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SURVEY OF NON-RETURNING STUDENTS

REPORT 2001-01

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I. INTRODUCTION

While Western collects a great deal of information from graduates and from continuing students, it is also important periodically to survey students who left without completing a degree about their experiences at Western. Their stories may differ from those of continuing students in ways important to Western's self-assessment and planning.

During Spring and Summer quarters of 1997, Western conducted a survey of former students who left Western without graduating during the previous ten years. The Office of Survey Research at Western interviewed a random sample of one thousand of the 2759 students who had: a) been enrolled at any time during the period 1991 through 1996, b) left Western without completing a degree, and c) remained out of Western for at least one full year, without having returned at any time prior to the survey in Spring, 1997. Therefore all students in the survey had been gone from Western for at least one year and as long as six years; brief leaves of absence of less than one year were excluded from this study. While a few of the non-returning students in this sample intended to return to Western eventually, most had made the decision to transfer to another school or to leave college altogether.

The surveys asked these former students about their experiences at Western, their reasons for leaving, and their subsequent academic careers. The intent of the survey was to identify factors that might have contributed to students' decisions to leave, to track their activities after leaving Western, and to explore whether policy changes might improve retention of such students in the future.

Respondents were in some agreement that their progress at Western was significantly hindered by the *unavailability of courses they wanted to take* (51%), and by *unsatisfactory advising* (34%); these are both areas with potential for improvement. There was also a strong consensus (72%) that *new students should be given suggested sequences of courses*, and that *at least one small class in the first quarter at Western* (66%) would improve adjustment to college. The most frequently noted transition complaint was *getting into the courses I needed*, with fully 81% reporting that this was either very difficult (36%) or somewhat difficult (45%).

Analysis revealed that there are three distinct categories of non-returning students: a) those who transfer "down" to a community college (33%); b) those who transfer "across" or "up" to another four-year college (64%); and c) those who leave Western and do not plan to continue college studies anywhere else (less than 3%). This report is primarily concerned with the first two groups, each of which will be discussed in more detail below.

In addition to these “destination” differences, native students earned higher grades at Western than transfers, were more likely to have been “pulled away” from Western by attractive programs elsewhere, more often cited *transfer to another school* as a major reason for leaving, had fewer financial and personal complications than transfers, and when in academic difficulty, were more likely to transfer “down” to a community college.

Three quarters of non-returning students who entered Western as transfers came with AA degrees from community colleges. On average, these students earn lower grades at Western than natives, but really no longer have an option to return to community college when in academic difficulty. With associate’s degree in hand they have chosen Western and seem to hold the institution in somewhat higher regard than non-returning natives; it is likely that many in this group are “pushed away” from Western by low grades or other circumstances rather than “pulled away” by more attractive options, and therefore might have been content to have continued at Western and graduated.

Section II presents a descriptive profile of non-returning students, including a comparison with continuing students and consideration of gender issues. Section III discusses reasons for leaving Western, including an exploration of the relationships between reasons for leaving and transfer destination, factors underlying the decision to leave, the timing of withdrawal, and a discussion of student comments on reasons for leaving. Section IV explores some factors influencing the timing of withdrawal. Section V discusses differences between natives and transfers, and Section VI considers attitudinal differences between non-returning students and continuing students. Section VII presents a summary of findings and recommendations.

II. DESCRIPTIVE PROFILE OF NON-RETURNING STUDENTS

In most respects, non-returning students were very much like continuing students; they enjoyed their experiences at Western, and believed they learned a great deal while enrolled. Nearly all (96%) of the non-returning students who completed surveys were *working toward a degree* while at WWU. About 85% *had a major field in mind* when they entered WWU, although this varied between native students (79% “definitely” or “tentatively”) and transfers from other schools (97%). About 76% of natives had a major field in mind when they left WWU, as did 82% of transfers; these majors were distributed quite evenly across disciplines. Less than a fifth (19%) of natives had completed half of required courses in the major when they left, compared to about two fifths (41%) of transfers.

About three quarters of natives had *attended summer start* (74%) and over half of transfers with an AA degree (55%) *attended new student orientation*. Slightly over half of those who entered as freshmen *attended social gatherings* during orientation, compared to less than a quarter of transfers (24%); neither group indicated particular difficulty fitting in socially at Western.

Non-returning students reported studying about the same amount of time as students who went on to graduate, about fifteen hours per week, including an interesting gender difference: female students studied two to three hours more per week than males. These differ-

ences hold for continuing students as well; freshman and alumni surveys support the finding that both freshmen women and senior women study two to three hours more per week than men, in all ranges except the very lowest (less than four hours per week) and the very highest (over 20 hours per week), in which the men study more hours. Recent studies suggest that both the total number of hours studied and the distribution of those hours into concentrated blocks are important to college success.

For all respondents, *earning a degree* was a more important goal (30%) than *learning a great deal* (17%), with more than half the students considering the two goals of about equal importance. They were evenly divided between educational goals of *job training* and *getting a well-rounded education*, with 29% leaning toward job training, 34% leaning toward a broad education, and 37% considering the goals about equal. These proportions are almost identical to those of 1996 graduates.

