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# Making Progress Toward The Degree

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Making Progress Toward The Degree  
Report 1995-02

Carl Simpson  
Scott Matson  
Linda Clark

October, 1995

## Introduction

Students' ability to complete degrees in a timely manner has become one of the key new issues in higher education. Enrollment increases along with resource cuts have created increasing problems for student progress, which Western has been confronting through curricular changes, enrollment management policy changes, and higher workload for faculty and staff. At the same time, increases in tuition have highlighted students' felt need for efficient progress.

Two recent findings illustrate the impact of these pressures on the university. First, nearly half (44.9%) of students who entered Western in Fall, 1994, said at least one course they wanted to take was unavailable; one-fourth (25.6%) said more than one was unavailable. These figures would be much higher were it not for extensive recent efforts by the university to increase course access. Second, one-third (33.3%) of new students entering Fall, 1994 said a "major reason" influencing their choice of major field would be their "ability to complete the major within an acceptable time." The great majority (81.1%) said this consideration is at least "a minor reason" for choosing their major field.

The United States Congress recognized the issue of degree completion in 1991 when it passed the Student Right-To-Know and Campus Security Act. This act states that each college, receiving federal funds, must disclose a graduation rate for full-time, degree seeking Freshmen. National studies on time to complete baccalaureate degree show that 43.0% of graduates do so within 4 years, 70.8% graduate within 5 years, and 81% graduate within 6 years--19% take longer than 6 years to complete their degree (National Center for Education Statistics; 1993). On a more local level, one that is more comparable to Western Washington University, a study of California State University, a public university with moderately selective admission requirements, showed that 81.0% of transfer students graduate in 4 years (average = 3.5 years), and 80.0% of Freshmen students graduate in 6 years (average = 5.6 years) (Garcia; 1994). Is the length of time necessary to complete a baccalaureate degree increasing?

The two studies listed above show that time to degree is increasing. The National Center for Education Statistics (1993) showed that in 1977 45.4% of graduates completed their degree within 4 years, 75.3% within 6 years, and 24.7% took more than 6 years to complete their degree. In 1990, 31.1% of graduates completed their degree within 4 years, 68.4% within 6 years, and 31.6% took more than 6 years to complete their degree. This shows that between 1977 and 1990 the percentage of graduates completing a degree within 4 years declined, while the percentage taking more than 6 years increased. The second study of California State University students entering in Fall 1978-79 took slightly less time to graduate than the 1983-84 cohort studied (Garcia; 1994). If time to degree is increasing, what are the factors causing this increase?

Several recent studies have identified variables as predictors of increase in time to degree (Garcia; 1994, Colorado Commission on Higher Education; 1992, Knight; 1994, Illinois Tate Board of Higher Education; 1992 & 1994). Student choice variables, such as stopping-out, changing majors, type of degree, financial circumstances, working, and changing campus can all add time to degree. Performance variables, such as student G.P.A., credit load, number of courses dropped, and academic preparedness (High School G.P.A., S.A.T. scores) also can add time to students' attaining a bachelor's degree. Not all predictors of increase in time to degree

lie with the student. University policies and practices, advising, course availability, major availability, and degree requirements can all add time to degree.

Three different alumni surveys at Western have measured aspects of this issue, identifying factors that increase the number of credits students accumulate on the way to the degree and factors that increase the time it takes students to complete those credits. This report adds for the first time an analysis of students' perceptions of whether they are making "solid progress" toward their degrees.

It was our expectation when writing the survey questions to be analyzed here that we would be studying another aspect of the time-to-degree problem--how students conceptualized "making progress" and what access, enrollment management, and academic and personal success factors influence the satisfactoriness of each student's progress. As this report shows, some of that expectation was met; however we found to a greater extent that we were studying the meaning which students impute to higher education and how that impacts one of students' most powerful subjective perceptions: that they are progressing satisfactorily toward their degrees.

Our findings suggest that students' perceptions of progress have as much to do with what they value about education and how they see themselves fitting into it, as with matters of course access, academic success or failure, and the like. This report therefore serves two purposes. First, it analyzes how many students feel that they are making satisfactory progress and if not, why not. Second, it also analyzes students' perceptions of General University Requirements (GURs) versus majors, and how these affect their satisfaction with their experience at Western. Both these matters are subjective; they involve students' perceptions. As such, this report is perhaps oriented as much to guide faculty and administration ideas about how students are interpreting their education at Western, as to guide us concerning specific problems regarding student progression to the degree.

