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EXPECTATIONS VS. EXPERIENCE: WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY'S CSXQ/CSEQ FINDINGS

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ASSESSING THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE

In 2002, the Office of the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education (through the Office of Institutional Assessment, Research, and Testing) administered pre and post surveys to first-year students, to determine and compare their expectations and experiences of their first college year. As Western moves forward with revisions to its general education requirements and considers expansion of special programs such as the First-year Interest Group (FIG) Program, it became more important to gather more specific data on the first college year.

The research was driven by two over-arching questions: How do the experiences of Western first-year students align with their expectations? What can we learn from students' experiences that can inform and help us envision an optimal first-year experience? Two measures were used: The College Student

Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ), and The College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ).

Because Western has often participated in The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), a national longitudinal survey of entering first-year students developed by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), their expectations of Western, for the most part, were well-documented. What was more of a mystery, however, were detailed data (excluding grades and retention) on what happened to the students over the course of the academic year. The CSEQ was one of the first surveys in which Western first-year students were asked to report on their actual first-year *experiences*. CSEQ results have proved enlightening, both in how they compare students' self-evaluation of their experiences with their expectations, and in clarifying for us levels of student engagement with academics, faculty, and the college environment in general.



THE CSEQ

The College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) was developed by C. Robert Pace at the University of California Los Angeles in the 1970s and was introduced as a multi-institutional survey tool in 1979. It has been revised three times since (1983, 1990, 1998). Since its inception, the CSEQ has been administered to over 300,000 U.S. students attending more than 400 different colleges and universities, making it the third largest national database on college student experiences. In 1994, the CSEQ research program was moved to Indiana University, Bloomington. In the spring of 2000 the online version of the survey was introduced.

The CSEQ remains one of the few national assessment instruments that inventories both the processes of learning (e.g., interactions with faculty, collaboration with peers, and writing experiences) and progress toward desired outcomes of college (e.g., intellectual skills, interpersonal competence, and personal values).¹ The survey also asks questions about the student's experience with the institution in three areas: (a) college activities; (b) the college environment; and (c) estimate of gains.²

THE CSXQ

In 1998, the CSEQ Research Program introduced the College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ).³ The CSXQ is primarily a shortened version of its parent instrument, the CSEQ. The two measures have 87 items in common, not including background information. When used alone, the CSXQ measures students' beliefs about how they will spend their time during the up-coming academic year. When paired with the CSEQ as a post-test measure, the CSXQ can assess the degree to which those expectations were met.⁴

SAMPLE & METHODS

It was determined that—similar to the administration of the CIRP—the most accurate way to determine students' expectations of Western would be to survey them before they had set foot on campus. At the end of July 2002, email invitations to participate in the CSXQ were sent to 632 prospective students. Half (316) were FIGs students, who had already signed up for a FIGs cluster; half were randomly-selected first-year students who had been accepted and agreed to attend Western, but had not yet registered for classes.

¹Borden, V. & Zak Owens, J. (2001). *Measuring quality: Choosing among surveys and other college and university quality assessments*. A joint publication of the American Council on Education, Washington, DC, and the Association for Institutional Research, Tallahassee, FL.

² Gonyea, R.M., Kish, K.A., Kuh, G.D., Muthiah, R.N., & Thomas, A.D. (2003). *College Student Experiences Questionnaire: Norms for the Fourth Edition*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, Policy, and Planning.

³Kuh, G.D., & Pace, C.R. (1998). *College student expectations questionnaire (2nd ed.)*. Center for Postsecondary Research and Planning. Bloomington: Indiana University.

⁴ Gonyea, R.M. (2001, May). The college student expectations questionnaire: Assessing college student expectations of their college education (14 paragraphs). *FYA-List Series* (On-line serial). Brevard NC: Policy Center on the First-Year of College.

The inclusion of the entire population of FIG students was intentional: the FIG Program was designed specifically to address some of the transition issues already identified as ones commonly experienced by first-year students (need for small group experience and research skills, among others). Data gathered from FIG students at the end of fall quarters in 2001 and 2002 showed the FIGs' positive effect on students' grades and retention, but the researchers were interested to see if other differences between FIG and non-FIG students could be demonstrated through the use of these survey measures. Also, no data on the effects of FIG had been gathered toward the end of the first academic year.