About one fifth (20%) of respondents indicated they had *worked for pay over 20 hours per week* most of the time they were at Western, compared to 36% of 1996 graduates. Overall, students in the group provided about 37% of their college expenses by working, about the same as graduates. About 39% received financial aid most of the time they were at Western.

About half agreed that they had been *positively influenced by outstanding faculty*, fewer compared to about three quarters of 1996 graduates, and half agreed that they had been *negatively influenced by poor instruction*, about the same as 1996 graduates. Slightly over half (54%) believed that at least half the courses at Western *encouraged them to do their best work*, compared to about three quarters of 1996 alumni, and the same percentage indicated they *would choose Western again* if making their college choice over.

Non-returning students generally benefited from their academic experiences at Western and elsewhere; compared to four years earlier, almost all respondents (97%) felt their *general knowledge* was stronger or much stronger, as were their *critical thinking skills* (89%) and *problem solving skills* (85%). About three quarters of respondents felt stronger or much stronger in *leadership abilities* (78%), *working independently* (78%), and *preparation for a career* (79%). Respondents indicated that *developing a meaningful philosophy of life* (73%), *helping others in difficulty* (68%), and *raising a family* (61%) were either essential or very important goals.

Non-returning students were more clearly in transition and less settled into “career employment” than alumni; only about one eighth (12.5%) had completed a baccalaureate, and half (50%) were currently enrolled in another school. About a third (34%) thought it likely they would remain in the same type of work for ten years or more, compared to 54% of 1996 graduates. Only about half (48%) were employed full-time at the time of the survey, and about a third (34%) were employed part-time, compared to about 70% of 1996 graduates employed full-time.

Respondents averaged a B+ in high school, the same as alumni. Politically, like Western students on average, they placed themselves slightly to the liberal side of middle-of-the-road.

Differences from continuing students

As shown in Table 1, in several respects non-returning students did differ significantly from their classmates who went on to graduate. They were more likely to have entered Western as freshmen, more likely to have been males, more likely to have lower college gpa's, and more likely to have experienced a considerable drop in their grade point average (gpa) from high school to the first year of college.

Table 1. Comparison of non-returning and continuing students

Variable	NRS Natives	NRS Transfers	Graduates (1 9 9 8)
Percent male	45.5%	44.0%	39.0%
Average HS gpa	3.43	3.32	3.42
WWU gpa	2.59	2.49	3.16
GPA drop (HS - 2 nd qtr WWU)	0.86	0.99*	0.52

*transfers with AA only; other transfers averaged drop of 0.48

To expand on these findings, first, nearly two thirds (62%) of non-returning students entered as freshmen, one third (29%) as transfers with an AA degree, and 9% as transfers without an AA degree, compared to about 44% of 1996 graduates who entered as freshmen.

Second, non-returning students were somewhat more likely to be males (45%) than would be predicted by the proportions of entering freshmen (about 42% male through most of the 1990's) or the proportion who went on to graduate (about 42% male in 1994, down to 39% in 1998). The issue of declining male enrollments and graduation rates has been a subject of increasing concern recently nationwide, with no clear answers.

Third, non-returning students had similar high school gpa's (3.35) to their classmates who remained enrolled and graduated (3.42), but their overall Western gpa's (2.50) were significantly lower than those for Western graduates (3.14) . In addition, those who failed to complete the first year earned even lower gpa's in the first two quarters at Western (2.3 on average) than those who left after completing more quarters of work (2.57).

Fourth, although students in general exhibit a substantial drop in gpa in the transition from high school to college, this drop was significantly larger for all non-returning students (-.8) than for all continuing students (-.5). In addition, those who failed to complete the first year exhibited an even greater drop in gpa between high school and the second quarter of college (-1.27) than either those who went on to graduate (-.5) or those who left Western after completing more than two quarters (-.8). Transfers with AA degrees averaged a fairly significant drop (-.99), while transfers without the AA degree had the smallest drops (-.47).

Though this is a loose relationship, it is statistically significant, and better explains variation in persistence than differences in either high school gpa or Western gpa alone. There-

fore, poor academic performance in the first year at Western is important for two reasons. First, it is highly correlated with leaving Western without completing the first year; about a quarter of non-returning students had a gpa of less than 2.0, and nearly a third of these (29%) left before completing the first year at Western; another 25% left just after completing the first year.

Second, there seems to be something important about the magnitude of the drop in gpa from high school to college which deserves special attention; perhaps some kind of academic counseling or other sign of institutional support (perhaps a hybrid of counseling and “academic advising,”) might help these students, who seem to have a more difficult time with the transition to college than their peers. Especially given that (as shown below) most non-returning students do eventually earn a baccalaureate somewhere, perhaps a deliberate policy could be designed to facilitate a “rescue” of at least some of these students and keep them enrolled at Western. Some recent studies suggest that such students need particular help with time management and study habits.

Information was not available to compare pre-admission SAT scores of returning and non-returning students. Preliminary data based on students who entered in fall of 1998 suggest that although students who remain enrolled do have consistently higher SAT scores than those that do not return, the magnitude of the average numerical differences is very small, on the order of eight to ten points—too small a difference for reliable prediction. Unfortunately, neither SAT scores nor high school grades seem to be useful predictors of non-retention.

