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RUNNING START STUDENT PROFILE: WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Prepared by Gary R. McKinney, Richard Frye, and Joseph E. Trimble

The Running Start Program allows high school students to get a “running start” at college by enrolling in college courses while officially still in high school. Once interested students meet state and institution admissions guidelines, they can earn college credits—most often, but not exclusively, from local community colleges—and even an Associate’s degree. The number of Running Start students who have transferred to Western has risen steadily: 1994-95 academic year = 59; 1995-97 = 117; 1996-97 = 220; 1997-98 = 278; and in the fall of 1998 = 248.

Running Start students are a relatively unique group; they are neither true natives (students who start at Western as first-time, in-coming freshmen) nor traditional transfers. They are most often about the age of natives, but can enter Western with as many credits as transfers with AA degrees. While most students their age are taking lower-division GUR’s, Running Start students can sometimes be

found in upper-division courses, completing requirements for their major.

From an institutional researcher’s standpoint, Running Start students present statistical considerations found in no other student body subcohort, especially when it comes to graduation rates. Though the number of credits transferred by Running Start students varies widely, they usually have considerably more credits than first-time, in-coming natives, but often have far less than regular transfers—most of whom enter Western via direct-transfer agreements, meaning they have earned an AA degree and at least 90 credits. If time to degree can be imagined as having a fixed starting point, natives, transfers, and Running Start students all begin at different ones. Running Start students start ahead of natives, most often behind transfers.

Since the fall of 1994, 71 Running Start students have graduated from Western, 32 from

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that first admittance year, but also 29 who entered in the fall of 1995, and 10 in the fall of 1996. Most of these graduates earned BA degrees (69.0%), but also BS degrees (25.4%), and BAE degrees (5.6%). Compared to the approximate figures for Western graduates overall, RS graduates are about as likely to earn a BA degree (69% overall), more likely to earn a BS degree (17% overall), and less likely to earn a BAE degree (13% overall). This group of 71 required an average of 3.6 years to earn their degrees. This figure is roughly what one might expect for a student who—at least when considering transfer credits—falls in-between traditional natives, who typically take between 4-5 years to graduate, and transfers, who typically take between 2-3 years.

In later years, it may be possible to use breakout groups for more direct graduation rate comparisons. For example, a subcohort of Running Start students who have earned 90, or close to 90, transfer credits could be created, then compared to a subgroup of randomly-sampled transfer students. This year, there were too few Running Start students that fit that profile to make such an analysis meaningful. Indeed, most Running Start students in the cohort under study had under 31 credits (63.1%), fewer had between 31 and 59 credits (20.0%), and very few had over 60 credits (13.5%). Of those with over 60 credits, only 76 of 124 students transferred 90 credits. In the meantime, there are a number of statistics that besides establishing an accurate profile of Running Start students also offer some accurate comparisons to other subgroups of Western students. One of these is retention rates.

At Western, retention rates are quite straight forward. The number of students entering in any given fall quarter who remain enrolled one year later are considered to be retained. Two years later, the same formula is utilized: if a student remains enrolled, he or she is considered retained. In this regard, the one-year retention rates of Running Start students are quite competitive with those of both natives and transfers. To use the fall, 1994, entering class as an example, 81.0% of Running Start students were retained to the fall, 1995, compared to 76.5% of transfers and 82.8% of natives. Figures varied for each entering class, but remained competitive overall.

For two-year retention rates, Running Start students' were higher than those for transfers (two-year RS retention = 70.7% for the class of 1994 and 64.1% for the class of 1995, compared to two-year transfer retention = 49.2% for the class of 1994 and 53.8% for the class of 1995), and about equal to those for natives (two-year native retention = 71.5% for the class of 1994 and 67.4% for the class of 1995). The complete set of available figures is presented below in Table 1.

Table 1: Retention Rates for Running Start Students vs. Natives and Transfers

entered: retained:	Fall, 94		Fall, 95		Fall, 96		Fall, 97	
	1-year	2-years	1-year	2-years	1-year	2-years	1-year	2-years
running start	81.0	70.7	73.5	64.1	84.9	65.2	75.5	-
transfers	76.5	49.2	78.6	53.8	75.5	-	-	-
natives	82.8	71.5	83.6	67.4	79.7	-	-	-

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As of fall, 1998, 71 Running Start students had graduated from Western, and while the traditional graduation rate measure of years to degree is not an accurate measure for comparison purposes, the Graduation Efficiency Index (GEI) is. The GEI is a formula that factors in the credits needed to graduate within a given degree program, the number of credits a student attempted, the number of credits earned, and credits transferred from other institutions. The GEI is blind to linear time, thus the GEI of Running Start students can be contrasted to that of other students with a fair degree of accuracy. The GEI of the 71 Running Start graduates was 88.9%. Keeping in mind that the number of Running Start graduates was slight when compared to the number of native and transfer graduates, this figure is very competitive with recent GEI findings for both natives and transfers. The overall GEI for 1995-96 graduates 87.9%, and for all 1996-97 graduates was 82.9%. The GEI for 1995-96 native graduates was 87.4%, and for transfer graduates 88.2%; the GEI for 1996-97 native graduates was 86.7%, and for transfer graduates 79.8%. (See Table 2 below.)

Table 2: Graduation Efficiency Index
Running Start Graduates vs.
Native and Transfer Graduates, WWU

	GEI	n
running start: all grads to date	88.9	71
transfers: 1996 graduates	88.2	1329
natives: 1996 graduates	87.4	1132
transfers: 1997 graduates	79.8	1341
natives: 1997 graduates	86.7	1097

The Western gpa earned by Running Start graduates is also a relatively accurate measure of comparison. (Though there are two issues to note: 1) the number of Running Start graduates, 71, is small, while the number of graduates overall, 2400+ in the academic year 1996-97, is large; and 2) transfer graduates traditionally have slightly higher Western gpa's than natives, since most of their lower division course work is done somewhere other than Western gpa and is not factored into their Western gpa.) These caveats notwithstanding, the gpa earned by Running Start graduates who have entered Western since 1994 is a respectable 3.26. The Western gpa of transfers in 1997 was 3.19, and for Western students overall was 3.16.

Another finding that shed some light on Running Start students was a regression analysis result that indicated the credits transferred by Running Start students appeared to be of practical benefit. For each twelve RS credits transferred, graduates were able to complete their degrees one quarter sooner.

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SUMMARY

This very basic profile of Running Start students cannot factor in such considerations as a student's emotional maturity and how that might effect their transition to college, how their unique status hinders or enhances their "fit" at Western, nor any of numerous unquantifiable considerations. It can only present the few hard facts that we have at our disposal, and what these facts tell us is that Running Start students appear to compete well academically. If the statistics in this report were left unidentified and presented to an impartial observer, Running Start students would appear pretty much like other Western students.



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