The CSXQ online version was used. Students in the sample could access the survey anytime between July 26 and Aug. 8. During that testing window, email reminders also went out to students. A total of 87 emails were undeliverable. In all, 218 students responded to the survey.

In late April, a thank-you letter was sent to those 218 responding to the CSXQ who had local addresses; the letter also served to notify them of the upcoming CSEQ survey. The survey window officially opened on April 30; students were sent instructions and several email reminders and the survey window remained open through May 16. One student indicated she did not attend Western, although she had responded to the CSXQ. Of the 218 students, 112, or 49.5%, completed and submitted CSEQ surveys.

FINDINGS

DEMOGRAPHICS

Typical of survey research, most participants in the CSEQ were female. Atypical of much survey research, the CSEQ allowed students to choose more than one ethnicity; thus the expected percentage of students indicating White/Caucasian ethnicity (around 90%) was only 83%, with 11% of student indicating a multi-racial make-up. Students self-reported grades, and as is the case with self-reporting, the grade level is probably a little high. However, as grades are used in this report's analyses simply as a yardstick against which to compare other variables, the exact grades of survey respondents are not really important. Three-quarters (75%) of CSEQ survey respondents had at least one parent who is a college grad. Nearly three-quarters (71%) indicated they planned on attaining an advanced degree (Masters, Ph.D., etc.). (See Table 1 on page 4.)

WORKING FOR PAY

Previous to the CSEQ survey, data from the CIRP survey of freshmen indicated that most incoming Western freshmen anticipated they would work a job to help pay expenses. Data from the CSS, or Senior Survey (also developed by HERI) indicated that, indeed, most Western students did work a job to help pay expenses while attending college. However, until the

CSEQ survey, researchers had never asked freshmen at the end of their first year whether they had actually gotten those jobs they thought they would be needing. And it turned out that while most freshmen thought they would get a job, very few actually did. The percentage of freshmen who expected to work at least 10 hours a week was 51%; the percentage who actually did work at least 10 hours a week was 12%. (See Table 2, and Figure 1 on page 5.)