Gender differences

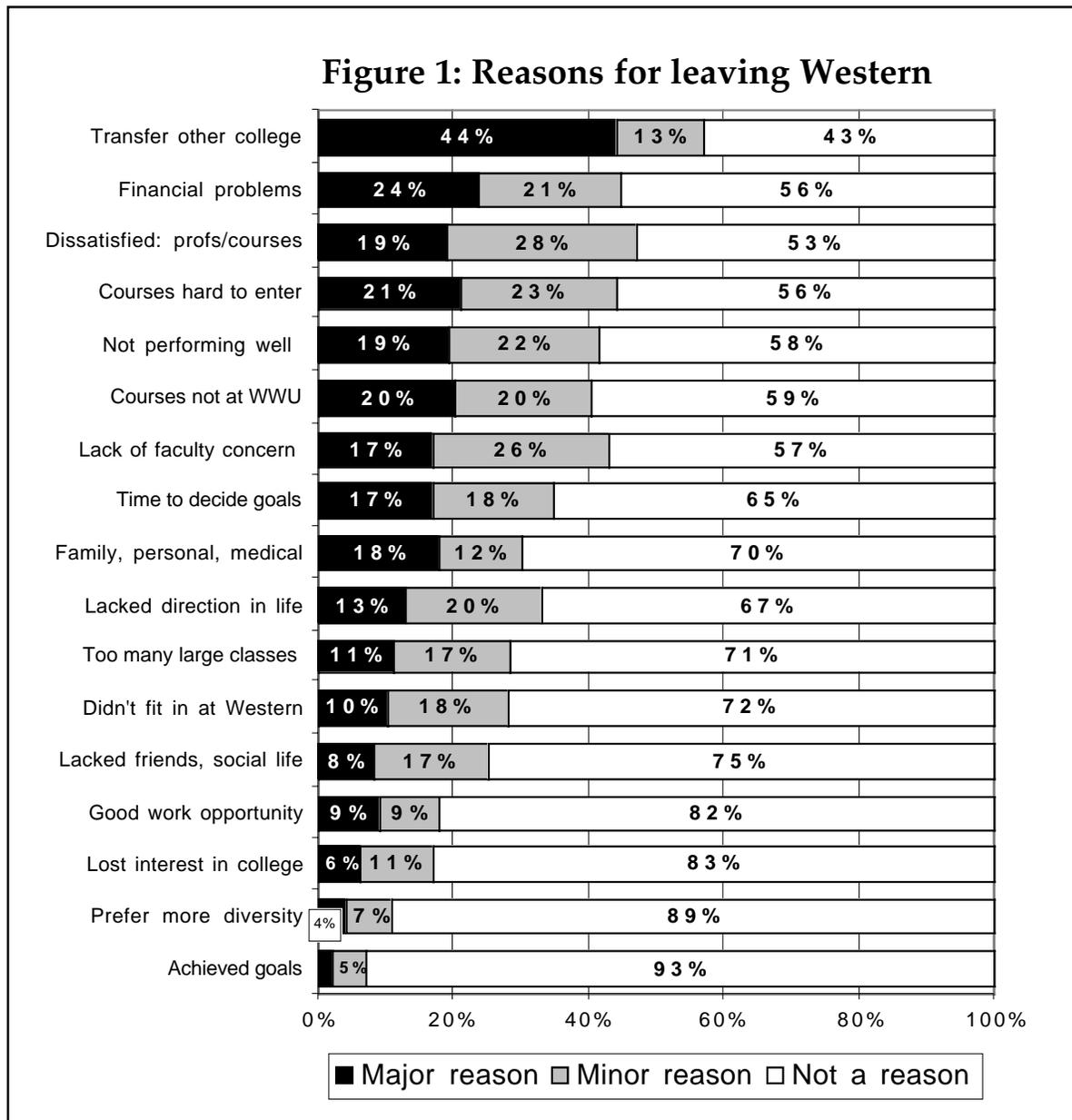
There were several small, but statistically significant gender differences among non-returning students, both for those who left during the first year and also for those who left later. As noted above, male students were more likely not to return than females. In addition, *transferring to another school* was more likely to be a major reason for women to leave (44%) than men (33%) during the first year, and even more so over all years (54% to 36%). (As noted below, *transfer to another school* is generally a euphemism for transfer to another four-year school, not a community college.)

Financial issues were more likely to be a major issue for men (40%) than for women (23%) in the first year, but more evenly divided in subsequent years (26%, 21%). *Feeling lack of concern from faculty* was more often a major issue for women (27%) than men (7%) in the first year, leveling out in later years (19%, 15%); and women (21%) were more likely than men (10%) to have a major issue with *feel they didn't fit in at Western* in the first year, which diminished after the first year (12%, 8%).

Male non-returning students provided a slightly larger percentage of their college expenses by working for pay (40%) than females (34%). Finally, as noted above, women tended to study about two more hours per week more than men, across most of the spectrum of hours studied. This is a national pattern that seems to hold for both non-returning and continuing students.