## How Many Report "Making Solid Progress Toward a Degree"

We asked students in each of our three surveys to report their perception of their own progress toward the degree in the most recent quarter completed at Western.<sup>1</sup> The specific questions asked in the Fall New Student Survey and the Spring follow-up of New Students were nearly identical: "Would you say [this] [Winter] quarter [is] [was] one in which [you're making] [you made] solid progress toward your degree?" Students who answered "No" were asked; "Why is that?"

The Winter Survey of Advanced Juniors and Seniors asked for somewhat greater detail: "How would you evaluate the progress you make last quarter (Fall) toward completing your college degree? Would you say your progress last quarter was... a) better than you had expected; b) about what you had planned; c) acceptable, but not as good as you had planned; or, d) much slower than you had planned?" If a student marked A, C, or D they were then asked; "Why do you think that happened?"

In the New Student Survey, native freshmen and transfer students reported very similar rates of satisfactory progress toward their degree, about 75% (See Figure One). However, when these students were asked the same question in our Spring quarter follow-up survey, the rates diverge. For native freshmen, the percent who say they made solid progress dropped to 58.5%, while for transfers, it rose slightly to 80.1%.

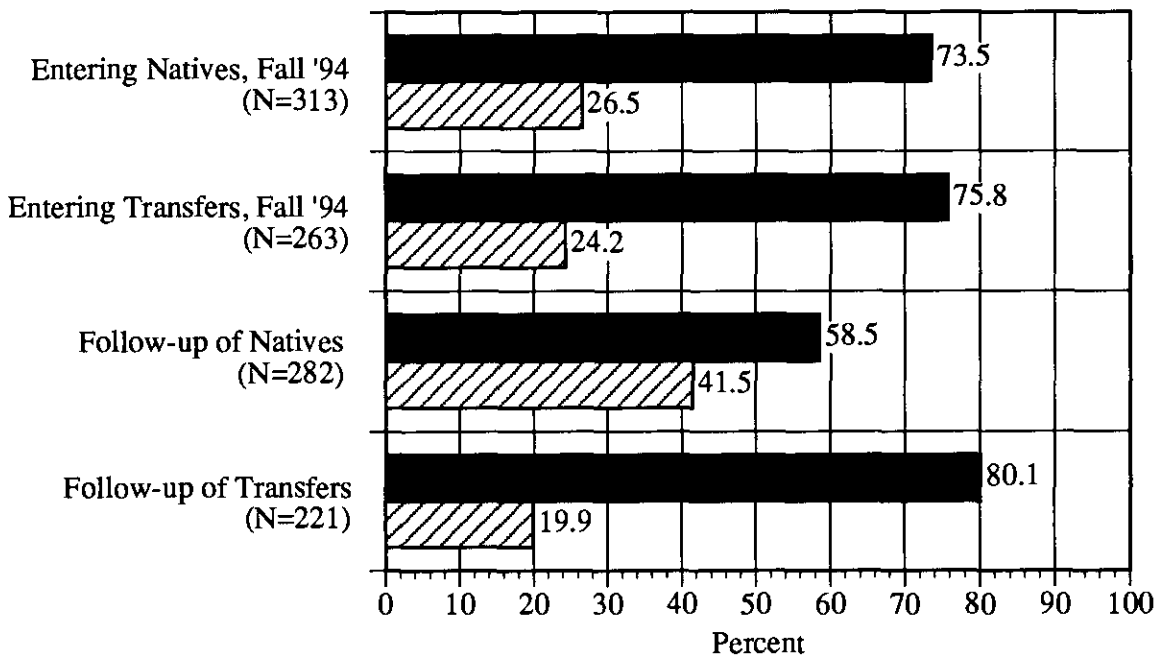
Responses from the advanced junior and senior sample are not entirely comparable with the other samples because the question was worded differently, but they appear to be somewhat more favorable than for new students. Seventy-seven percent said that their progress is about what they had planned or better, and 91% said that their progress is at least acceptable. This means that only 9% of upperclassmen report much slower progress than expected, although one-fourth say their progress was not as good as planned (See Figure 1).

While the majority of Western students report they are making solid progress to the degree during each quarter, enough say they are not to raise concerns. In particular, one-fourth of new students and more than forty percent of third quarter freshmen report feeling their progress is not satisfactory. Upperclassmen, including third-quarter transfers, make better progress, but a significant minority still report unsatisfactory progress. We learn more about why the proportions are this large by examining students' own explanations for why they are not making "solid progress."