Table 1: Demographics

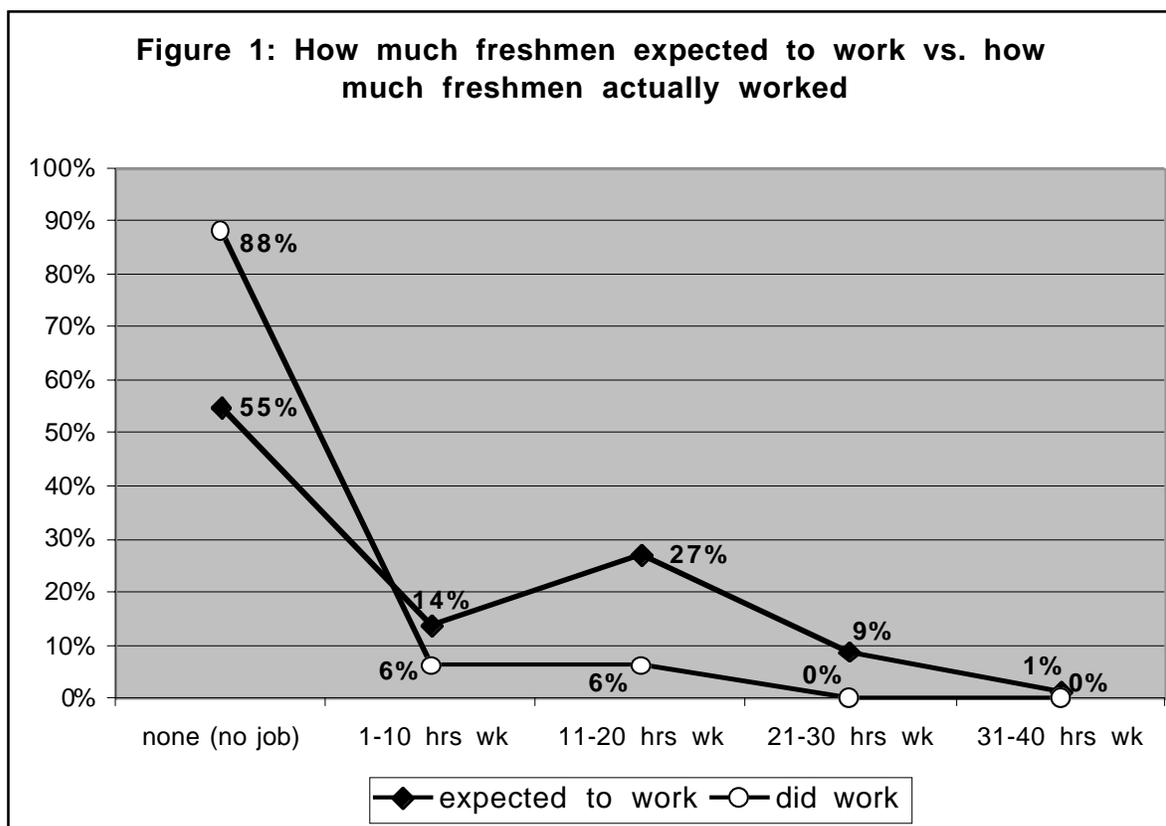
Ethnicity			WWU Grades	%	n
Asian/Pacific Islander	3%	3	A	13%	15
Black/African-American	2%	2	A-/B+	31%	35
White, Caucasian	83%	92	B	34%	38
Other	2%	2	B-/C+	15%	17
Multiracial	11%	12	C or lower	6%	7
	101%	111		99%	112
Gender		%	n	Parent's College Grads?	
Male	28%	31	No	23%	26
Female	72%	81	Yes, both	42%	47
	100%	112	Yes, either	35%	39
				100%	112

Table 2: Hours worked for pay

	None/no job	1-10 hrs/wk	11-20 hrs/wk	21+ hrs/wk
Hours working on campus for pay	88%	6%	6%	-
Hours working off campus for pay	85%	6%	6%	3%

