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WESTERN EDUCATIONAL LONGITUDINAL STUDY (WELS) REPORT SERIES

FIRST-TIME, IN-COMING TRANSFERS AND FRESHMEN: A COMPARISON OF SURVEY FINDINGS

Gary R. McKinney, Sara Jones, Richard Bulcroft, and Joseph E. Trimble

INTRODUCTION

This report presents Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS) findings from three surveys: 1) the baseline survey of first-time, in-coming transfers administered in the summer and early fall of 2005; 2) the baseline survey of first-time, in-coming freshmen administered in the summer and early fall of 2003; and 3) the follow-up survey of fall, 2003, freshmen, including those who did and who did not take the WELS baseline survey in the spring of 2005. Findings from the survey of transfer students was whittled down somewhat by including only those respondents who had earned an AA degree. This was done to help create some statistical evenness between the sophomore and transfer cohorts. Since the two surveys were administered about three-four months apart, it is reasonable to assume that most of the students surveyed would have earned about 90 credits. In this report the three cohorts will be identified as *Fall '05 Transfers w/AA degrees*, *Fall '03 Frosh*, and *Fall '03 Frosh as Spring '05 Sophomores*. (For a more complete historical summary of the WELS project, please reference "A note on the WELS" on the back page of this report.)

The *Fall '05 Transfers* survey was completed by 858 first-time, in-coming transfers (about 90% of the population). The *Fall '03 Frosh* survey was completed by 1580 first-time, in-coming freshmen (about 75% of the population). The *Fall '03 Frosh as Spring '05 Sophomores* survey was completed by 814 sophomores (about 63% of the population). For all three surveys, when respondents were compared demographically to non-respondents, the samples were representative. (For a complete breakdown of n's per question set, please contact Gary McKinney, whose contact information is in the colophon on the back page of this report.)

This report compares responses to the same questions asked of each cohort. Some questions were asked of all three cohorts, but some questions were only asked of two cohorts: the *Fall '05 Transfers w/AA degrees*, and the *Fall '03 Frosh as Spring '05 Sophomores*. The questions focus

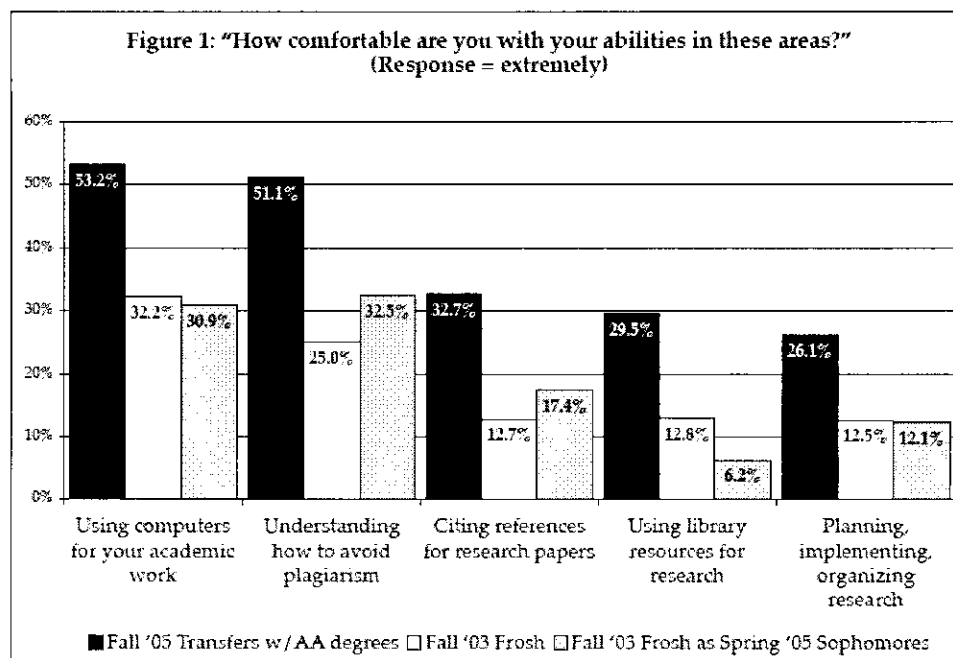
on a variety of expectations—ranging from academic to personal—plus comfort levels with a list of abilities, how likely respondents are to graduate from Western, and to what extent students have decided on a major. As an extra point of comparison, the report includes an analysis of the grade point average (gpa) earned in upper-division courses (300- and 400-level) by freshmen and transfers during the fall, 2005, quarter, when both survey cohorts were taking Western classes at the Junior level.