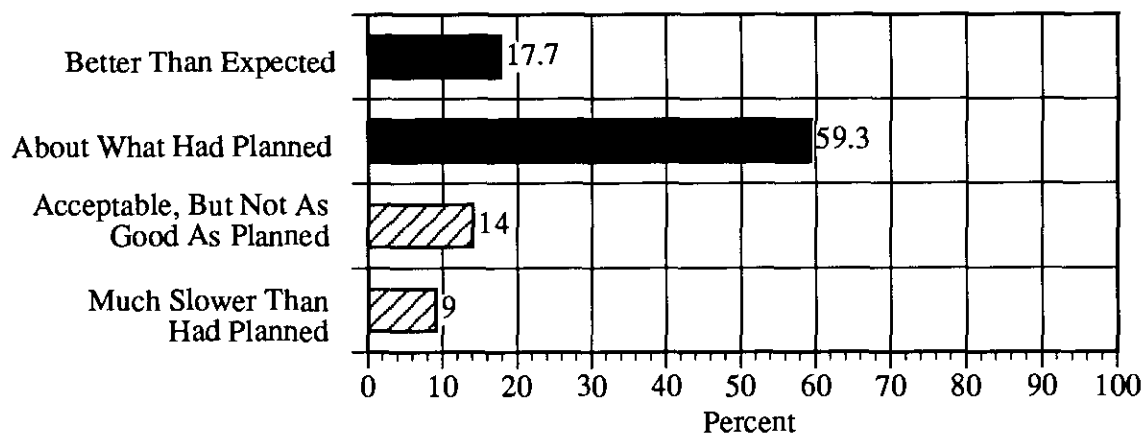
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<sup>1</sup> For the Fall survey of new students, the question referenced "this" quarter, their first at Western. All respondents had completed at least 5 weeks at Western. The Winter survey referenced Fall quarter, and the Spring survey referenced Winter quarter.

**Figure 1a. The Percent Who Say They Are Making Solid Progress Toward The Degree:  
WWU Survey of Entering Students, Fall 1994  
and Follow-up Survey, Spring 1995**



**Figure 1b. Evaluation of Progress Toward Completion of the Degree:  
WWU Survey of Students With 100+ Credits,  
Winter 1995 (N=712)**



Yes, Making Solid Progress  
 No, Not Making Solid Progress

### Making Progress Matters: Retention and Planning to Complete a Degree at Western

Plans to complete a degree at Western do appear to be significantly influenced by whether students feel that they are making progress during each quarter. During students' first quarter at Western, the perception of not making progress reduces the number who plan "definitely" to complete at Western, but does not move anyone into the category of planning not to complete here. By Spring quarter, however, both natives and transfers who report failing to make good progress also more often plan not to complete a degree at Western (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1. Percent of Students Who Say They Plan To Complete Degree at Western: WWU Survey of Entering Students, Fall 1994 and Follow-up Survey, Spring 1995**

	Plan to Complete at Western?	Making Progress?	
		Yes	No
<b>Freshmen, Entering Fall '94</b>	Definitely	43.9	34.1
	Probably	46.5	51.2
	Probably Not/Definitely Not	<u>10.6</u>	<u>14.7</u>
		100% (n=230)	100% (n=83)
<b>Transfers, Entering Fall '94</b>	Definitely	74.7	49.2
	Probably	18.0	42.9
	Probably Not/Definitely Not	<u>7.3</u>	<u>7.9</u>
		100% (n=199)	100% (n=64)
<b>Freshmen, Follow-up, Spring '95</b>	Definitely	40.0	21.4
	Probably	51.6	58.1
	Probably Not/Definitely Not	<u>8.4</u>	<u>20.5</u>
		100% (n=165)	100% (n=117)
<b>Transfers, Follow-up, Spring '95</b>	Definitely	71.8	43.2
	Probably	19.8	38.6
	Probably Not/Definitely Not	<u>8.4</u>	<u>18.2</u>
		100% (n=177)	100% (n=44)

<sup>2</sup> One could argue that causality is reversed - that people planning not to finish a degree at Western relaxed effort and did not make progress. However, further analysis using the longitudinal structure of these data clarify the time order; failing to make progress during Fall quarter has the effect of decreasing the probability of planning to finish a degree at Western between Fall and Spring quarters.

from sequencing of prerequisites in some majors, the university imposes no expectation that freshmen have decided on a major, yet 10.0% of our first quarter freshmen sample reports that being undecided on the major is the main reason for failing to make solid progress. In all, then, 53.0% of new freshmen who say they are not making solid progress explain that fact by saying either that they have no preferred major as yet or that they are not yet taking courses in the major--both conditions that universities accept and even encourage.



