “very important” life goal was 28.0%, slightly lower than found nationally, as well as slightly lower than found last year for 1995 Western freshmen. (See Figure 1.)

Thus, CIRP Survey findings tell us that volunteerism is an even stronger element of the social conscience of 1996 in-coming Western freshmen than for freshmen nationally, and has been for a number of years. For instance, while nationally the percentage of freshmen performing volunteer work reached an all-time high of 71.8% in 1996, the percentage of Western freshmen performing volunteer work surpassed that figure in 1993, when 74.9% reported performing volunteer work. Indeed, Western’s 1992 figure of 70.3% was nearly as high as the 1996 figure reported nationally.

Figure 1: Volunteerism Among Freshmen



NATIONALLY, FINANCIAL CONCERNS INCREASINGLY INFLUENCE CHOICE OF COLLEGE

More than ever, students are feeling the economic pinch of increased tuitions and tighter money. Since the early 1990's, the percentage of in-coming freshmen expressing "some" or "major" concern with financing college has run approximately 70 percent nationwide. During the years 1966 through 1989, this figure ran between 60 to 65 percent.

In the national CIRP Survey of 1996, 33.1% of in-coming freshmen reported that being offered financial assistance was a "very important" reason for selecting their college--an all-time high. Similarly, 31.3% reported low tuition as a "very important" reason--the second all-time high. Also, 5.7% reported that not being offered financial aid by their first college of choice was a "very important" reason for choosing the college they now attend--again, an all-time high.

Not just financial reasons, but the marketability of their eventual degrees played a stronger role in college selection than before. All-time highs were reached in two categories: graduates get good jobs (46.8%), and graduates get into top graduate schools (29.6%).

Freshmen also expected to have to work a little harder than they have in recent years to help pay their college costs. For example, 41.1% expected to get a job to pay expenses (up from a low of 34.7% in 1989), and 6.4% expected they would work full-time while attending college (up from a low of 3.2% in 1982).

Indeed, all this concern about money and having to work while in college apparently has had an effect on the stress level of in-coming freshmen: 29.4% reported feeling "overwhelmed by all I had to do." This percentage is an increase of 13.4% from the low of 16.0% reported in 1985.

At Western, finances are also important, though not nearly as important as for their national counterparts. One issue was dramatically different: only 10.8% of in-coming Western freshmen chose Western because they were offered financial assistance. As in recent years, the number one reason freshmen chose Western was its academic reputation (60.2%), followed by its size (52.9%), neither of which consideration had anything to do with finances.

Moreover, smaller percentages of Western freshmen than freshmen nationwide reported the following three concerns as "very important" when choosing their college: 1) low tuition (23.3% at Western vs. 31.3% nationwide); 2) graduates get good jobs (34.5% vs. 46.8%); and 3) graduates get into top graduate schools (16.1% vs. 29.6%).

Which is not to say that Western freshmen were not concerned with finances. Nearly three-quarters (72.8%) reported that they were "some" or "very" concerned about financing, an even higher figure than found nationally (68.9%). The difference may be in the Western tradition of working for pay while in college. For 1996 in-coming freshmen, 61.1% reported that they estimated their chances were very good that they would work while in college, a full 20.0% higher than for freshmen nationwide. Indeed, the lowest this figure has ever been was 50.3% in both 1976 and 1985. In contrast, the highest this figure has ever been for freshmen nationwide was 42.7% in 1977.