As would be expected when comparing freshmen to students with two years of college already completed (transfers), the overall theme revealed by the findings is that transfers have more confidence in their academic abilities than do freshmen. Freshmen, however, have less concern

FINDINGS

Comfort with Abilities

All three survey cohorts were asked about their comfort levels with a list of academic processes. Responses indicate that *Fall '05 Transfers w/AA degrees* were more confident in their abilities than *Fall '03 Frosh*, and *Fall '03 Frosh as Spring '05 Sophomores*. For each item—using computers, avoiding plagiarism, citing references, using library resources, and overall research skills—transfers were more likely to indicate they were “extremely comfortable” with the process than were freshmen or sophomores, with the difference ranging from 13% to 25% higher. (See Figure 1, below.)



Expectations - General

Students were asked about what they expected would transpire as they entered Western. Yet besides expectations, the answers to the questions equally offer an insight into confidence levels. Regarding their academic confidence, for instance, there is clearly less ambivalence

among first-time, in-coming transfers than among first-time, in-coming freshmen. Far more *Fall '05 Transfers w/AA Degrees* than *Fall '03 Frosh* strongly agreed that they had "...the study skills (they) needed to be a successful student" (70% transfers vs. 27% freshmen). [This question was not asked of *Fall '03 Frosh as Spring '05 Sophomores*.] Similarly, more transfers than freshmen strongly agreed they expected "...to have important new friendships with other Western students" (60% vs. 50%), and that they would "...feel a part of the university community" (43% vs. 31%). On the other hand, sophomores were the most likely to expect "...to have important new friendships with other Western students" (69%). Most interestingly, sophomores were the least likely to strongly agree that they would "...feel a part of the university community" (27%). (See Figures 2a and 2b below.)

Figure 2a: Expectations. (Response = strongly agree)

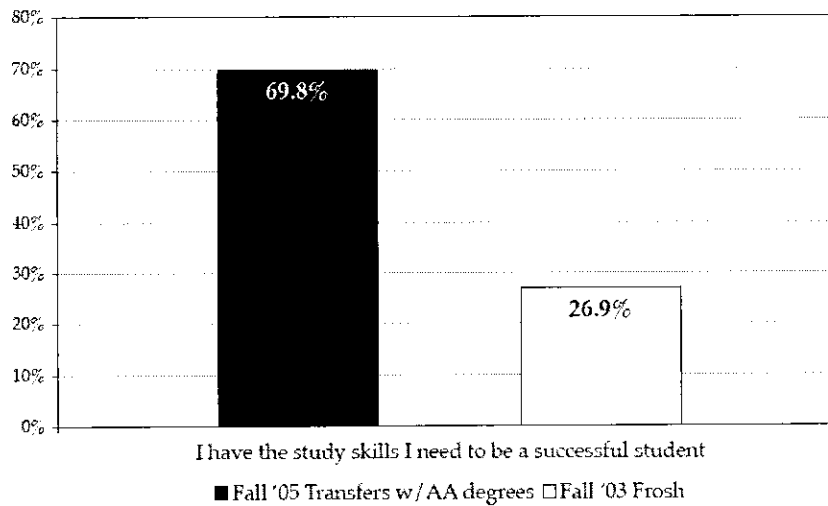
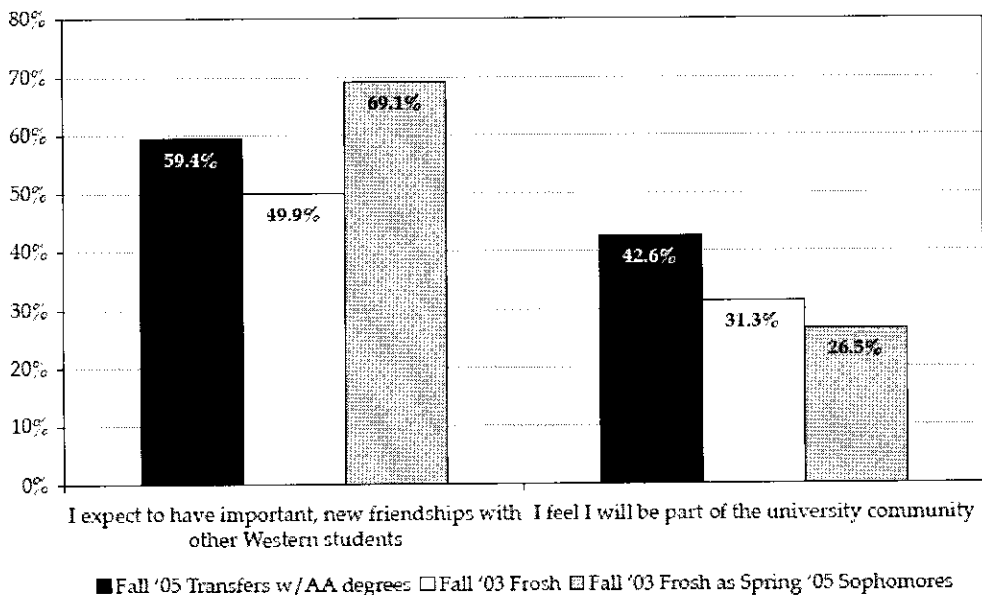