III. REASONS FOR LEAVING WESTERN

Students were asked to indicate which of 17 different reasons for leaving were major, minor, or not applicable to their decisions to leave Western. As shown in Figure 1, by far the most commonly cited reason for leaving Western was to *transfer to another college*, with 57% of all respondents saying it was either a major reason (44%) or a minor reason (13%). Transfers to other four-year schools were much more likely to list this as a major reason for leaving (82%) than those who transferred “down” to a community college (45%). Few respondents (14%) indicated an intention to return to Western to continue studies; and 74% of this “unlikely to return to Western” group cited transferring to another school as their dominant reason for leaving.



Other issues cited as major reasons for leaving Western were diffuse, including *financial problems* (23.6%), *difficulty getting into courses* (21%), *dissatisfaction with professors or courses* (19%), *courses or programs not available at Western* (20%), *not performing well enough* (19%), and *feeling little concern from faculty* (17%).

About half the respondents (51%) cited *courses I needed were filled* as having hindered their progress at Western either “a great deal” (27%) or “quite a bit” (24%). The most frequently noted transition complaint was *getting into the courses I needed*, with fully 81% reporting that this was either very difficult (36%) or somewhat difficult (45%).

About a third (33%) felt hindered by inadequate advising, and over half (51%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that *more or better advising was needed*. Nearly three quarters (72%) agreed that *new students should be given suggested sequences of courses*. About two thirds (66%) believed that *at least one small class in the first quarter at Western* would improve adjustment to college.

Reasons for leaving by transfer destination

The substantial majority of students who leave Western intend to complete baccalaureate degrees elsewhere. Regardless of their reasons for leaving Western, about three quarters (74%) of non-returning students had attended another college within six months, and 88% expected to earn a baccalaureate within five years. Over half (55%) expected eventually to earn a master’s degree or higher.

Table 2. Destinations of transfers from Western

Transferred to:	Percent	WWU gpa
University of Washington	20.0%	3.10
Washington State University	8.0%	2.68
Other WA Public 4-yr	9.8%	2.73
Washington community college	33.0%	2.22
In-state private	6.8%	2.61
Out-of-state (all)	18.5%	2.90

A third of in-state transfers (33%) went from Western to a community college, and about a fifth (20%) transferred to the University of Washington. Others were divided among other schools, with 8% going to Washington State University, and about 4% each to Central and Eastern. There is an interesting and significant relationship between gpa at the end of the first year and school to which transferred: transfers to UW had an average gpa of 3.1. EWU, WSU, and CWU transfers averaged 2.55, 2.68, and 2.93, respectively (the better students going to Central); and community college transfers averaged a 2.22 gpa.

As shown in Table 2, Western loses many of its better students to the University of Washington and out-of-state schools, a small number of good to average students to other regional schools, and a large number of lower-performing students to community colleges. This redistribution of students over time seems to indicate that the Washington State higher education system as a whole is working appropriately, with the best students gravitating toward the state's flagship institution, and less prepared students returning to community colleges for further preparatory work. On the other hand, the distinctive groupings suggest the possibility of improving retention at least somewhat by tailoring policies to the particular groups.

Students who are "pulled away" to the University of Washington, besides having higher gpa's (3.1) and being strongly motivated to *transfer to another college* (90% cited it as a major reason), were quite likely to have been "lonely or homesick" (62% experienced; 11% had "satisfactory assistance"); were "overwhelmed by all they had to do" (52% had problem; 8% helped); were depressed (41% had problem; 9% helped) at Western.

Those who transferred to other four-year schools were interested in a wide array of fields, with notable percentages transferring into business (20%), engineering (13%), and medically related programs (14%). They were lukewarm about their experiences at Western, with 59% either dissatisfied (21%) or neutral (38%) about their overall college experience at Western, and 37% feeling they needed more or better advising. They were significantly motivated to leave by *courses or programs hard to enter* (24% major reason, 19% minor reason), and by *programs not at WWU* (30% major, 18% minor).

By comparison, students who transferred "down" to community colleges were very similar except for their lower gpa's (2.2); they had about the same hindering experiences (61% "homesick," 62% "overwhelmed," 54% "feeling depressed"). They were slightly more drawn to majors in education (14% compared to 3%), and less drawn to engineering (1% compared to 13%), or medical fields (8% compared to 14%). They generally felt a better "fit" with Western; fewer than half (46%) were dissatisfied (10%) or neutral (36%) with their overall experience at Western, but over half (53%) felt they *needed more or better advising*.

Factors underlying reasons for leaving

In an attempt to make some additional sense from the wide array of reasons given for leaving Western, a factor analysis was performed to determine if the reasons were related to each other in any meaningful way. As shown in Table 3, the reasons for leaving clustered into four dimensions, which, on the basis of their common attributes, were labeled *negative perceptions*, *uncertain goals*, *not fitting in socially*, and *unsatisfactory fit* between the student's goals and Western programs.

