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Seniors Assess their Experience at Western Washington University: a Sequential Comparative Analysis

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Seniors Assess their Experience at Western Washington University: A Sequential Comparative Analysis

Prepared by Gary R. McKinney and Joseph E. Trimble

Introduction

This report combines findings from four senior surveys, administered during the spring quarters of 1993, and also 1995 through 1997. These surveys are longitudinal, resurveying in the senior year those students who had taken the freshmen survey four years previously. The survey form utilized was the College Student Survey (CSS), developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California, Los Angeles. The CSS was designed to serve as a follow-up to the Student Information Form—the freshmen survey questionnaire also developed by HERI—or as a stand-alone instrument. Both the senior and fresh-

men surveys profile student characteristics, attitudes, values, educational achievements, and goals.

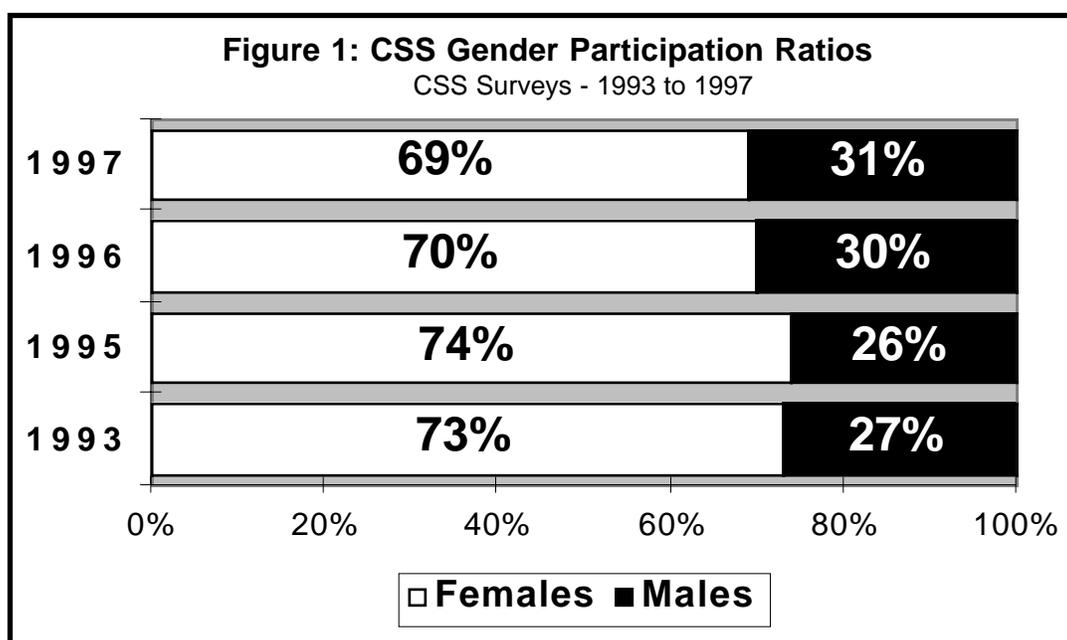
When comparing senior/freshmen survey findings, it is important to keep in mind that freshmen surveys were administered during the summer prior to the fall in which these first-time, in-coming freshmen began classes; thus, freshmen survey findings actually reflect the activities and attitudes of college-bound high school students. Senior surveys, on the other hand, were administered nearly four years later; thus, they reflect activities and attitudes of the same cohort of students after considerable college experience.

Table of Contents

Demographics	Pages 2-3
How Have Seniors Spent Their Time?	Pages 4-7
Improved Skills and Abilities	Page 8
With What are Seniors Satisfied	Pages 9-11