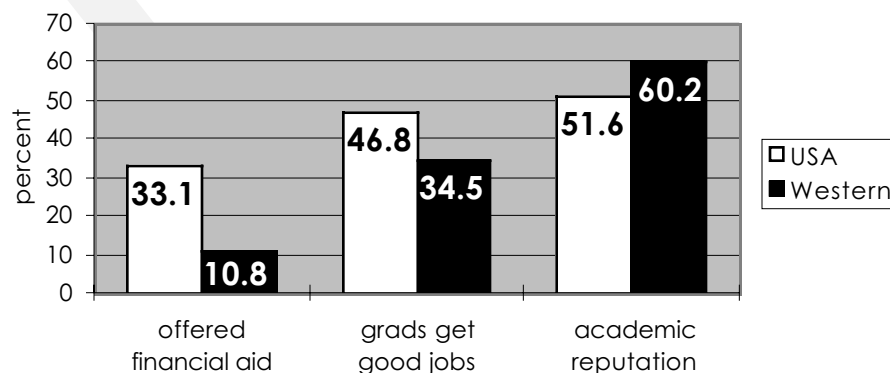
Yet Western freshmen were not exempt from feeling the pressure. Like their national counterparts, the percentage who reported “feeling overwhelmed by all I had to do” was at a record high of 28.3%. This figure is up from a low of 22.3% in 1985. Interestingly, the fluctuation between all-time highs and lows felt by Western freshmen (6.0%) varies much less than for freshmen nationwide (13.4%). Moreover, in the last ten years, Western freshmen were also less likely to report feeling depressed than freshmen nationally, with the percentage fluctuating between 7.6% to 9.0% compared to 8.2% to 10.5% nationwide. Apparently, some sort of mitigating factor exists that lightens the amount of stress students coming to Western feel.

What this factor or factors might be is hard to say. Just looking at the findings for this section alone, it’s obvious that Western students are more “laid-back” than their national counterparts, not quite as concerned with finances, with the jobs or graduate schools their degrees might lead them to. Yes, they do want a good education; after all, their primary reason for choosing Western is its academic reputation. But with the astounding success of Microsoft, with the stabilizing of Boeing in recent years, maybe Western freshmen are just assuming a good job awaits them. Or maybe its Western’s physical environment, a beautiful location close to many recreational (stress reducing) activities. For example, the percentage of Western freshmen who had spent three hours a week or more exercising or playing sports was 73.4%, compared to 60.8% of freshmen nationwide. Whatever the reasons may be, Western freshmen definitely have a somewhat different outlook than do their national counterparts. (See Table 1 and Figure 2.)

Table 1: "Felt Overwhelmed by All I Had to Do"

USA			Western		
highest (1996)	lowest (1985)	change	highest (1995)	lowest (1985)	change
29.4	16.0	+13.4	30.1	22.3	+7.8

Figure 2: "Very Important Reason for Selecting This College"



NATIONALLY, GRADE INFLATION CONTINUES

National researchers found a number of indicators pointing to increased grade inflation. For instance, the percentage of freshmen reporting 'A' grades reached an all-time high of 31.5%, while the percentage reporting 'C' grades reached an all-time low of 14.6%.

At Western, grade inflation has been very difficult to track. A number of assessment studies have tried, including: 1) The Evolving Character of WWU Freshmen: Analyses of CIRP Surveys from 1971 to 1991 (Report 1993-04); 2) CIRP Survey of WWU Freshmen for the 1993 In-coming Class (Report 1994-02); and 3) CIRP Survey of WWU Freshmen for the 1994 In-coming Class (Report 1995-03). Between the three reports the grade inflation issue was looked at in numerous ways. Both self-reported high school grade point averages (hsgpa) and transcribed hsgpa's were studied, as well as pre-college test scores. Also factored in were a number of attitudinal indicators taken from CIRP findings. None of the studies could do better than indicate that for Western freshmen the issue of grade inflation was inconclusive.

It is true that Western freshmen were even more likely than their national counterparts to report 'A' grades (54.8%), and very unlikely to report 'C' grades (0.6%). Yet the 1995 study cited above clearly indicates that since 1982, as hsgpa's have risen and/or fallen, so have pre-college test scores. If at the high school level grading has become easier, one would expect to see pre-college test scores (WPCT and/or SAT) to remain level or drop while high school grade point averages rose. But other than the period between 1979 to 1981, this is not the pattern than appeared when pre-college test scores and hsgpa's of in-coming Western freshmen were compared. (In Figures 3 and 4 below, two sets of pre-college test scores were used: the old Washington Pre-College Test, or WPCT, in use through the late 1980's; and the Scholastic Aptitude Test, or SAT, the pre-college test of record for most entering freshmen since 1990.)