Figure 2b: Expectations. (Response = strongly agree)



Expectations - Academic

All three surveys asked students how difficult they expected each of a series of academic issues would be for them—although the sophomore survey asked fewer of these questions than the other two. Using only the response “not (a difficulty) at all”, the differences between the two groups were often striking. For instance, 58.7% of transfers compared to 20.2% of freshmen indicated that “sharing with other students in a discussion group” would not be difficult at all. Similarly, 32.7% of transfer compared to 6.0% of freshmen indicated that “preparing for and presenting your work in front of a class” would not be difficult at all. On the other hand, 52.9% of freshmen compared to 36.4% of transfers indicated that “balancing your coursework with a job” would not be difficult at all. This finding was rather forgone, in that far fewer freshmen work jobs than do transfers. (WHAT’S THIS %?) (See Figure 3a, below.)

When asked about specific coursework issues—writing papers, completing homework and reading, managing coursework, and balancing coursework with outside obligations—transfers again indicated more confidence in their abilities than freshmen. For the response “not (a difficulty) at all”, the percentage difference between transfers and freshmen ranged from 37.0% to 12.1%, with a higher percentage of transfers in each instance. (See Figure 3b, page 5.)

In the survey section about academic expectations two issues were raised in all three surveys: “managing your time effectively” and “balancing your coursework with family or community obligations”. For “managing your time effectively” 24.2% of Fall ‘05 Transfers w/ AA degrees compared to 4.4% of Fall ‘03 Frosh and 10.0% of Fall ‘03 Frosh as Spring ‘05 Sophomores responded that it would not be difficult at all. Interestingly, for “balancing your coursework with family or community obligations” 33.7% of sophomores compared to 30.0% of transfers and 20.3% of freshmen responded that it would not be difficult at all. (See Figure 3c, page 5.)

Figure 3a: “How difficult do you expect each of the following academic items will be for you this year?” (Response = not at all)

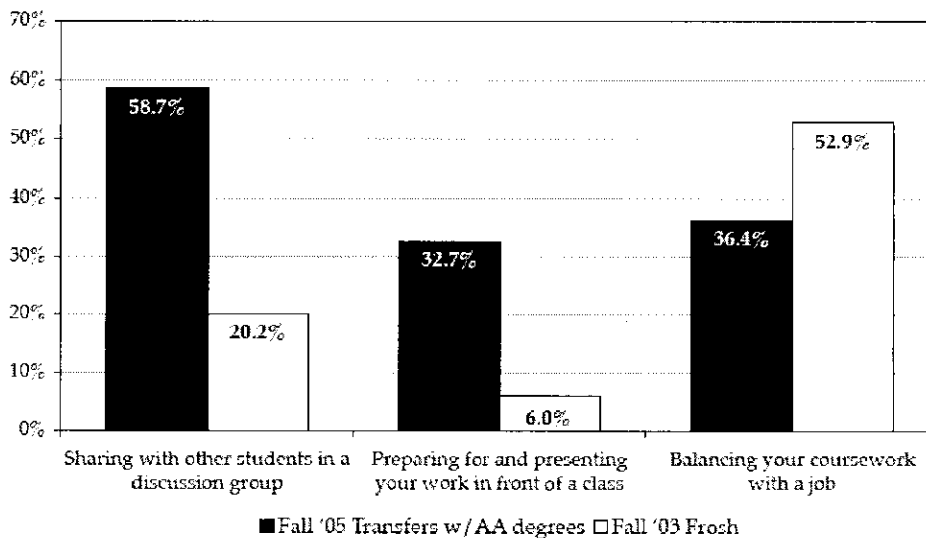


Figure 3b: "How difficult do you expect each of the following academic items will be for you this year?" (Response = not at all)