Demographics

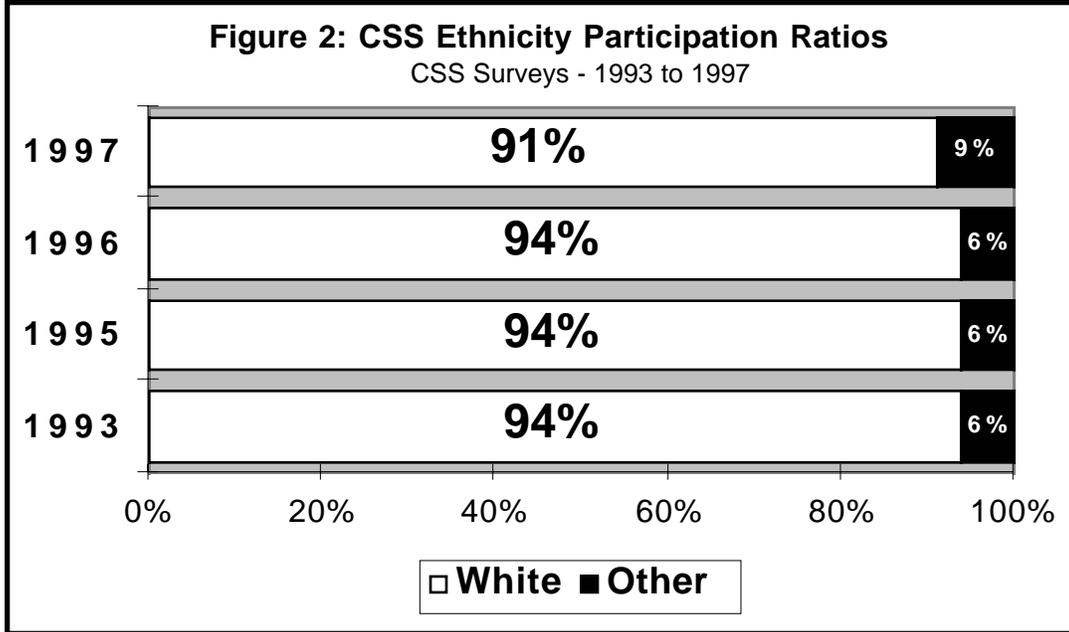
The number of CSS participants increased more than twofold between 1993 and 1997, from 213 to 448. As first-time, in-coming freshmen, over 95% of survey respondents were aged 18 to 19; thus, as college seniors four years later, most respondents were aged 22 to 23. Most survey respondents were female, though there was a modest increase in the percentage of male respondents. In 1993's administration, 27% of the participants were male and 73% female. By 1997's administration, 31% were male and 69% females. As a point of comparison, in the last decade the gender ratio of the overall population of Western students has been approximately 55% female and 45% male. In survey research, it is common to have gender ratios skewed towards female participants. (See Figure 1).



Most survey respondents were White, though in 1997 the percentage of ethnic-minority participants (9%) was the highest ever. In all four CSS survey administrations, the percentage of ethnic-minority participants has been less than that of the population of ethnic-minorities in the student body population. Primarily, this is because the CSS is administered only to those students who took the freshmen survey four years earlier, whose pool of students is consistently underrepresented by ethnic-minorities. For instance, in 1991 ethnic-minorities made up 10% of the freshmen class, but only 6% of freshmen survey participants; in 1992 ethnic-minorities made up 14% of the class, but only 6% of the survey participants; and in 1993 ethnic-minorities made up 18% of the class, but only 9% of the survey participants.

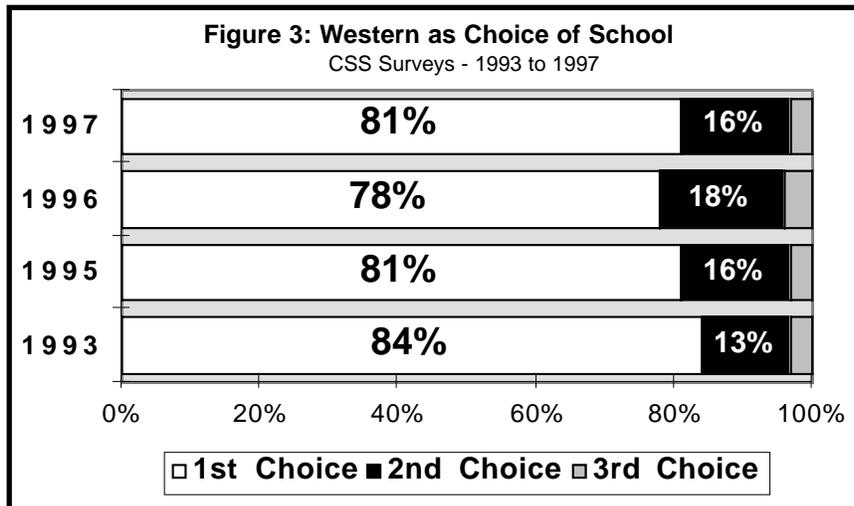
The reason for the underparticipation of ethnic-minorities in the freshmen survey may be linked to freshmen survey administration logistics. Though a small number of in-coming freshmen take

the freshmen survey at September orientation program (less than 10%) most take the survey in August, at SummerStart, an event ethnic-minority freshmen have been less likely to attend than White freshmen. (See Figure 2.)