Figure 3: High School GPA and WPCT-Comp Scores for WWU Freshmen: 1971-1988

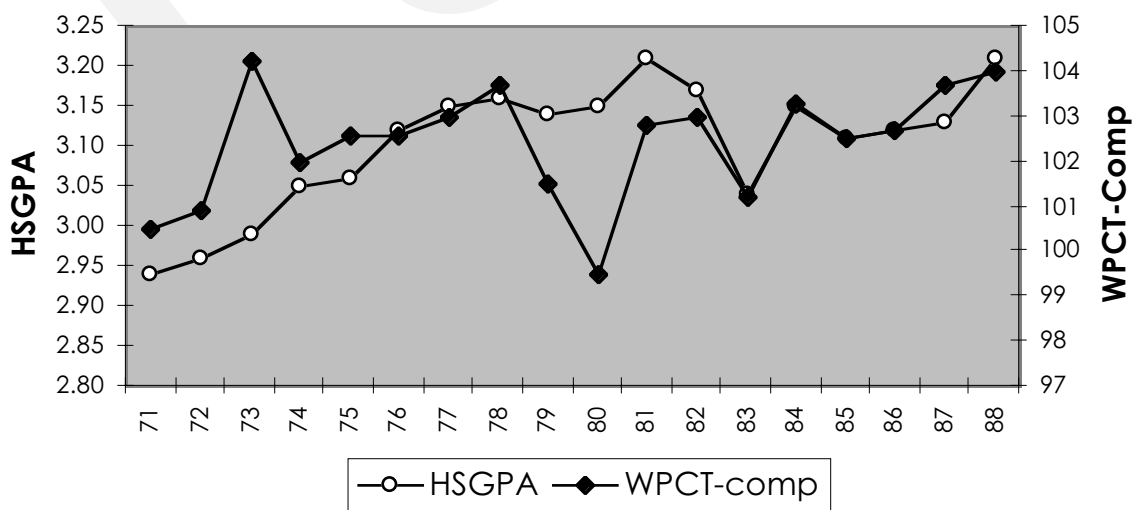
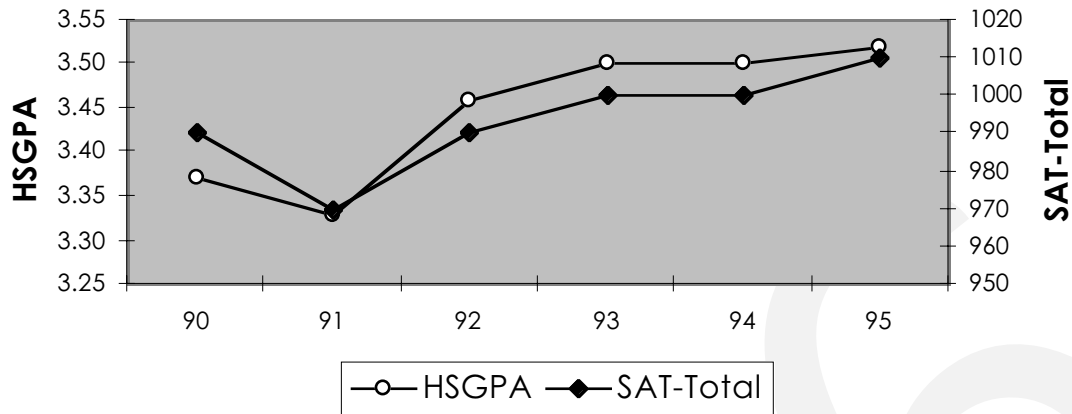


Figure 4: High School GPA and SAT-total Scores for WWU Freshmen: 1990-1995



Part of the reason we may not be seeing grade inflation at Western is that the increased demand for admissions has allowed many more better-prepared students than ever to attend. Unlike in the 1970's, when 8-10% of in-coming Western freshmen had 'C' averages, an exceedingly scant number with 'C' averages now gain admission.