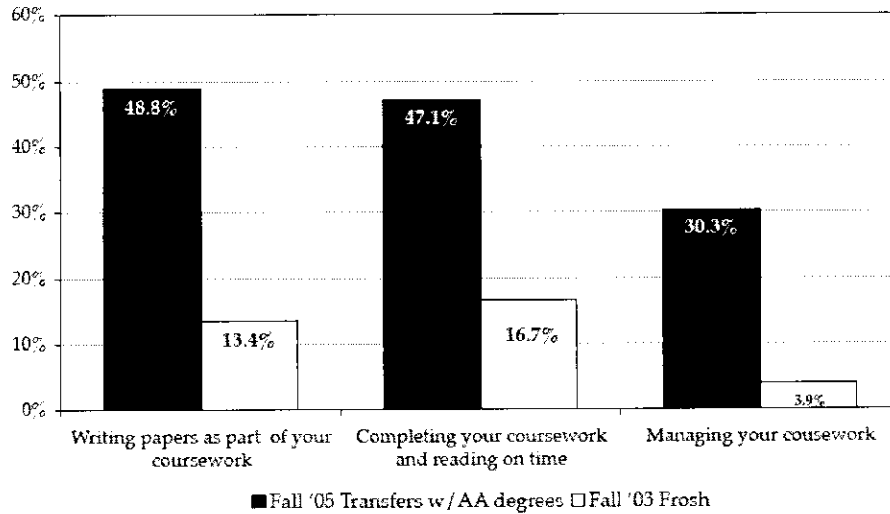
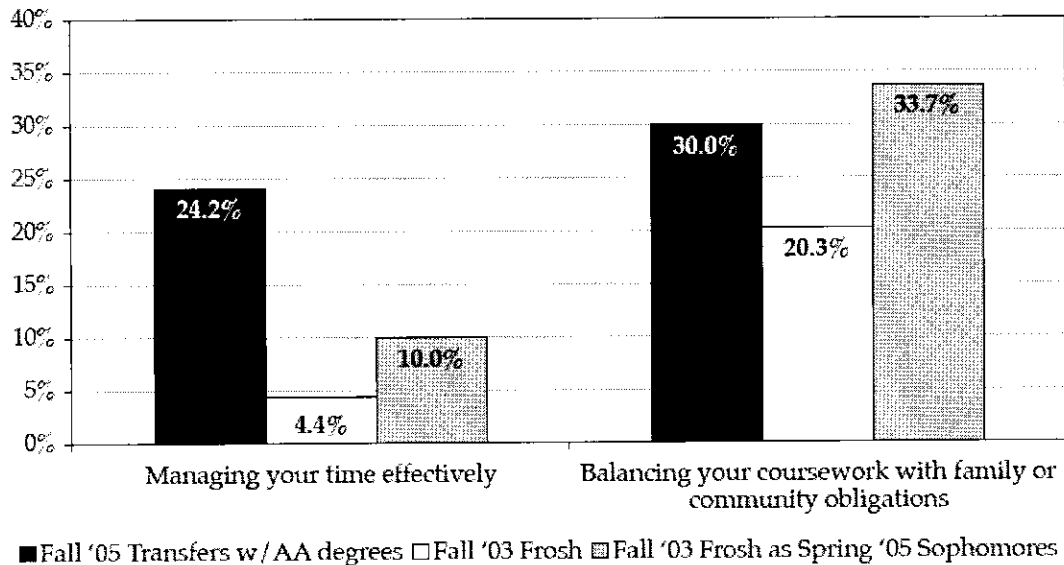


Figure 3c: "How difficult do you expect each of the following academic items will be for you this year?" (Response = not at all)



Expectations - Personal

All three surveys asked students how difficult they expected each of a series of personal issues would be for them—although the sophomore survey asked fewer of these questions than the other two. For "handling the use of alcohol or drugs", "managing your physical and emotional health", "managing stress", and "getting enough sleep", *Fall '05 Transfers w/AA degrees* were

more likely to indicate that the issue was “not (a difficulty) at all” than were *Fall '03 Frosh* or *Fall '03 Frosh as Spring '05 Sophomores*. The percentage gaps were not as large between transfers and sophomores as they were between transfers and freshmen. (See Figure 4a, below.)