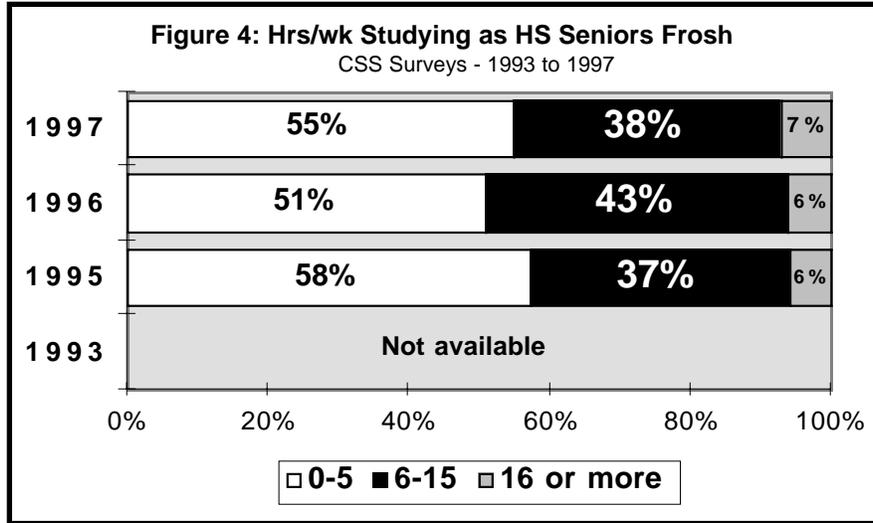
For Most, Western is First Choice

Western was the first school of choice for most survey respondents. It was the first or second choice of over 95% of respondents. The three top reasons given for choosing Western were: 1) **academic reputation**; 2) **size of college**; and 3) **that Western “graduates get good jobs”**. (See Figure 3.)

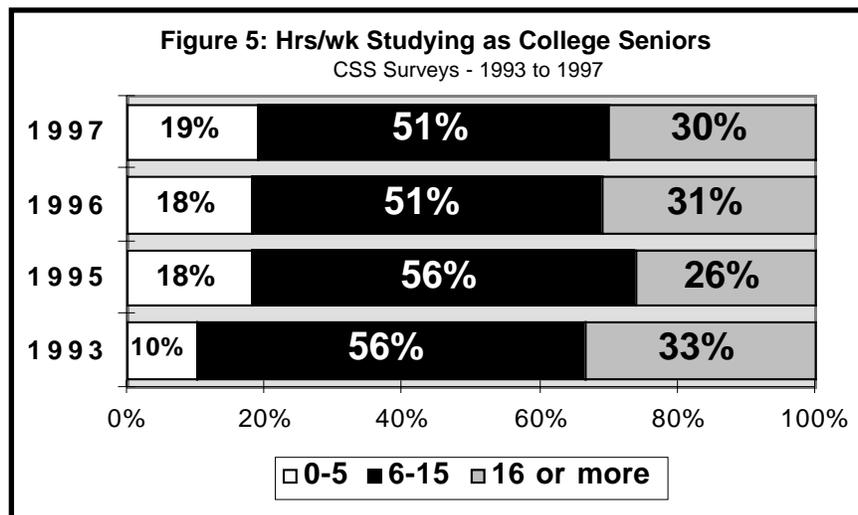


How Have Students Spent Their Time?