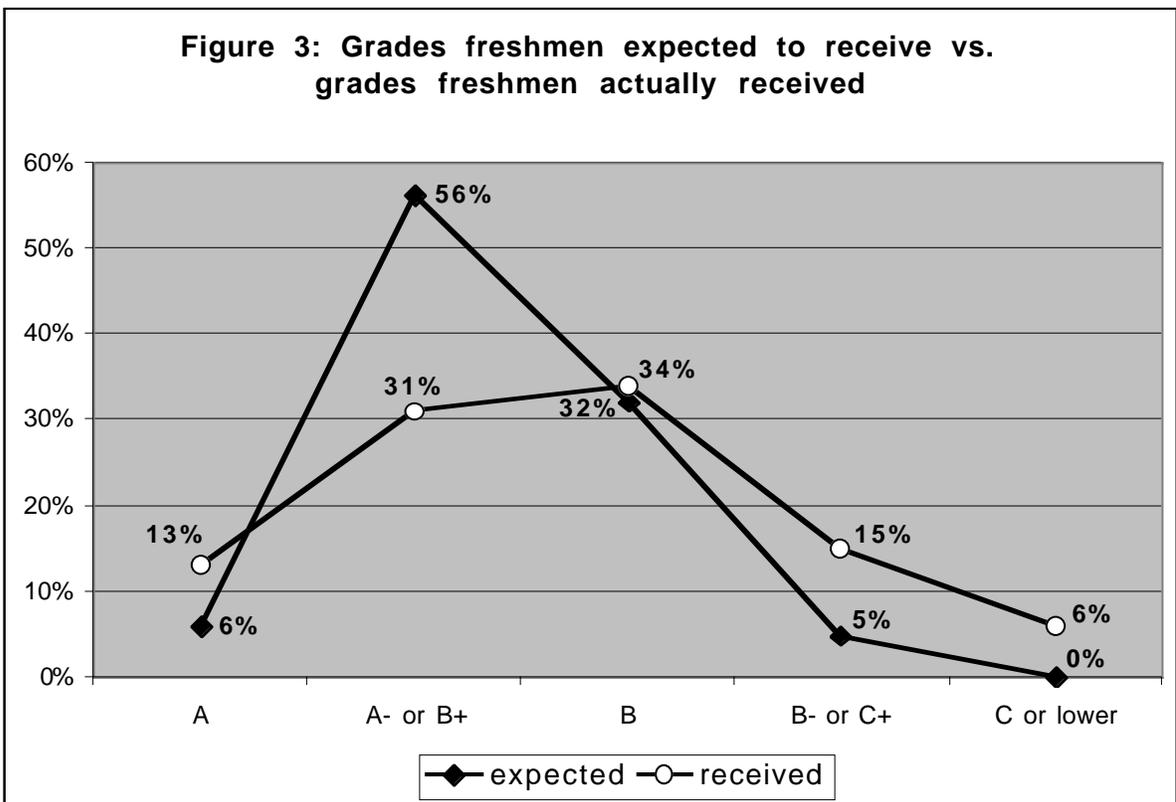
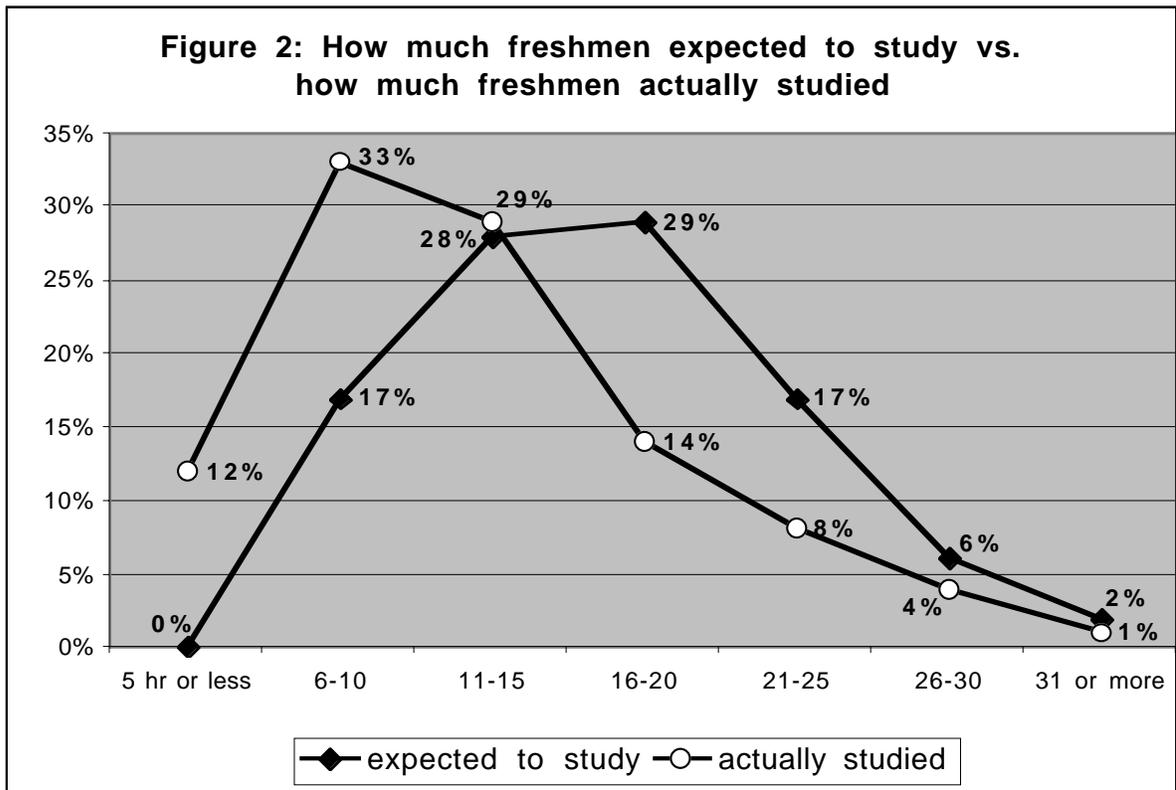
STUDYING