When asked about “getting the financial support you need”, the sophomore cohort was more likely than transfers or freshmen to indicate it was “not (a difficulty) at all”. When asked about “managing your finances”, sophomores were again more likely to indicate it was “not (a difficulty) at all”. Sophomores were also more likely than transfers or freshmen to indicate that “fitting in with others at Western”, and “getting the emotional help that you need to do well in school” were “not (a difficulty) at all”. Transfers were more likely than freshmen or sophomores to indicate that “meeting your family’s expectations” was “not (a difficulty) at all”. (See Figures 4b, below, and Figure 4c, next page.)

Figure 4a: “How difficult do you expect each of the following personal items will be for you this year?” (Response = not at all)

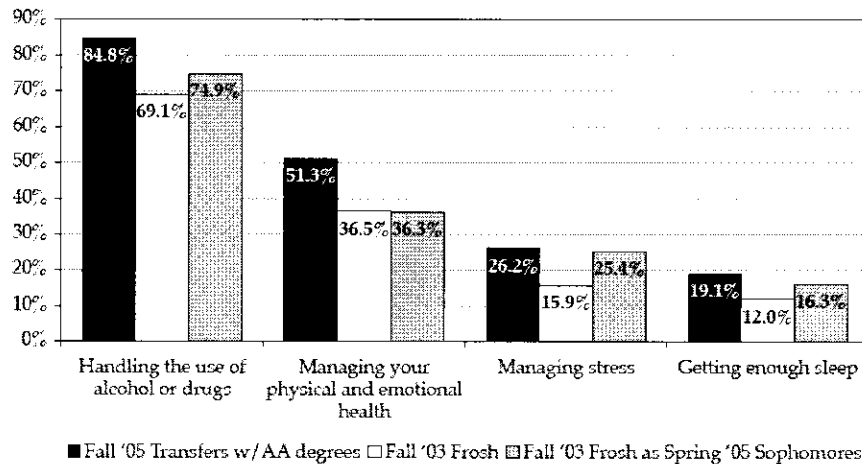


Figure 4b: “How difficult do you expect each of the following personal items will be for you this year?” (Response = not at all)

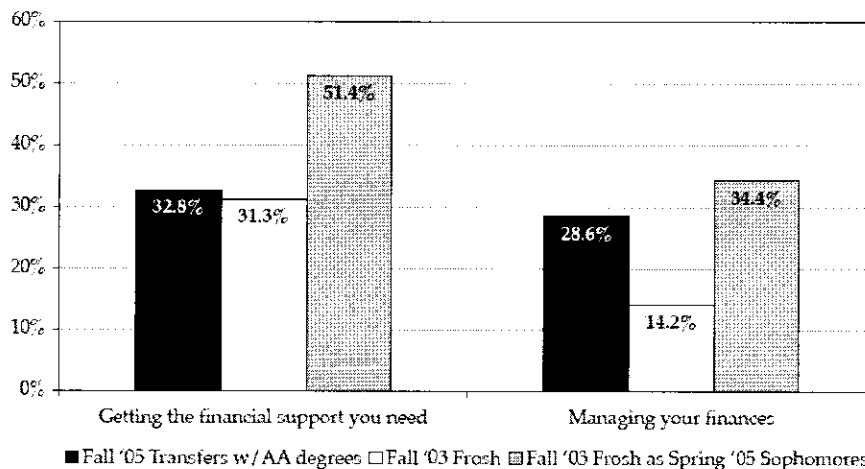
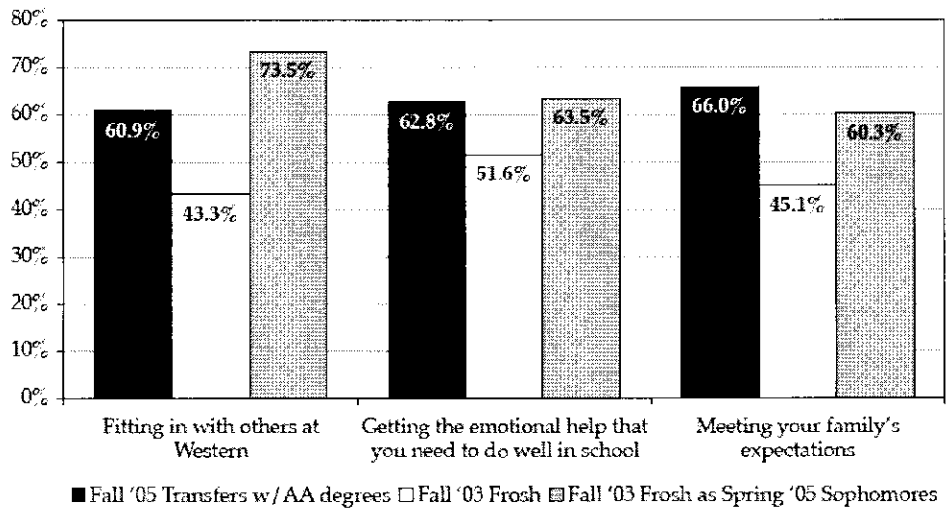