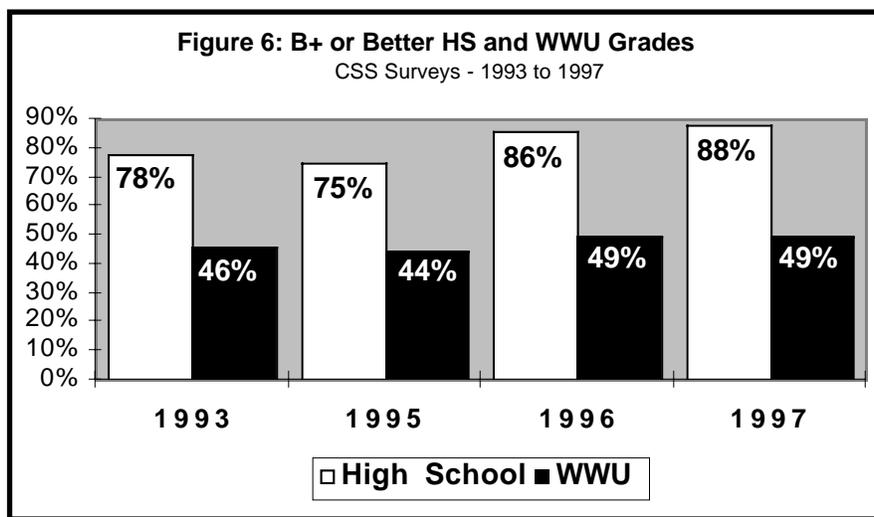
Survey respondents were asked to estimate how many hours a week they spent on a series of activities—for instance, studying. Keep in mind that when they were in-coming freshmen, survey respondents would have been reflecting back on hours spent on activities over the course of their senior year in high school. As Figure 4 points out, during that high school senior year over 50% of these in-coming freshmen had spent five hours or less a week studying.



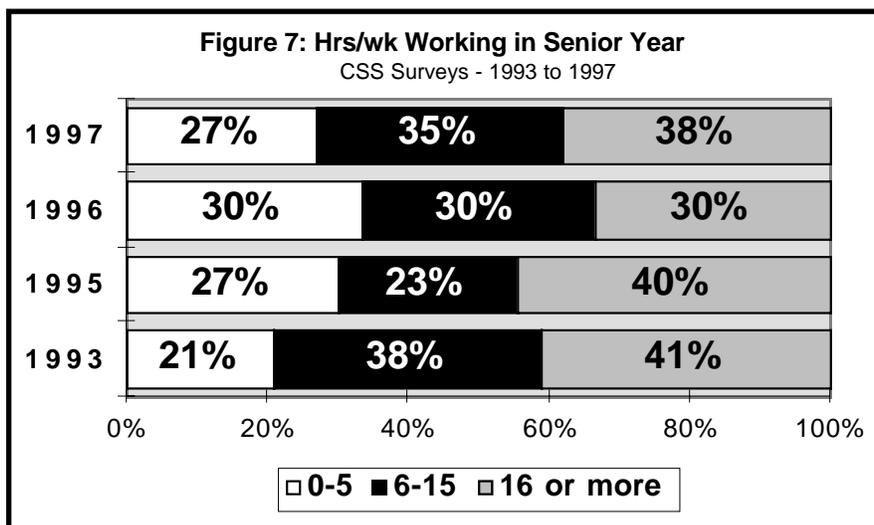
Compared to when they were high school seniors, CSS survey respondents spent much more time studying when they were college seniors. The percentage of survey respondents spending 6 to 15 hours a week, and 16 hours or more a week increased significantly. However, in the survey years 1995 through 1997, nearly twenty percent of college seniors were still reporting that they spent five hours a week or less studying. (See Figure 5.)



In the 1990's, in-coming freshmen were coming to Western with stronger high school credentials than at any time in the school's history. Accordingly, they have earned better college grades—a trend borne out in CSS survey findings. For instance, in the 1995 CSS survey, 75% of respondents reported high school grades of B+ or better; in the 1997 CSS survey, 88% of respondents reported high school grades of B+ or better. The college grades of CSS respondents have also risen, though much more modestly, from 46% reporting college grades of B+ or better in 1993 to 49% in 1997. (See Figure 6.)