One common conception about in-coming frosh is that they don't know how to, or are not prepared for the amount of homework and studying they will encounter. In-coming Western frosh have had successful academic careers in high school (the average hsgpa being 3.5 and the average SAT being 1100), and thus might be expecting that the same amount of effort will



result in the same high grades they have been used to receiving. Possibly they are expecting college to be harder; possibly they are expecting to study more. And from what the CSXQ tells us, most in-coming frosh appear to have the right attitude toward studying. Over half (54%) expected to study a minimum of 16 hours a week or more which, when added to an average credit load of 15-16 hours, indicates a fairly appropriate academic commitment of at least 30 hours a week.

Yet responses to the CSEQ note an experience different from expectations. Most frosh in the survey (74%) indicated they studied *fewer* than 16 hours a week, with 45% indicating they studied fewer than 11 hours a week. Of course these students also paid a price, as there was a direct correlation (as one would assume) between hours studied and grades received. Two academic activities in particular correlated positively to higher grades: 1) “hours on out-of-class academic work” and 2) “completed assigned readings”. In this case, $R^2 = .177$, which means that 18% of the difference between grades was explained by responses to these two items. It’s hard to imagine these in-coming frosh suddenly losing their interest in academic success; indeed, as other CSEQ findings presented in this report indicate, they apparently had other important issues eating up their time and concentration. (See Figure 2.)



GRADES

As might be assumed from the previous findings on how much less they actually studied, incoming freshmen expected to receive better grades than they actually earned. Most survey respondents (62%) expected to receive at least a B+ average, with 6% expecting to earn A's. In actuality, only 44% received grades that high, with a number of high achievers (13% with A's) skewing the results somewhat. Only 5% of respondents expected to earn grades of B- or lower, yet 21% actually did receive such grades. In other words, a few students earned better grades than they expected, while most earned worse grades than they expected. (See Figure 3 on page 6.)

STUDENT/FACULTY INTERACTION

Entering freshmen expect to engage in a great deal more interaction with faculty—both in and out of class—than they actually reported experiencing during their first year. As illustrated in the chart below, 48% of the students believed they would, at some point during their courses, talk with their professors in more detail about course information; in reality, only 28% of them reported they did. And while 45% of entering freshmen stated they would be asking their instructors about their course performance, only 9% reported that they had actually done so.