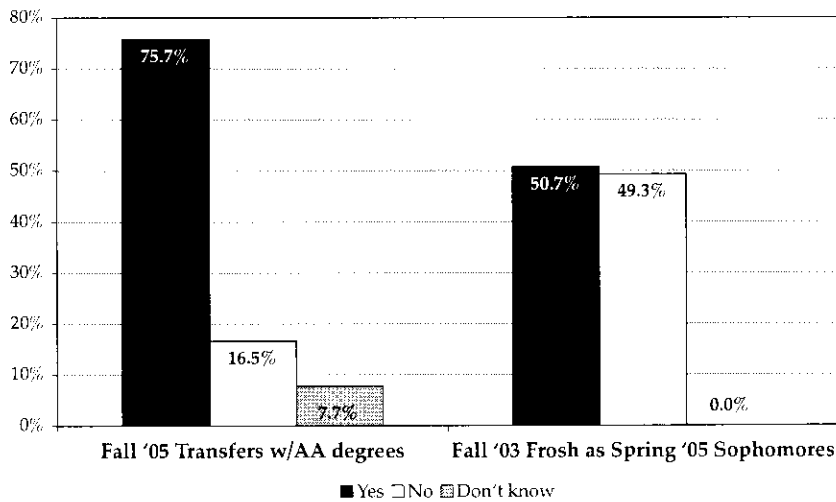
Figure 4c: "How difficult do you expect each of the following personal items will be for you this year?" (Response = not at all)



Working While Attending Western

Survey respondents were asked if they expected to work while attending Western. *Fall '05 Transfers w/AA degrees* were more likely than *Fall '03 Frosh as Spring '05 Sophomores* to indicate they planned to work. Given that the sophomore cohort also indicated they did not expect to have difficulty "getting the financial support" they needed, this finding is not surprising. (See Figure 5 below.)

Figure 5: "Do you expect to work while attending Western?"



Majors

Survey respondents were asked how certain they were of their majors. *Fall '05 Transfers w/ AA degrees* were more likely than *Fall '03 Frosh as Spring '05 Sophomores* to indicate they were either "very" or "extremely" certain of their major (88.2% of transfers compared to 76.6% of sophomores). A small percentage (7.6%) of sophomores indicated they were only "a little" or "not at all" certain what their major would be.

On the other hand, when survey respondents were asked if they had "completed the paperwork to officially declare" their major, sophomores were more likely than transfers to indicate they had (40.7% of sophomores compared to 25.5% of transfers). Sophomores were also more likely to have "talked to an advisor about declaring" their major (39.2% of sophomores compared to 31.7% of transfers). Yet these findings could also reflect the reality that transfers were only just arriving to Western when they completed the survey and hadn't yet found the time to take care of the paperwork aspect of declaring a major. (See Figures 6a and 6b below.)