Competitive admissions requirements are also cited by national CIRP Survey researchers as accounting for in-coming freshmen taking more college preparatory courses than ever. At Western, not only did freshmen report having taken more mathematics, foreign language, biological science, physical science, and computer science than ever before, but were even more likely than freshmen nationwide to report having taken college preparatory courses. (See Table 2.)

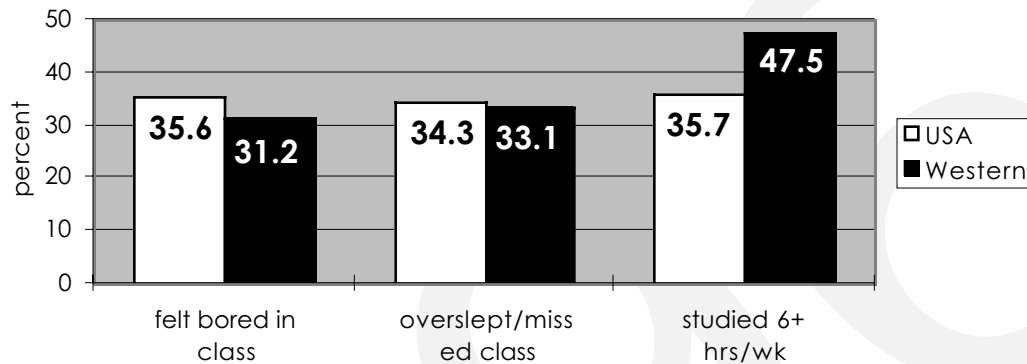
Table 2: "How many years did you study each of the following subjects"

	USA		Western	
	1996	lowest (yr)	1996	lowest (yr)
Mathematics (3 years)	95.1	83.3 ('83)	97.5	84.4 ('85)
Foreign Language (2 years)	84.4	64.2 ('83)	98.4	84.1 ('85)
Biological Science (2 years)	41.3	31.3 ('90)	37.1	31.3 ('85)
Physical Science (2 years)	52.6	46.9 ('92)	63.8	49.8 ('85)
Computer Science (1/2 year)	58.3	52.2 ('84)	61.8	55.4 ('94)

One last method national researchers have used to conclude that "grade inflation" has continued is to isolate certain survey responses that examine the attitudes and behaviors of in-coming freshmen toward academics. For instance, 35.6% of freshmen nationwide reported having felt bored in class, the all-time high. Also, 34.3% reported having overslept and missed class or appointment, also an all-time high. Moreover, only 35.7% reported that they studied six hours a week or more.

At Western, though the comparable figures are relatively close to those found for freshmen nationwide, the numbers tell a different story. For one, though 31.2% of Western freshmen reported having felt bored in class, this figure was an *all-time low*. Similarly, the 33.1% reporting having overslept and missed class or appointment was the lowest since 1971, when it was 29.1%. And finally, the percentage of Western freshmen reporting that they had studied six hours a week or more was 47.5%, *not only an all-time high, but also 11.8% higher than the national finding*. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5: Attitudes and Behaviors Supportive of "Grade Inflation"



Once again, the findings and connections that national CIRP researchers have used to present a case for “grade inflation” do not seem to work when applied to Western freshmen. Does this mean that “grade inflation” does not exist in Washington State, that there is something special and/or profound in Washington State’s K-12 system that has eliminated the issue? No, we cannot say that. All we can do is point to the fact that for in-coming *Western* freshmen the survey items that nationally indicate “grade inflation” do not indicate the same thing locally.