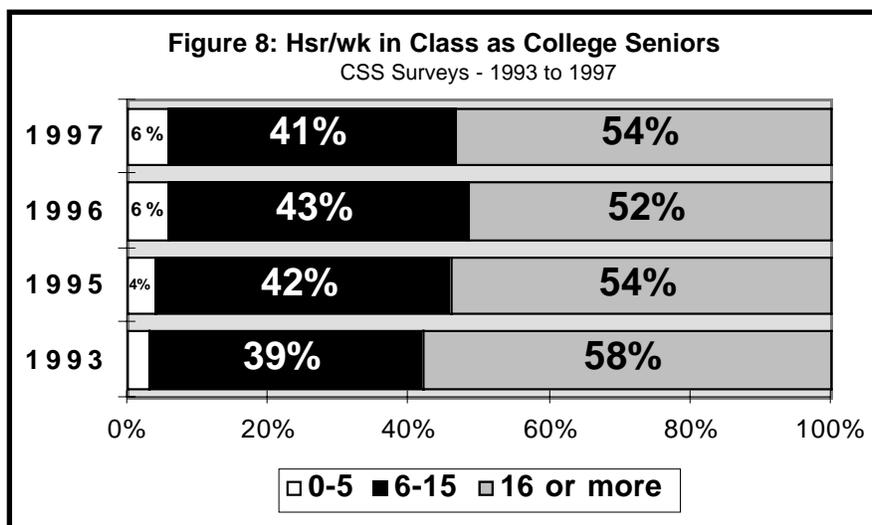


Figures 5 and 6 tell an interesting story. In-coming freshmen appear more academically prepared, but also appear to be spending somewhat less time studying. If students are studying somewhat less, what activities were they engaging in? Were they, for instance, having to work more for pay—in order to keep up with the rising costs of higher education? No, according to CSS survey findings. College seniors were actually working slightly less in recent years than in 1993. (See Figure 7.)

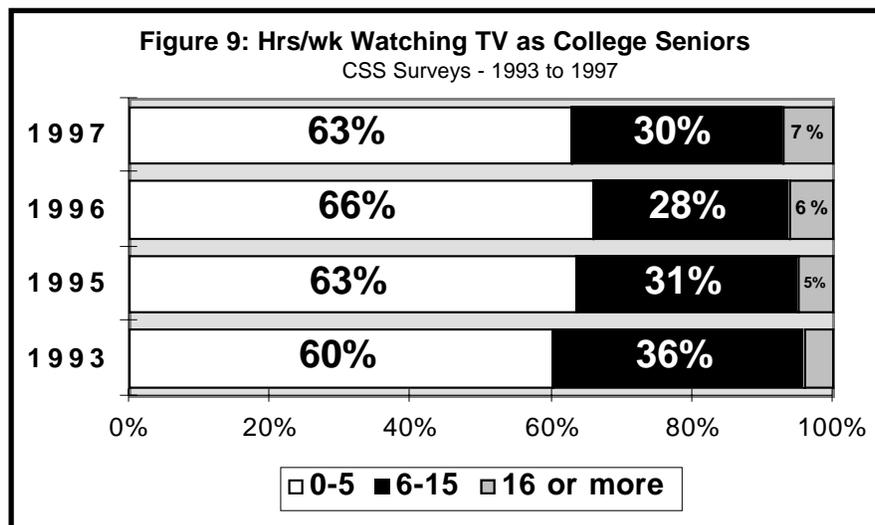


How Have Students Spent Their Time? (continued)

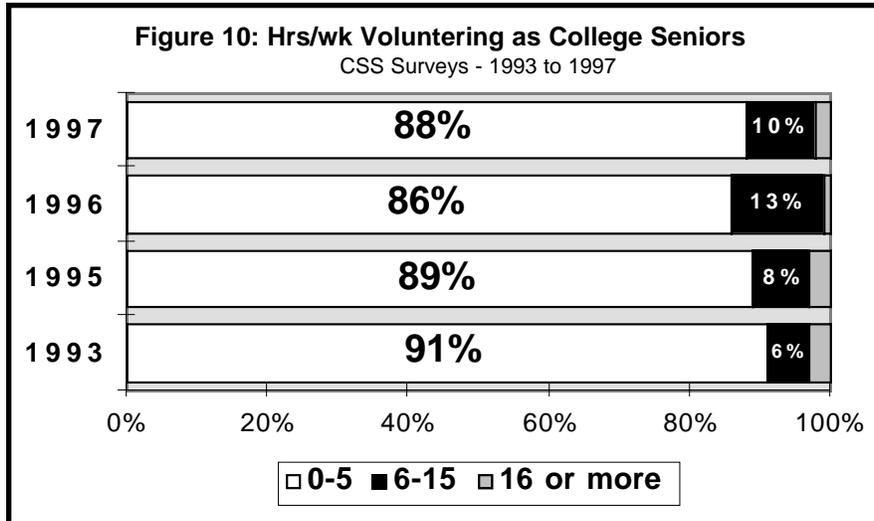
Findings from CSS surveys in 1996 and 1997 indicated that CSS respondents were also spending slightly less time in the classroom than CSS respondents reported in 1995 and especially in 1993. In the two most recent surveys, there were slightly higher percentages of seniors reporting spending five hours or less in the classroom and slightly lower percentages reporting spending sixteen hours a week or more. (See Figure 8.)