By their third quarter, fully 41.5% of our sample of native freshmen say they are not making solid progress, and the reasons they give are even more overwhelmingly that they are not yet in a major. Nearly two-thirds of their reasons (63.9%) are that they are taking GURs or they have not decided on a major. References to being undecided rise from 10.0% to 23.0%, which may largely explain why so many more report failing to make solid progress. It appears that students are feeling increasing pressure to decide on a major with each quarter they spend at Western, and a significant proportion, as would be expected, have not yet decided during late freshman year.<sup>3</sup> As would also be expected, indecision about the major is less frequently a problem for transfers and upperclassmen (see Figure 3a), many more of whom are in fact decided.

For transfers, it is taking courses outside the major that looms larger as an issue in the third quarter than in the first. While only 17.0% of new transfers reporting unsatisfactory progress explain it by saying they are taking GURs or other classes outside the major, the figure rises to 42.0% by their third quarter at Western (see Figure 3a). By this point, most transfers are late juniors and nearly all are at least late sophomores, and the great majority have decided on a major. The urgency of getting into the major appears therefore to have increased.

In short, except for new transfers, in excess of half of the reasons first year students give for not making solid progress toward the degree appear best described as a discounting of education outside a major field. This translates to about 14.0% of all first quarter freshmen and over 26.0% of all third quarter freshmen who feel that taking GURs or not yet having a major means they are not making solid progress toward their degree. For these students, completing 15 credits satisfactorily during a quarter does not constitute solid progress if the credits are GURs or otherwise not in a major.

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<sup>3</sup> The indecision referred to here is fairly complete. Students were asked whether they were currently declared, had an intended major field, or were undecided.

The primary policy challenge these findings pose for the university presumably has to do with how to define for students the value of general education, rather than with increasing efficiency for students. In addition, the findings suggest that choosing a major and seeing some relevance of early course work to that major are such serious concerns for some students that they denigrate the value of their first year experience if these issues are not resolved. This recommends additional attention by the university to explaining and facilitating the process of selecting a major and perhaps exploring ways that students can develop some attachment to their majors even before taking courses in the major.

We move now to the other set of reasons for not making progress, those that are more commonly associated with making progress to the degree: taking too few courses, doing poorly in courses, limited access to courses, etc.

For first quarter transfer students, a high percentage of reasons for not making solid progress toward the degree reflect their transition. Their most common reason (26.4%) is that classes are full or unavailable, a problem being addressed by changes in transfer registration--changes only partially implemented for this sample. This same problem is reported very seldom by first quarter freshmen, most of whom participated in summer start. In addition, transfers' explanations for not making progress emphasize being "in transition," lacking clear goals, and dissatisfaction with the advising they received. These three reasons are given by one-third of new transfers. By their third quarter, transfers' reports of these three problems have dramatically decreased (to 11.7%) and problems with course access have eased (to 11.6%). Reasons that increase for transfers are personal problems, inability to get into a major of their choice, and taking courses outside the major.

Some reasons for not making progress that might loom largest in the minds of professors were reported by only a minority of first-year students: poor grades by about one-tenth, lacking clear goals by a similar minority, and dropping courses by only about five percent (see Figure 2).

When we move to our survey of advanced juniors and seniors who had been enrolled at Western for at least two quarters prior to the survey, we find not only fewer students reporting unsatisfactory progress, but also a constellation of reasons for slow progress that looks much more like our initial expectations: poor grades, personal and family issues, access problems, and a smattering of very specific problems that reduced credits completed or performance in courses (see Figure 3a).

Nearly as many advanced juniors and seniors progressed more rapidly than expected as progressed more slowly. Almost half of these attribute their superior progress to improved grades or improved study habits. Another group (20.4%) referred to the quality of courses and professors. Only eight percent offer as explanation that they had completed a large number of courses, although this omission probably occurs because the question asked why they made better progress "than you had expected." One-tenth of reasons for especially good progress were that registration had gone smoothly and desired courses were available.

In short, reports of upperclassmen who made less progress and more progress than they expected reflect specific issues of course access, course quality, student performance, and personal issues. None of the first year students' concerns with GUR courses and major decisions are relevant because these advanced students have "made it" to the stage the new students define as "making progress."

Readers should bear in mind that the incidence rates for each of the problems listed above are low. With one-fourth or fewer students feeling they failed to progress satisfactorily during each quarter, a figure such as that 12.0% cite lack of access to courses as their reason means that a total of about 3.0% of all students (12.0% times 25.0%) report making poor progress because courses were unavailable. Interested readers can use Figures 1-3 to calculate similar figures for other problem areas.