SELF-CONFIDENCE AND ASPIRATIONS ON THE RISE

In-coming freshmen are showing an increased sense of self-confidence. National researchers point out that this may be due to recent movements at the K-12 level to boost students’ self-concept. In any case, when asked to rate themselves in comparison to persons their own age, more freshmen nationwide--and an even higher percentage of Western freshmen--than ever rated themselves “above average or in the highest 10%” for academic ability (57.9% USA vs. 81.0% Western), writing ability (41.7% USA vs. 57.2% Western), and mathematical ability (39.0% USA vs. 42.4% Western), among others. (See Table 3.)

Table 3: "Rate yourself on each of the following traits as compared with the average person your age"

	USA			Western		
	1996	lowest (yr)	Change	1996	lowest (yr)	Change
Academic Ability	57.9	50.6 ('71)	+7.3	81.0	63.8 ('85)	+17.2
Writing Ability	41.7	27.2 ('66)	+14.5	57.2	39.1 ('71)	+18.1
Mathematical Ability	39.0	32.0 ('71)	+7.0	42.4	28.8 ('76)	+13.6

Increased freshmen self-confidence was paralleled by increased optimism and grander aspirations. Nationally--and even more so at Western--higher percentages of freshmen anticipated they would make a "B" average (49.0% USA vs. 62.0% Western), would earn a BA degree (69.0% USA vs. 87.2% Western), and would graduate with honors (17.8% USA vs. 18.8% Western).

Table 4: Students estimate their chances are "very good" that they will. . .

	USA			Western		
	1996	lowest (yr)	Change	1996	lowest (yr)	Change
Make a "B" average	49.0	32.7 ('72)	+16.3	62.0	44.2 ('71)	+17.4
Earn a Bachelor's degree	69.0	58.7 ('74)	+10.3	87.2	66.9 ('71)	+20.3
Graduate with Honors	17.8	3.7 ('68)	+14.1	18.8	6.1 ('76)	+12.7

INTEREST IN BUSINESS AND BIOLOGY AS MAJORS CHANGES DRAMATICALLY

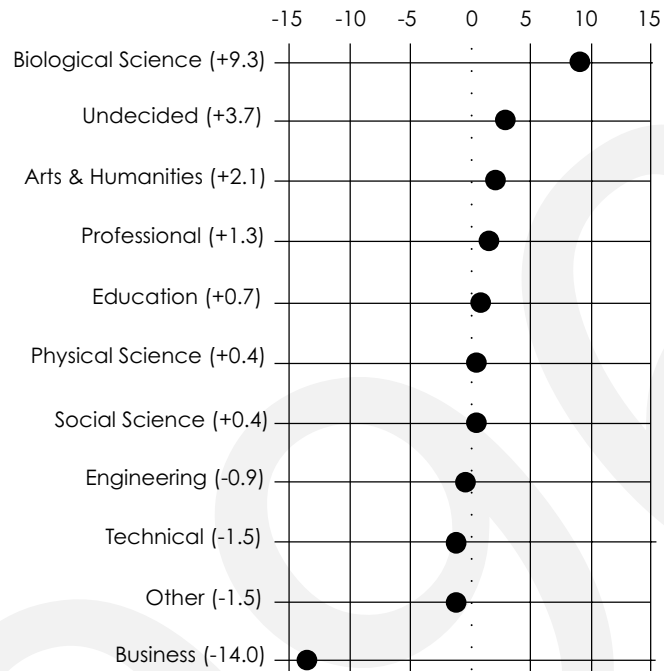
At Western, interest in Biological Science as a major has increased considerably since 1985. While most majors (with the exception of Business) have seen modest or little change, the percentage of in-coming freshmen anticipating they would major in Biological Sciences increased nearly ten percent.

On the other end of the scale, interest in Business has fallen dramatically. At its peak in 1985, 28.1% of in-coming freshmen indicated Business as their probable major. By 1996, this figure had fallen to 14.1%, a decrease of 14% over the ten-year span. Yet Business continues to be a popular major. For in-coming freshmen in 1996, only Education was a more popular anticipated major, with 15.0% indicating this preference. Also, interest in Business as a major, though far less popular than it was in 1985, was up from the 1994 figure of 12.5%. (See Table 5 and Figure 6.)