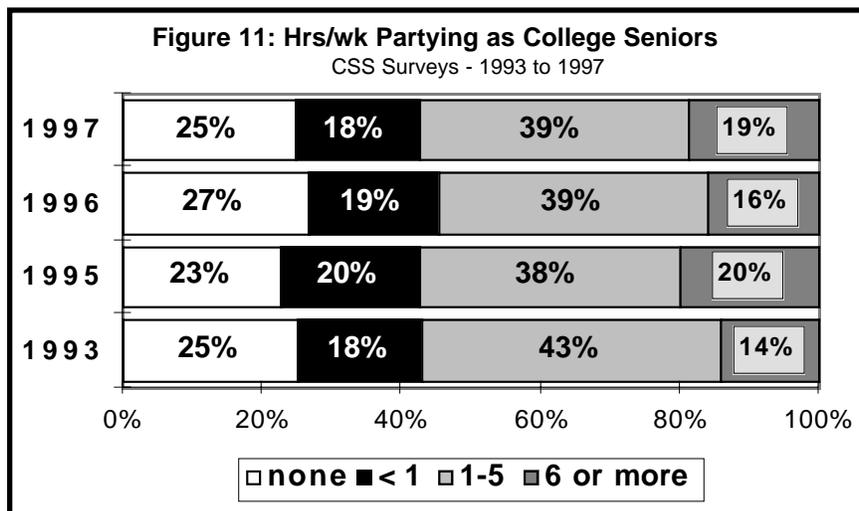
If they were studying less, working less, and spending less time in the classroom, were CSS respondents, then, watching more television than they once had? Not really, according to the CSS findings—though patterns of television viewing changed somewhat. Comparing viewing habits in 1997 to those in 1993, slightly more students reported watching television 16 hours a week or more, while at the same time slightly more students reported watching television five hours a week or less. (See Figure 9.)



Volunteering was one activity that saw higher participation levels in recent years than in years previous. The percentage of students reporting that they had volunteered six hours a week or more increased from 8% in 1993 to 12% in 1997. (See Figure 10.)



Another activity that has seen a slight increase in participation is partying. In 1993, approximately 14% of CSS survey respondents reported partying six hours a week or more. In the 1997 CSS survey, 19% of respondents reported partying six hours a week or more. (See Figure 11.) On the other hand, approximately 25% of Western seniors reported that they did not party at all, with approximately another 20% reporting they partied less than one hour per week—figures that have been relatively consistent over the four survey administrations. Also, It should be kept in mind that all the changes in student activities mentioned, whether studying or partying, have been slight, less than five percentage points in most instances. With such slight differences trend analysis is weak and the figures should be viewed accordingly.



How Do Seniors View Their Improvement?

When seniors were asked to compare their current skills and abilities to when they were freshmen, the percentage citing “much stronger” abilities was highest for knowledge in a particular field or discipline. The second highest percentage was for general knowledge. Further down the list were percentages for ability to think critically, problem solving skills, and interpersonal skills. (See Table 1.)

Table 1: Percent of Seniors Reporting "Much Stronger" Abilities than in Their Freshmen Year*

Item	1993		1995		1996		1997	
	WWU	USA	WWU	USA	WWU	USA	WWU	USA
Ability to think critically	29%	26%	30%	31%	29%	35%	29%	26%
Ability to work cooperatively	10%	16%	15%	21%	14%	23%	10%	15%
Analytical and problem-solving skills	21%	21%	24%	27%	23%	30%	26%	24%
Foreign language ability	7%	7%	6%	8%	8%	10%	10%	8%
General knowledge	49%	37%	48%	45%	50%	46%	47%	37%
Interpersonal skills	21%	21%	23%	25%	23%	29%	23%	22%
Mathematical skills	7%	10%	7%	13%	6%	17%	7%	10%
Public speaking ability	14%	16%	15%	22%	20%	25%	15%	16%
Religious beliefs and convictions	14%	10%	10%	9%	15%	13%	15%	10%
Reading speed and comprehension	5%	10%	13%	14%	11%	15%	11%	11%
Writing skills	17%	17%	21%	19%	17%	20%	16%	16%
Knowledge of people from different races/cultures	18%	16%	18%	18%	17%	21%	19%	16%
Knowledge of a particular field or discipline	73%	48%	73%	57%	71%	64%	73%	53%