The "factor loadings" shown in the table are a measure of the degree of relationship between each variable and each factor; generally speaking, loadings of .4 and above (shown in bold) are indicative of a significant group relationship, and are noted in bold type in the table. Note that factor analysis does not necessarily identify which variables are most important; it identifies clusters of variables which in some sense "go together," based on the similarity of responses, and therefore gives a sense of the general principles underlying a large number of measured variables.

Table 3. Reasons for Leaving Western (rotated factor loadings*)

Reason for leaving	Negative perceptions	Uncertain goals	Social belonging	Fit with Western
Transfer to another college		-0.321	0.190	-0.593
Not interested in college		0.540		
Not performing well enough	0.148	0.302		0.402
Had financial problems		0.165		0.449
Time away to decide goals		0.792		
Lacked friends or good social life			0.704	
Dissatisfied with profs/courses	0.796		0.135	-0.142
Felt little concern from faculty	0.820		0.183	
Courses/programs not at WWU	0.142			-0.462
Courses/programs hard to enter	0.443			
Lacked direction in my life		0.691	0.154	0.153
Felt I didn't fit in at Western	0.157		0.813	
Disappointed by the large classes	0.539		0.182	

*Loadings of 0.4 and above (shown in bold) are indicative of a significant group relationship.

The first factor includes *dissatisfaction with courses or profs, feeling little concern from faculty, difficulty in entering courses or programs, and disappointment with large classes*; the common thread among these several elements is dissatisfaction with Western as an institution, and is labeled “negative perceptions” in Table 3.

The second factor is related to the uncertainty of student goals, and includes *not interested in college, need time away to decide goals, and lacked direction in life*.

The third factor is about not having developed a sense of social belonging at Western, and included *lacked friends or social life, and felt I didn't fit in*.

The fourth factor is essentially about the fit with Western as an institution, with positive loadings for *not performing well enough* and *had financial problems*, and substantial negative loadings for *transferred to another school* and *courses not available at WWU*.

The negative signs on these variables highlight a disparity between two types of non-returning students: *transfers up/across* and *transfers down*. Most (81%) of those who transferred “up” to the University of Washington or “across” to other four-year schools listed *transferred to another school* and *courses/programs not at WWU* as major reasons for leaving, and generally did not have issues with grades or finances. In a sense they were being “pulled” away (positive sign) from Western by the attraction of other programs.

In contrast, only 44% of those who transferred “down” to community colleges listed *transfer to another school* or *courses/programs not at WWU* as major reasons for leaving, but did

have major issues with grades and finances; these students were in a sense “pushed” away from Western (negative sign) by a combination of these other factors. Since transfers “down” are by far the larger group, the negative sign appears on the loadings for these variables in Table 3; transferring to another school is more a result for these students than a cause.

All of this suggests the possibility that some better students may use Western as a sort of community college: a place to fulfill GUR/AA requirements, and perhaps take some courses in a major, but then complete their baccalaureates at other institutions. However, this may not be an intention students had before coming to Western. According to survey data from the CIRP, a national freshman survey in which Western participates, Western has consistently been a “first choice” college for over 80% of new freshmen over the past decade, and a “second choice” college for virtually all other applicants. In order to explore the feasibility of policy action to improve retention of these students, it would be useful to know whether students who transfer to UW or other four-year schools had that intention when they first enrolled at Western, or were inclined to leave by disappointments with their experiences at Western, particularly advising/support and course availability, as described in the next section.

Student support

A second factor analysis looked more closely at groupings of responses to a number of questions on the survey that had to do with attitudes about navigating through the academic system at Western. These questions included reasons for leaving Western, transition issues, satisfaction elements, hindrances to progress, and attitudes about advising, belonging, and mentoring. The analysis revealed the following themes:

- **STUDENT SUPPORT.** This strong first factor grouped the following variables: *felt little concern from faculty, satisfaction with academic advising, satisfaction with ability to find a mentor, hindered by poor advising, and needed more or better advising.*
- **GETTING COURSES.** This second factor related to the frustrations of getting into courses they needed, with significant loadings for the following variables: *courses hard to enter, getting into courses needed, and hindered by course unavailability.*
- **ACADEMIC ABILITY.** This third factor included the following variables: *not performing well enough, high school gpa, and Western gpa.*
- **UNCERTAIN GOALS.** This fourth factor included strong loadings for the following variables: *time away to decide goals and lacked direction in my life.*

The pattern of responses in this second factor analysis highlights the earlier finding that inadequate advising and course unavailability are important elements in the decision to leave Western, and also suggests that students do distinguish between dissatisfaction with support services and dissatisfaction with course availability. The elements which comprise the “support” factor include advising but extend beyond it; students might be looking for some sense that the institution cares about them as individuals, as evidenced by the alignment of *good advising, support of a mentor, and concern from faculty.* Perhaps policies which reach out to poorly performing students during the first year of enrollment might result in higher retention rates for these students.

Given the distinctive factor groupings of reasons for leaving Western, possible strategies to improve retention might include: helping prospective students to better clarify which school would be best for them before they come to Western; identifying students in academic difficulty during the first year and providing them with special support; and perhaps even restructuring academic advising for new students to convey a warmer and more focused sense of institutional concern. It might also be useful to interview in more detail students who transferred to other four-year schools, to explore more fully the reasons for their decisions to transfer.