Table 5: Student's Probable Major

	1985	1996	Change
Biological Science	2.5	11.8	+9.3
Undecided	7.8	11.5	+3.7
Arts & Humanities	10.7	12.8	+2.1
Professional	8.3	9.6	+1.3
Education	14.3	15.0	+0.7
Physical Science	3.6	4.0	+0.4
Social Science	10.0	10.4	+0.4
Engineering	5.1	4.2	-0.9
Technical	2.6	1.1	-1.5
Other	7.1	5.6	-1.5
Business	28.1	14.1	-14.0

**Figure 6: Student's Probable Major
Relative Change between 1985 and 1996
(In percentage)**



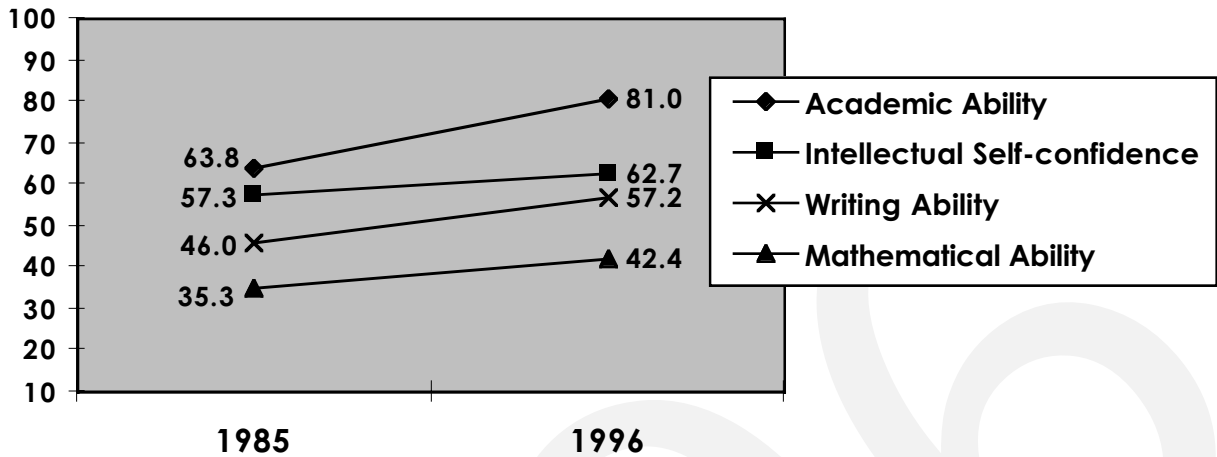
IN-COMING FRESHMEN, ESPECIALLY FEMALES, REVEAL A MORE “SCHOLARLY” CHARACTER

Certain CIRP Survey findings can be grouped to reveal the “personality” of a given cohort of students. One of these categories we’ll call “Scholar”. This analysis is one found in Alexander Astin’s *What Matters in College? Four Critical Years Revisited* (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 350 Sansome Street, San Francisco, CA 94104).

The findings used to reveal the extent of 1996 freshmen’s scholarly character include four self-ratings (academic ability, intellectual self-confidence, mathematical ability, and writing ability), plus noting as very important in choosing Western that its graduates go to top graduate schools.

In 1985, the percentage of in-coming freshmen rating their academic ability “above average or in the highest 10%” was 63.8%. In 1997, that figure was 81.0%, an increase of 17.2% over ten years. All the self-rating categories saw increases between 1985 and 1996, including intellectual self-confidence (from 57.3% to 62.7%), mathematical ability (from 35.3% to 42.4%), and writing ability (46.0% to 57.2%). Also increased was the percentage of students indicating they chose Western because its graduates get into top graduate schools, from 7.3% in 1985 to 16.1% in 1996, an increase of 8.8%. (See Figure 7.)