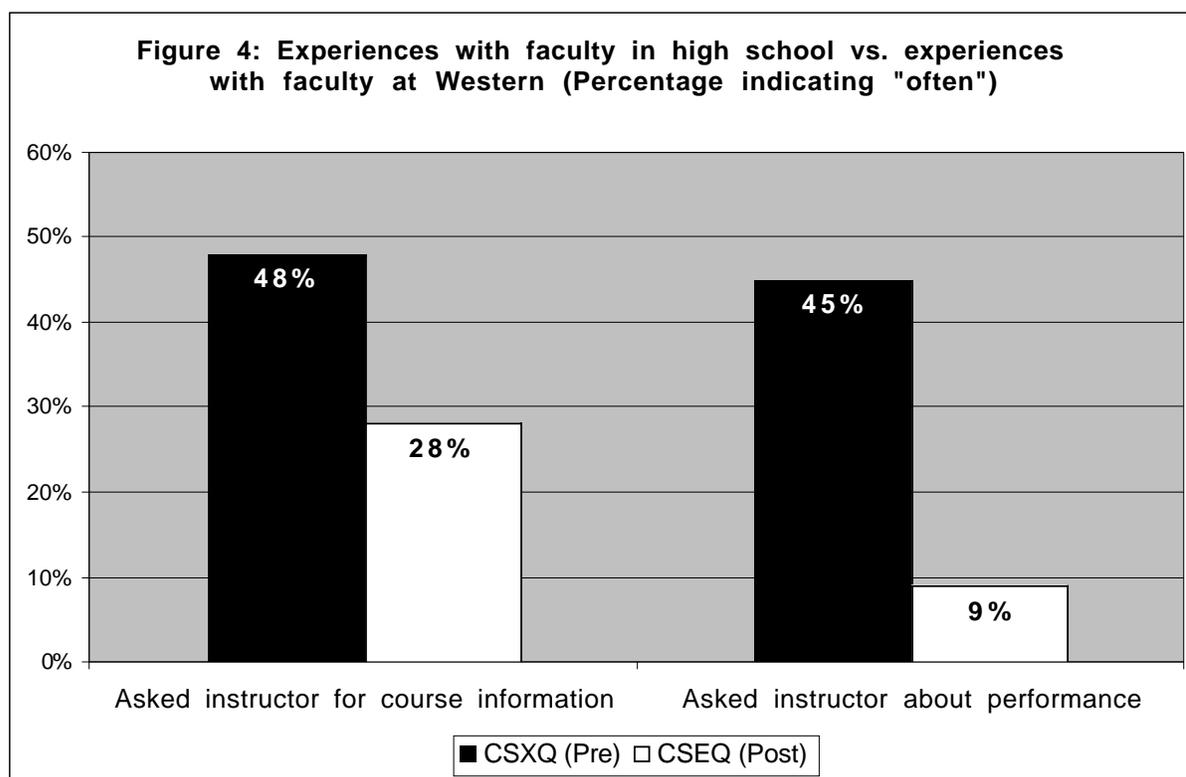
In one respect, these results are not surprising. We already know that many students choose Western in part because it is a mid-size university located in a small city. It may logically follow that this perception of “size” leaves entering first-year students unprepared for the reality of the large class sizes of the lower division general education courses. For students and faculty alike, large class sizes make more personal student-faculty interactions challenging at best. (See Figure 4 on page 8.)

ESTIMATES OF GAINS

The CSEQ asked the the following question: “In thinking about your college or university experience up to now, to what extent do you feel you have gained or made progress in the following areas?” (NOTE: these questions were *not* asked in the CXEQ pre-survey.) Responses to this question revealed a definitive pattern of experience, based on five areas as defined by CSEQ researchers: 1) personal / social development; 2) intellectual skills; 3) general education; 4) vocational preparation; and 5) science and technology.

In the top-third of responses, five items relating to personal / social development were found, including the top three rated: 1) *developing the ability to get along with different kinds of people*; 2) *understanding yourself, your abilities, interests, and personality*; and 3) *developing your own values and ethical standards*. Also rated high was *gaining a broad general education about different fields of knowledge*.

In the second-third of responses, five items relating to intellectual skills were found, including the top two rated: 1) *putting ideas together, seeing relationships, similarities, and differences between*



ideas (synthesizing ideas), and 2) using computers and other information technology. One item relating to vocational preparation was also near the top of the mid ratings: gaining a range of information that may be relevant to a career.

In the bottom-third of responses, four items relating to general education and four items relating to science and technology were found. The top rated items in the bottom-third items included: 1) *seeing the importance of history for understanding the present as well as the past*, 2) *broadening your acquaintance with and enjoyment of literature*, and 3) *analyzing quantitative problems (understanding probabilities, proportions, etc.)*

Clearly, CSEQ findings indicate that freshmen report their highest gains in the personal and social area, with a strong nod also towards gains in a broad general education. Secondly, freshmen report gains in intellectual areas. Lastly, freshmen report gains in science / technology and general education areas. (See Table 3 on page 9.)

STATISTICAL PREDICTORS

Western researchers ran a statistical test examining the relationship of survey responses to grades received. The strongest predictor of grades was “hours spent on out of class academic work”. This factor alone explained 12% of the variation. When adding the factor “completed assigned readings” 18% of the variation was explained. In other words, better grades were received by students who spent more time studying and completing their assigned readings. With both factors included, the anova test statistics were $F(2, 11.344) = 11.398, p < .000$.