Student comments

Non-returning students were given an opportunity to write open-ended comments on *what changes might have made it possible or desirable to stay at Western*, and *what was the best thing about your time at Western?* Desired changes which Western could affect with policy included general categories of *more course choices, better course availability, and smaller classes* (about a third of comments); *availability and structure of majors* (about 20% of comments); and *better advising* (21% of comments).

Complaints with less obvious institutional solutions included motivational and personal issues (34% of comments); financial issues (23%); a scattering of unrelated professor / staff issues (16%); and general comments about campus life (13%).

It is important to note that non-returning students found many Western experiences enjoyable and satisfying. Nearly two thirds (60%) particularly enjoyed aspects of their personal / interpersonal life at Western, including social life, self-discovery, and independence. Over half (54%) particularly enjoyed the campus and community environment, dorm life, and various campus activities and resources. It is useful to keep in mind that for many of these students, graduating from Western is a lofty goal to which they aspire, and which they might need special help to achieve.

IV. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE TIMING OF WITHDRAWAL

A substantial number of new students (29%) left Western before completing the first year, and another 25% left after completing only one year. Because of their numbers, both groups are of substantial interest, and they display some interesting differences. As shown in Table 4, those who left during the first year displayed a different rank order of reasons for leaving Western than either students who left directly after completing the first year, or students who left after completing four or more quarters.

Students who left before completing the first year were about equally divided between those who entered as freshmen (43%) and those who entered as transfers with an associate's degree (47%); but their destinations were very different. Over half (57%) of those who entered as freshmen transferred "down" to community colleges, compared to only 8% of those who entered as transfers. About half of these transfers (56%) went to other public four-year schools in Washington, with another 16% going to Washington private schools, and 13% to schools outside Washington.

A similar pattern holds for those who actually completed the first year, although a much higher percentage of natives who completed the first year transferred to other Washington baccalaureate institutions (34%) than those who did not complete the first year (16%), and a correspondingly smaller proportion transferred to community colleges (46% compared to 57%).

Table 4. Ranking and mean ratings of reasons for leaving by quarters enrolled

Reason for leaving	0-2 qtrs	3 qtrs	6 qtrs	all qtrs
Transfer to another college	1 (2.09)	1 (1.69)	1 (2.19)	1 (2.00)
Had financial problems	2 (2.24)	6 (2.44)	7 (2.27)	2 (2.32)
Not performing well enough	3 (2.29)	4 (2.41)	9 (2.46)	5 (2.39)
Dissatisfied with profs/courses	4 (2.30)	2 (2.39)	4 (2.27)	3 (2.34)
Felt little concern from faculty	5 (2.35)	7 (2.50)	5 (2.31)	7 (2.40)
Courses/programs hard to enter	6 (2.39)	5 (2.44)	3 (2.22)	4 (2.35)
Family, personal, medical	7 (2.41)	13 (2.62)	8 (2.58)	9 (2.52)
Time away to decide goals	8 (2.45)	11 (2.61)	6 (2.33)	8 (2.48)
Disappointed by the large classes	9 (2.45)	9 (2.58)	11 (2.63)	11 (2.60)
Felt I didn't fit in at Western	10 (2.48)	8 (2.53)	13 (2.77)	12 (2.62)
Lacked direction in my life	11 (2.48)	10 (2.59)	10 (2.52)	10 (2.54)
Courses/programs not at WWU	12 (2.51)	3 (2.41)	2 (2.25)	6 (2.39)
Lacked friends or good social life	13 (2.56)	12 (2.61)	12 (2.87)	13 (2.73)
Found good work opportunity	14 (2.73)	15 (2.83)	16 (2.55)	14 (2.73)
Not interested in college	15 (2.78)	16 (2.87)	15 (2.73)	15 (2.78)
WWU environment not diverse	16 (2.85)	14 (2.79)	14 (2.88)	16 (2.84)
Achieved goals	17 (2.96)	17 (2.93)	17 (2.88)	17 (2.73)

Rating scale: 1 = major reason, 2 = minor reason, 3 = not a reason

For all non-returning students, *transfer to another school* was the top reason cited for leaving. Among secondary reasons, as shown in Table 4, students who left Western before completing the first year were strongly influenced by *financial considerations* and *not performing well enough*, while students who left after completing the first year, while also having some academic performance issues, were more influenced by *dissatisfied with profs or courses* and

courses or programs not at WWU. Students who left after six quarters were even more likely to cite *courses or programs not at WWU* as a primary reason for leaving, as well as *courses or programs difficult to enter*, and *dissatisfied with profs or courses*.

As shown by the ratings in Table 5, transfers to other four-year schools were more likely to cite *transferred to another school* a major reason for leaving than transfers to community colleges, even though both groups ranked this the top reason for leaving. Transfers to community colleges cited *not performing well enough* and *financial considerations* as top secondary reasons for leaving Western, while those who transferred to other four-year schools were not particularly motivated by performance issues or financial issues, placing higher significance on *courses/programs not at WWU*.