Figure 7: Freshman rated self above average or highest 10%



Yet while the “scholarly” character of 1996 in-coming freshmen has increased decidedly overall, the change for females was more dramatic than for males. In four of the five categories monitored, the percent of change over ten years was greater for females than for males. For instance, 60.0% of in-coming females rated themselves above average or in the highest 10% of academic ability in 1985, while 80.1% rated themselves such in 1996, an increase of 20.1%. For males, this increase was 12.5%, from 69.9% to 82.4%. Only self-ratings for mathematical ability was the percentage change between 1985 and 1996 greater for males than for females. (See Table 6.)

Table 6: Indicators of "Scholar" Characteristics in Western Freshmen -- 1985 and 1996 Compared by Gender

	<u>Males</u>			<u>Females</u>		
	1985	1996	Change	1985	1996	Change
Rated self above average of highest 10%						
Academic Ability	69.9	82.4	+12.5	60.0	80.1	+20.1
Intellectual Self-confidence	69.0	71.5	+2.5	50.1	57.4	+7.3
Mathematical Ability	44.9	52.2	+7.3	29.5	36.5	+7.0
Writing Ability	42.5	49.6	+7.1	48.1	61.7	+13.6
Reason noted as "very important" in choosing Western						
Graduates get into top graduate schools	5.2	13.5	+8.3	8.6	17.6	+9.0

Unfortunately, the findings do not paint an entirely rosy picture of the academic self-confidence of in-coming female freshmen. By rearranging the data in Table 6 slightly, as done in Table 7 below, some interesting trends can be noted. For one, regardless of which year you look at--1985 or 1996--in-coming freshmen males rate their academic ability, intellectual self-confidence and mathematical ability higher than females. Yet males are less likely than females to report earning "A" grades in high school (only 47.2% of males reported earning "A" grades versus 60.5% of females). It is also well documented that females earn better grades at Western (please see any of the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing's Graduation Reports). Yet females appear to be less confident in their academic abilities--except when it comes to their writing ability. Here, females rate themselves higher than males, a gap that has grown considerably in ten years. Females were also more likely to report that they chose Western because its graduates get into top graduate schools.

In contrast, males continue to have much more confidence in their mathematical ability, as well as have more intellectual self-confidence--though it should be noted that this gap has decreased slightly. A lot has been made of late in the way males and females are educated, and in-coming freshmen findings appear to confirm the stereotypes so often mentioned: males feel more confident with their math skills, females feel more confident with their writing skills. Indeed, only in the area of academic ability does the gap between male and female freshmen appear to be reaching parity. In 1996, this gap was only 2.3%--statistically a very minor difference--compared to 9.9% in 1985. And maybe this is where any change in how females and males are educated begins to surface, in a more general category rather than self-ratings for specific skills.

Table 7: Indicators of "Scholar" Characteristics in Western Freshmen by Percentage Gap between Males and Females in 1985 and 1996

	<u>1985</u>			<u>1996</u>		
	Male	Female	Gap	Male	Female	Gap
Rated self above average of highest 10%						
Academic Ability	69.9	60.0	M +9.9	82.4	80.1	M +2.3
Intellectual Self-confidence	69.0	50.1	M +18.9	71.5	57.4	M +14.1
Mathematical Ability	44.9	29.5	M +15.4	52.2	36.5	M +15.7
Writing Ability	42.5	48.1	F +5.6	49.6	61.7	F +12.7
Reason noted as "very important" in choosing Western						
Graduates get into top graduate schools	5.2	8.6	F +3.4	13.5	17.6	F +4.1

Last Words

The 1996 CIRP Survey had 354,853 participants from 709 two- and four-years colleges and universities. Of these, 251,232 survey forms from 494 institutions were judged the most representative samples, and were used to compute the national norms, statistically adjusted to represent the nation's total population of approximately 1.54 million first-time, in-coming freshmen.

The Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing maintains complete records of CIRP Surveys administered at Western since 1971. These records are available to any and all legitimate uses: administrators, staff, students, and/or community researchers included.

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