*Comparison is between Western Seniors and Seniors at peer institutions across the nation
(The number of institutions varies by year, but averages 8-9)

In Table 1, responses from Western Seniors were compared to responses from the national sample of CSS survey respondents in each of the four survey years. For this report, the national sample used was of institutions categorized similarly to Western. As designed by national CSS survey administrators (the Higher Educational Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles), Western falls under the category public, four-year institute—a public university that grants few, if any Ph.D.'s.

Areas in which Western seniors rated their skills and abilities higher than their national counterparts in all four survey years included knowledge in a particular field, general knowledge, and religious beliefs and convictions. Areas in which Western seniors rated their

skills and abilities lower than their national counterparts in all four survey years included mathematical skills, ability to work cooperatively, and public speaking ability.

With What Are Seniors Satisfied, or Not Satisfied?

Seniors were asked to rate their “satisfaction with this college on each of the aspects of campus life listed below”. A four-part scale was used: very satisfied, satisfied, neutral, dissatisfied. A fifth response of “can’t rate/no experience” was also an option. For the purposes of this study, the responses very satisfied and satisfied were combined into one response called “satisfied”.

As in Table 1, the responses of Western CSS survey respondents regarding their satisfaction with various aspects of campus life are presented beside responses from the national sample of CSS survey respondents in each of the four survey years, using only those findings from similarly categorized institutions.

Longitudinally, most responses by Western CSS survey responses were consistent over the four survey administrations. For instance, the percentage of seniors rating their overall college experience very satisfactory or satisfactory varied by only 5%. A few items saw statistical blips; for example, the percentage of seniors rating “sense of community on campus” rose sharply in 1996 to 70%, then fell back in 1997 to a figure more in line with those found in 1993 and 1995. The only item that saw a steady rise in satisfaction levels was that for lab facilities and equipment, which was probably influenced by the new science buildings built over that time span.

The most intriguing aspect of the findings was the comparison to the national sample, where for the most part Western findings were competitive. In Table 2, for instance, Western’s seniors appeared quite pleased with their overall college experience, and with the overall quality of instruction they received.

	1993		1995		1996		1997	
	WWU	USA	WWU	USA	WWU	USA	WWU	USA
Overall college experience	83%	80%	86%	81%	88%	79%	84%	81%
Overall quality of instruction	77%	73%	74%	76%	73%	75%	77%	75%

With What Are Seniors Satisfied, or Not Satisfied?(continued)

CSS survey respondents also appeared pleased with the courses in their major field. The percentage indicating satisfaction was high and quite comparable to national findings. Moreover, seniors appeared quite satisfied with humanities courses and, for the most part, social science courses, although there was an odd blip in the 1996 survey results. In that survey administration, the percentage of seniors indicating satisfaction with social science courses fell from 72% to 49%, before rebounding to 68% in 1997. Satisfaction with science and math courses, however, was not so encouraging. Not only was the percentage of seniors indicating satisfaction with science and math courses low, percentages were consistently lower than they were compared to national findings. (See Table 3.)

	1993		1995		1996		1997	
	WWU	USA	WWU	USA	WWU	USA	WWU	USA
Courses in major field	88%	85%	92%	88%	89%	88%	87%	86%
Humanities courses	72%	70%	71%	67%	65%	67%	67%	63%
Social science courses	71%	70%	72%	67%	49%	66%	68%	63%
Science and math courses	53%	63%	50%	60%	45%	60%	48%	54%

Services was another area in which findings from Western seniors did not match up very well against national findings. The percentages of Western seniors indicating satisfaction with academic advising, career counseling, financial aid services, and tutorial help were all lower than national percentages. On the other hand, percentages of Western seniors indicating satisfaction with student housing, job placement services, and campus health services were more competitive. (See Table 4.)