Similarly, transfers to community college were more likely to feel uncertain about their goals (*lacked direction, time to decide goals*), while transfers to other four-year schools found lack of social connections (*didn't fit in, lacked social life*) a relatively more important cause for leaving (although actual levels of ratings were very similar for both groups).

Table 5. Reasons for leaving: rank order and ratings by type of destination school

Reason for leaving	2-yr ranking	4-yr ranking	2-yr avg rating	4-yr avg rating
Transfer to another college	1	1	1.89	1.24
Not performing well enough	2	11	2.07	2.73
Had financial problems	3	10	2.27	2.70
Dissatisfied with profs/courses	4	3	2.34	2.29
Felt little concern from faculty	5	5	2.37	2.37
Courses/programs hard to enter	6	4	2.39	2.31
Courses/programs not at WWU	7	2	2.40	2.22
Lacked direction in my life	8	13	2.46	2.80
Time away to decide goals	9	14	2.49	2.83
Family, personal, medical	10	9	2.52	2.70
Disappointed by large classes	11	8	2.55	2.61
Felt I didn't fit in at Western	12	6	2.60	2.54
Lacked friends or good social life	13	7	2.63	2.59
Found good work opportunity	14	15	2.80	2.86
Not interested in college	15	17	2.80	2.97
WWU environment not diverse	16	12	2.84	2.80
Achieved goals	17	16	2.96	2.91

Rating scale: 1 = major reason, 2 = minor reason, 3 = not a reason

Comparison of Tables 4 and 5 shows that students who leave Western before completing the first year are largely motivated by poor academic performance, and are more likely to attend community colleges before continuing studies at another four-year university. They had substantially lower gpa's (2.3) during the first two quarters than students who went on to complete the first year (2.5), or those who went on to graduate (2.9). Students who transferred to community colleges had an average second quarter Western gpa of 2.3 (regardless of when they left WWU), while those who transferred to other four-year schools had a substantially higher average second quarter gpa of 2.8.

These differences paint a picture of two distinct categories of non-returning students, which essentially define the extremes of a continuum. At one end are students who probably entered Western as natives, tend to drop out before completing the first year, have larger drops in academic performance from high school to the first year of college, have marginal gpa's, feel more uncertain about their goals, have more financial problems with attending Western, and tend to transfer to community colleges before resuming their studies at another four-year college.

The second group tend to complete whole years at Western, could be natives or transfers, have higher, adequate gpa's, are more likely to leave for more desirable programs or more available courses elsewhere, tend to have fewer financial problems with college, have stronger relative issues about fitting in at Western, and tend to transfer directly to other four-year schools.

V. OTHER DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NATIVES AND TRANSFERS

In addition to differences associated with timing of withdrawal, other statistical differences between non-returning students who entered Western as freshmen and those who transferred from other schools (generally with an Associate's degree) were generally not large, and are in anticipated directions, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Comparisons of natives and transfers

Category	Natives	Transfers
Transfer to other college (<i>% major reason</i>)	53%	27%
Not performing well (<i>% major/minor reason</i>)	38%	54%
Courses unavailable WWU (<i>% major/minor reason</i>)	46%	30%
Courses hard to enter (<i>% major reason</i>)	18%	29%
Family, personal, medical (<i>% major/minor reason</i>)	26%	38%
Satisfaction with social life (<i>% very satisfied</i>)	34%	15%
Lack of transition support (<i>% significantly hindered</i>)	24%	40%
Adjust better if at least one small class 1st quarter (<i>% agreeing</i>)	72%	57%
Western GPA	2.59	2.38

Overall, natives were likely to earn higher gpa's (2.59) than transfers (2.38), and were more likely than transfers to place high importance on *transfer to another college* (53%,27%, respectively), *courses not available at WWU* (46%, 30%), and *prefer at least one small class first quarter* (72%, 57%).

Transfers were somewhat more likely than natives to place higher importance on *not performing well enough* (54%, 38%), *courses difficult to enter* (29%, 18%), *family, personal, or medical reasons* (38%, 26%), *satisfaction with social life* (34%, 15%), and *lacked support in transition* (40%, 24%).

The implication is that non-returning students who entered Western as freshmen generally do better academically, seem to fit in better socially, and seem to have fewer complicating factors in their lives than transfers. On the other hand, community college is not really an option for transfers, so they are perhaps better able to stay focused on completing their baccalaureate.

As shown in Table 7, non-returning students who entered as natives are nearly equally likely to transfer to a four-year school (58%) as a two-year school (42%), while those who entered as transfers with associate's degree are much more likely (77%) to transfer to a four-year school than a two-year school (23%). This is quite logical, since these students have little to gain from returning to community college. On the other hand, nearly a third of non-returning students who entered as transfers leave with a failing gpa, compared to about a fifth of non-returning students who entered as freshmen.

Therefore a particular potential problem may arise for transfer students in academic difficulty, who may be forced to return to community college to take courses they don't need in order to satisfy Western's readmission policies, or go directly to another baccalaureate institution for which they are no better prepared than for Western. Because transfers are more likely to be in academic difficulty, have fewer options, and in some sense are more motivated to get a degree from Western than natives, perhaps there might be a better way to address the remedial needs such students and usher them productively toward their degrees.