**Figure 6b: Questions about students' plans for a major.
(Response = YES)**

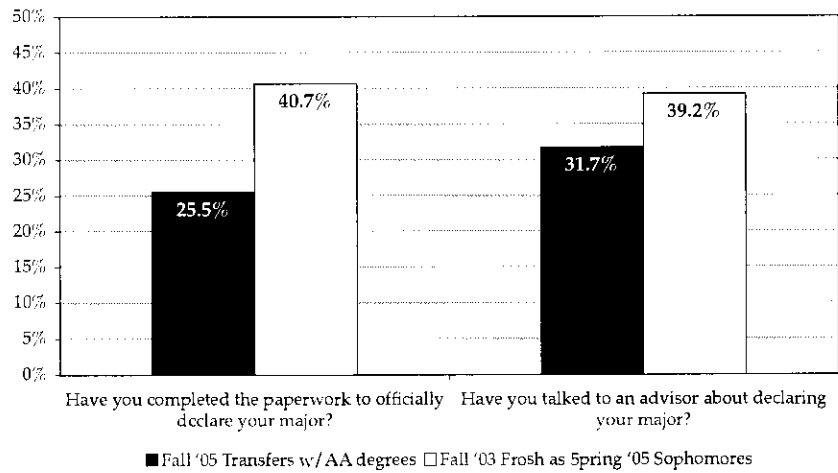
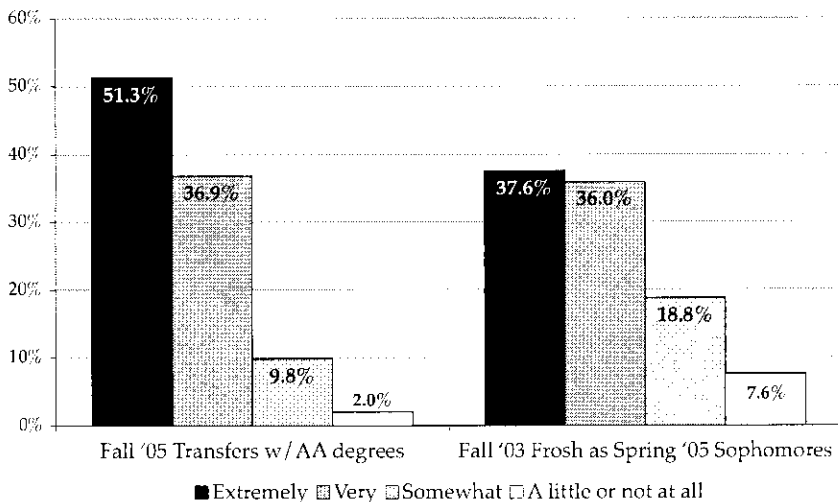


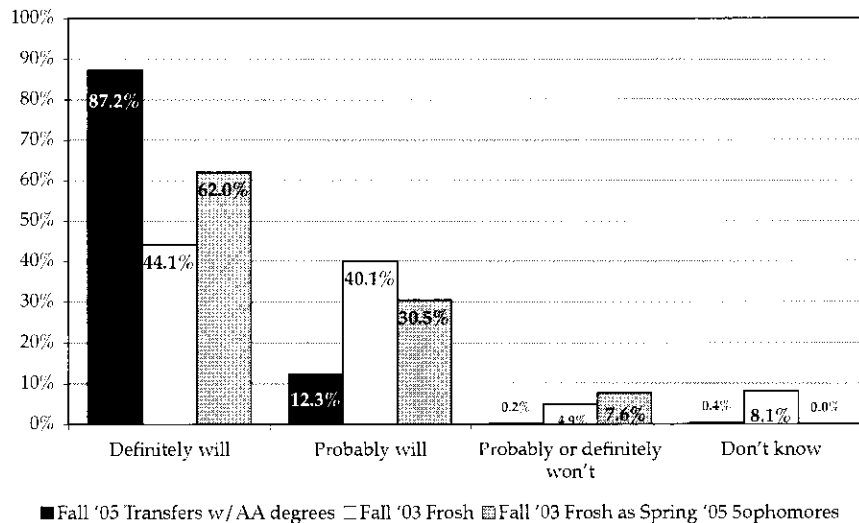
Figure 6a: "How certain are you of what your major will be?"



Graduate from Western?

Nearly all Fall '05 Transfers w/AA degrees said they would "definitely" or "probably" graduate from Western (99.5%). Most Fall '03 Frosh indicated the same (84.2%), while even more Fall '03 Frosh as '05 Sophomores indicated the same (92.5%). Some freshmen (8.1%) indicated they "did not know" if they would graduate from Western, while some sophomores (7.6%) indicated they "definitely" or "probably" would not graduate from Western.

Figure 7: "How likely are you to graduate from Western?"