	1993		1995		1996		1997	
	WWU	USA	WWU	USA	WWU	USA	WWU	USA
Academic advising	32%	46%	37%	50%	36%	52%	30%	48%
Campus health services	55%	47%	47%	56%	49%	56%	50%	46%
Career counseling/ advising	29%	44%	38%	49%	33%	49%	36%	43%
Financial aid services	28%	38%	34%	47%	44%	51%	39%	47%
Job placement services	38%	38%	39%	37%	27%	44%	32%	35%
Student housing	52%	45%	52%	54%	54%	48%	53%	49%
Tutorial help	58%	65%	49%	64%	48%	64%	49%	54%

When it came to campus facilities, findings were mixed. The addition of the new science complexes has apparently had some effect, as the percentage of seniors indicating satisfaction with lab facilities and equipment rose steadily from 41% in 1993 to 72% in 1997, while at the same time going from 10% lower than national findings to 10% higher. Satisfaction with library facilities, on the other hand, has steadily eroded, from 50% in 1993 to 42% in 1997. More than likely these findings will begin to rise again with the completion of the library renovations. (See Table 5.)

	1993		1995		1996		1997	
	WWU	USA	WWU	USA	WWU	USA	WWU	USA
Computer facilities	59%	63%	60%	69%	61%	58%	55%	60%
Lab facilities & equipment	41%	51%	56%	59%	61%	66%	72%	62%
Library facilities	50%	62%	49%	64%	46%	66%	42%	56%

The catchall “Other” category of senior satisfaction also had mixed findings. The percentage of seniors indicating satisfaction with the sense of community on campus was quite competitive with national figures. On the other hand, the percentage indicating satisfaction with such issues as the ability to find a mentor, class size, and diversity of the faculty was lower than national findings in all four survey years. (See Table 6.)

	1993		1995		1996		1997	
	WWU	USA	WWU	USA	WWU	USA	WWU	USA
Ability to find mentor	54%	60%	56%	65%	53%	66%	56%	59%
Amount of contact w / faculty	55%	56%	59%	67%	63%	69%	55%	61%
Interaction with other students	83%	81%	82%	84%	79%	83%	76%	78%
Sense of community on campus	53%	54%	52%	56%	70%	52%	43%	43%
Class size	62%	69%	52%	73%	56%	75%	56%	69%
Diversity of faculty	27%	47%	26%	45%	26%	49%	24%	39%
Relevance of coursework to life	42%	57%	54%	59%	53%	57%	50%	55%

Yet in spite of the few areas in which Western seniors were less enthusiastic than their national counterparts, one issue was very clear: that given the opportunity to make their college choice over, **Western seniors overwhelming, and consistently, indicated that they would choose Western again.** An average of 86% so indicated across the four survey administrations (1993 = 87%, 1995 = 85%, 1996 = 86%, and 1997 = 86%).

Summary

The CSS Surveys were longitudinal: Seniors who had taken the Freshmen Survey four years previous were resurveyed. The instruments used in each year were designed by the same researchers and allowed direct comparisons. The survey participants were not randomly selected; demographically the cohort had a higher ratio of females and Whites than were found in the overall student body. Also, nearly all survey participants had attended SummerStart, which not all freshmen attend, especially ethnic-minority students. Thus, while the findings should be taken seriously, these caveats should also be kept in mind. Trends are described, but their strength may be weak.

Most importantly, Western seniors overall seemed pleased with their Western experience. Ratings for “overall college experience” and “overall quality of instruction” were high and compared favorably to Western’s peer institutions nationwide. It was ratings for specific services that were less than might be hoped. A similar trend was noted when seniors were asked to rate their skills and abilities compared to when they were freshmen. Ratings for “knowledge in a particular field” and “general knowledge” were high and competitive with national findings, but in certain specific ability areas those ratings fell somewhat short of national findings.

Another caveat to keep in mind when considering these findings is that the first senior survey was administered in 1993 and the most recent in 1997. Four surveys were conducted over five years—not an extraordinary amount of time from which to draw serious concerns, nor to take hasty accolades. Nevertheless, it is of some interest to consider how Western seniors reported spending their time. According to these findings, seniors were spending slightly less time studying, working for pay, and in the classroom, and slightly more time volunteering and partying.

The complete set of CSS findings is available through the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing.

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