Table 7. Destinations of non-returning students by admit status

	Entered as Freshman	Entered as Transfer w/AA
Percent left to 4 yr school	58%	77%
Percent left to 2 yr school	42%	23%
totals	100%	100%
Percent left with gpa 2.0 or less	22%	32%
Percent left with gpa over 2.0	78%	68%
totals	100%	100%

VI. ATTITUDINAL COMPARISONS WITH CONTINUING STUDENTS

By its very nature, the survey of non-returning students provides few questions directly comparable to questions asked of students who remained enrolled. However, there are some similar questions on recent alumni surveys which can be used for less rigorous comparisons of the different groups.

Non-returning students were much more likely than recent (1998) graduates to perceive various factors as significant obstacles toward their progress at Western, hindering them either “a great deal” or “quite a bit.” As shown in Table 8, these included *filled courses* (51% of NRS compared to only 30% of graduates); *receiving poor or inadequate advising* (33% vs. 21%); *uncertain goals* (25% vs. 17%); *lacking support and direction* (28% vs. 13%); and *waiting for access to major* (28% vs. 13%).

Table 8. Comparisons of graduates and non-returning students

Category of comparison	NRS	Graduates
Filled courses (<i>% hindered</i>)	51%	30%
Inadequate advising (<i>% hindered</i>)	33%	21%
Uncertain goals (<i>% hindered</i>)	25%	17%
Lack support, direction (<i>% hindered</i>)	28%	13%
Academic advising (<i>% dissatisfied</i>)	43%	27%
Availability of major courses (<i>% dissatisfied</i>)	44%	7%
Overall college experience (<i>% satisfied</i>)	49%	86%

These relatively negative perceptions of certain aspects of the Western experience held by non-returning students are consistent with their comparatively low levels of satisfaction with these same aspects of their experiences while enrolled. Nearly half (43%) were “dissatisfied” with *academic advising*, (compared with 27% of graduates) and with the *availability of courses in the major* (44% compared to 7%). Only about a quarter were satisfied (either “satisfied” or “very satisfied”) with these aspects. About a third were “dissatisfied” with their *ability to find a mentor*, and about a quarter were satisfied.

Non-returning students held many attitudes similar to graduates. Only about a third were satisfied with their *level of contact with faculty* (34%), with *financial aid services* (36%), with the *relevance of coursework to everyday life* (36%), and with the *availability of courses outside the major* (39%), and most were highly satisfied with *Bellingham as a place to live* (73% satisfied or very satisfied), *library facilities* (70%); the *quality of social life* (63%), and *other students at Western* (61%), about the same as graduates on similar questions.

These distinctions between non-returning students and continuing students are quite consistent for both the higher performing and lower performing groups of non-returning

students. The better students are somewhat more likely to be dissatisfied with course availability, especially in the major, and somewhat less likely to be dissatisfied with contact with faculty. Interestingly, lower performing non-returning students were more satisfied (61% *satisfied* or *very satisfied*) overall with Western than higher performing ones (44%), although graduates were much more satisfied with Western overall than either group of non-returning students (86% *satisfied* or *very satisfied*).

VII. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The basic finding of the survey is that there are three rather distinct groups of non-returning students: native students in academic difficulty who transfer to community colleges, often during the first year; natives who transfer to other four-year schools, often after completing the first or second year; and transfer students in academic or personal difficulty who transfer primarily to other baccalaureate institutions. Although all three groups have similar high school grades, test scores, and hours studied, each follows a different behavior pattern.

Members of the largest group are likely to have entered as freshmen, encounter academic difficulty, leave without completing whole academic years, stay for fewer quarters, have financial problems with school, and transfer to a community college after leaving Western.

The second group are likely to have entered as freshmen, get better grades, stay at Western for more quarters before leaving (usually completing whole years), transfer to another four-year school after leaving Western, and be motivated to leave by the unavailability of courses or programs.

The third group are a mix of students who entered Western with an Associate's degree; of the one third that had failing gpa's, 60% went to another four-year school, and 40% went to a community college or technical college. Essentially all of those who left with passing grades went to another four-year school.

Western might be able to exert some influence over the behavior of all three groups by improving student advising and course availability. Lower-performing students, both transfers and native freshmen, might respond positively to early identification and special advising, especially regarding time management and appropriate study habits, during their second quarter at Western. Also, the idea of at least one small class during the first quarter at Western received strong support from a large majority of non-returning students.

Students who enter as transfers and encounter academic difficulty might also benefit from a stronger outreach and support or remedial program within Western, rather than being dismissed due to low grades. Such students might benefit from an option for proving and improving their academic performance, and Western might benefit from improved retention of these students.

Non-returning students who were better academic performers, who are "pulled" away rather than "pushed" away, are harder to identify before they leave. However, all non-returning students seem less tolerant than graduates of difficulties entering courses or

programs, and of getting into courses they want to take. But even alumni have indicated problems with scheduling conflicts (41%), one or more quarters of delay waiting to take classes (58%), and significant hindrances associated with courses they wanted being full (37%). Perhaps improvement of these common areas of dissatisfaction would also improve retention of these students.