Table 3: Estimates of Gains

("quite a bit" or "very much")

Highest Ratings

PSD	Getting along with others	79%
PSD	Understanding self	78%
PSD	Values and ethical standards	75%
GE	Broad general education	75%
IS	Learning on one's own	74%
PSD	Adapting to change	69%
GE	Awareness of other philosophies	66%
PSD	Functioning as a team member	64%

Personal/Social Development (PSD)

5 items

General Education (GE)

2 items

Intellectual Skills (IS)

1 item

Mid Ratings

VP	Career information	63%
IS	Synthesizing ideas	63%
IS	Using computers, other IT	60%
IS	Writing effectively	59%
IS	Thinking analytically	58%
IS	Speaking effectively	56%
VP	Skills for professional career	52%
GE	Personal health habits and fitness	50%

Intellectual Skills (IS)

5 items

Vocational Preparation (VP)

2 items

General Education (GE)

1 item

Lowest Ratings

GE	Understanding history	48%
GE	Acquaintance with literature	42%
ST	Analyzing quantitative problems	41%
GE	Knowledge about world	41%
VP	Vocational preparation	39%
GE	Enjoyment of art, music, drama	37%
ST	Consequences of science, technology, etc.	35%
ST	Understanding science	30%
ST	Understanding new technology	29%

General Education (GE)

4 items

Science & Technology (ST)

4 items

Vocational Preparation (VP)

1 item

CONCLUSION/IMPLICATIONS

Like all assessment measures, the CSXQ/CSEQ surveys don't provide "end all and be all" answers. For instance, although care was taken to create an equal number of FIGs and non-FIGs students for inclusion in the study, the CSXQ/CSEQ did not find any noticeable differences between the experiences of FIGs participants vs. non-FIGs participants. This was not a totally unexpected result. The CSXQ/CSEQ survey measures experiences at the end of the academic year and, as has been noted in previous findings, the FIGs program's strongest effect is at the end of the first quarter—when FIGs participants earn higher gpa's than non-FIGs participants. Indeed, memories are short and the extra attention—the so-called "halo" effect—from the first quarter FIGs experience dissipates. The effect of the FIGs program is not felt again until the beginning of the following year. Because the first quarter experience greatly affects retention, FIGs participants have a slightly higher retention rate.

Nonetheless, a survey like the CSXQ/CSEQ adds dimension and nuance to what we've learned and continue to learn about the first-year experience at Western. In that regard, the survey results did serve to enlighten us on the two over-arching questions we asked prior to embarking on our data collection: *How do the experiences of Western first-year students align with their expectations? What can we learn from students' experiences that can inform and help us revision an optimal first-year experience?*

Academically speaking, Western's first-year students expect more both of themselves and of the institution than what they report experiencing. They expect to study more and get higher grades, and this pattern is echoed when students estimate the gains they've made during this first year: They rank their personal and social development the highest, for the most part outweighing their reported gains in academic areas, including general education and intellectual skills. In this regard, respondents' self-reported study habits and lower-than-expected interactions with faculty imply the need to make students more immediately aware of the expectations of the academic community, and the need to create more and better pathways for faculty to interact with students outside of large lecture courses.

Students also indicated mid-range gains in intellectual skills; they rated lowest their gains in more specific acquisition of knowledge in general education and science and technology. This data should prove useful as Western moves to redefine its general education requirements and infuse specific competencies into its undergraduate curriculum. It also has implications for further exploring an expanded FIG and/or year-long connected courses with specific competencies during the first year.

The first year of college is a time of transition, of great personal change for many students, as well as the start of a journey of intellectual development and social awareness. It is not surprising, given what we already know about freshmen students nationally, that ours also

express the greatest gains in their own personal and social development. Indeed, one of the goals of liberal education is this greater awareness of the world and one's place in it, of values and education in general. In this respect, Western undergraduates are not atypical.

Further questions for research may be: How can we explore this gap between students' expectations and experiences? How can we best move students more quickly into seizing autonomy for their own learning? How can we as an institution provide an even stronger culture for learning and more opportunity for academic engagement during the first year?

Finally, in looking to optimize the first-year experience, we might borrow the language from the movement on student outcomes assessment and ask: "What is it we want first-year students to know and be able to do at the end of the first-year?" Once we are clear on that, we should be able to frame our first-year experience in terms of what is, is not, and should be happening for our students.



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