Upper Division GPA Analysis of Transfers and Freshmen

As it is clear that first-time, in-coming transfer appear brimming with confidence, researchers thought it would be interesting to see whether that confidence translates into results; in other words, how do the grades that transfers earn at Western compare to their native counterparts? To do this, the grades earned in upper division courses for the fall quarter, 2005, were compared. Please note that these grades are not directly correlated to the students in this report who took the surveys, but rather are the grades earned by all students who fit the profile of two of this reports' survey categories: 1) students who, in the fall, 2003, entered WWU as freshmen (and who, in nearly all cases, by the fall, 2005, were juniors or seniors), and 2) students who, in the fall, 2005, entered as transfers with AA degrees (and who, in nearly all cases, were also juniors or seniors). By then taking note of the fact that very high percentages of both cohorts also participated in the surveys (approximately 75% and 90% respectively), all in all, researchers felt that these two groupings came exceedingly close to representing the cohorts of this report.

The average WWU gpa earned by students in fall, 2005, who entered Western as freshmen in the fall, 2003, was 3.36. The average WWU gpa earned by students in fall, 2005, who entered Western as transfers with AA degrees in the fall, 2005, was 3.21. This difference was statistically

significant (.000). However, the η^2 was only .010, which means that only 1% of this difference can be directly explained by admit status. So while the difference between a 3.36 and 3.21 gpa may appear important, statistically the difference is minor—although not without some explanation.

First of all, the “freshmen” cohort had slightly more caucasians than the “transfer” cohort (88.6% compared to 86.7%), as well as had slightly more females (64.4% compared to 60.5%). And while neither of these differences is statistically significant, these two issues are important to note because in numerous statistical comparisons at Western, females and caucasians nearly always have higher gpas. Furthermore, the “freshman” cohort had an average SAT score of 1152, compared to the “transfer” cohort, which had an average SAT score of 1077. This difference in SAT scores is important to note because average SAT is one of the strongest predictors of academic success at Western. So while not definitive, these statistical findings are offered as part of the explanation for the difference between “freshman” and “transfer” gpas in the fall, 2005, quarter.

CONCLUSIONS

Upon beginning their first quarter at Western, first-time, in-coming transfers with AA degrees were confident in their abilities, more so than were first-time, in-coming freshmen in their first quarter at Western. This confidence gap was lessened as in-coming freshmen became sophomores; indeed, for a few issues—especially with regard to fiscal issues—these “native” sophomores indicated more confidence than in-coming transfers. Yet for many issues, both academic and personal, survey findings indicated that in-coming transfers had a high level of confidence—which might not come as a surprise, as these students have had the benefit of already attending college before arriving at Western. Moreover, it is of importance to note is that not only do first-time, in-coming transfers with AA degrees have the *confidence* to do well at Western, they also *do* well: when considering upper division coursework only, findings show that the gpas earned by transfers and native freshmen are statistically very close. One puzzling finding from this data set is that while “native” sophomores have clearly made more friends at Western, they do not apparently feel any more a part of the Western community—indeed a lower percentage of “native” sophomores indicate this connection than they did as freshmen.

A NOTE ON THE WESTERN EDUCATIONAL LONGITUDINAL STUDY (WELS)

The Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS) was conceived as a process to obtain data more relevant to Western and its mission than survey data had been able to obtain previously. Rather than continuing to rely on outside survey forms, researchers developed a Western-specific survey form. Development of this survey took about three years, with researchers soliciting input from dozens of individuals, departments and offices. Along the way, WELS researchers also noted where data was already being collected so that doubling up on survey questions was minimized.

The final survey form was considered by all participants to be as thorough and Western-specific as it could be. In the inaugural WELS survey, 1580 in-coming 2003 freshmen participated. These respondents became the baseline cohort. From this baseline, samples have been and will continue to be drawn for subsequent WELS surveys. The principle surveys—and their consequent reports—conducted and completed to date include:

- Baseline (summer, 2003): *Western Educational Longitudinal Study (OIART report 2003-02)*.
- First quarter transitions (late fall, 2003): *Fall 2003 Freshmen Transition Survey. (OIART Focus Summary, Issue 8, Volume 4.)*
- End of first year follow-up (spring, 2004): *Follow-up of Freshmen Entering Fall, 2003 (Report No. 2004-01)*.
- End of Sophomore year follow-up (spring, 2005): Report available in winter, 2006.

All OIART reports can be accessed in pdf form at <http://www.wwu.edu/depts/assess>. For hard copies, please contact Gary McKinney. E-mail: gary.mckinney@wwu.edu. Telephone: 360-650-3409.

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