### **Non-Subjective Interpretations: Factors Influencing the Perception of Making Progress**

We move now to “objective” measures of students’ behaviors and experiences. Data from the WWU Registrar and from students themselves describe the number of credits completed by each student, students’ GPAs, whether or not courses were in the major, whether or not each student was a declared major at the time of the survey, and so forth. These are valuable to examine in part because they introduce new issues, but also because they offer a corrective to students’ subjective reasons for not making progress. For example, imagine two freshmen taking all GURs. One may report that she is not making progress because she is taking all GURs, while the other may report making good progress. In this case, it is not the objective fact of taking GURs that explains why one reports making poor progress; it is the students’ subjective interpretations of GURs as a part of the college experience. On the other hand, we can imagine one freshman who is taking all GURs and who reports making poor progress, while another is taking one course in her major and reports making good progress. In this case, it may be appropriate to interpret who reports making inadequate progress on the basis of the actual courses students are taking.

We tested a range of behavioral and situational factors that could influence students’ perceptions that they are not making solid progress. The first of these involves the declaration of a major field and taking courses in the major. Judging from students’ reported reasons for not making progress, these are certainly salient issues for many students. The question is whether students’ perceptions that they are making good progress is increased when they are taking at least some courses in the major and when they have a definite major in mind. These issues are explored in the following section.

#### Involvement in the Major and Making Progress

As is to be expected, few first quarter native freshmen (9.0%) have declared majors. About half have intended majors, and 41.3% are undecided about a major. These figures change little by the third quarter, when 40.4% remain undecided. On the other hand, most entering transfers had a major in mind, with 46.3% “declared,” 48.1% “intended” and only 5.6% “undecided”. By their third quarter, the percent of transfer students who had declared majors rose to almost 67.0%. Also to be expected, almost all (91.3%) of our sample of advanced juniors and seniors reported “declared” majors, while only 0.4% were “undecided. These figures are consistent with the pattern that rates of making solid progress are highest for advanced juniors and seniors and lowest for entering freshmen.

It is also the case that few first quarter freshmen (17.1%) were taking at least one course in the field of their definite or intended major.<sup>4</sup> For entering transfers, the corresponding figure is 54.3%. For new freshmen, of course, nearly all courses in the major field are GURs that happen to be in the major. By Spring quarter, these figures are virtually unchanged.

We can ask whether reports of not making progress are more frequent among those who do not yet have a major in mind and whether they are higher among those taking no courses outside the major. The answers are yes in both cases (see Table 3). This finding is repeated for Fall and Spring quarters, although the pattern is strongest for Freshmen in Spring quarter and for Transfers in Fall. It seems logical that these would represent periods of especially intense decision-making by each group. To illustrate the relationship most clearly, we show data for freshmen and transfers below in the quarters where the pattern is strongest, but the pattern is similar in both quarters for both groups.

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<sup>4</sup> Fewer than four percent are taking two or more courses in their intended major field.

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**Table 3. Percent of Spring Quarter Freshmen and Fall Quarter Transfers who report Not Making "Solid Progress toward Completing [their] Degree" by Involvement in a Major**

**3.A. Whether Decided on a Major Field**

	<u>Percent Not Making Progress Among:</u>	
	<u>Spring</u> <u>Freshmen</u>	<u>Fall</u> <u>Transfers</u>
Declared Majors	31.4 (n=35)	13.3 (n=119)
Intended majors	37.8 (n=127)	33.3 (n=126)
Undecideds	45.9 (n=111)	33.3 (n=15)

**3.A. Number of Courses in the Major Field that Quarter**

	<u>Percent Not Making Progress Among:</u>	
	<u>Spring</u> <u>Freshmen</u>	<u>Fall</u> <u>Transfers</u>
No courses	44.5 (n=220)	26.5 (n=83)
One Course	35.4 (n=48)	22.2 (n=45)
Two or More Courses	14.3 (n=14)	12.9 (n=93)

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Table 3 shows consistently more frequent reports of poor progress among those less decided about their majors and among those taking fewer courses in an intended major, both for freshmen and for transfers. While these two factors explain a good deal about who reports making poor progress and who does not, although they also leave much unexplained. It is clear that for some substantial number of Western students, involvement in the major is one prerequisite to the perception of making solid progress toward the degree.

We can also examine whether students' reasons for reporting poor progress differ depending on whether they have decided on majors and are taking courses in intended majors. One finding is obvious and confirmatory: almost no one in our sample of advanced juniors and seniors is undecided or is taking primarily courses outside the major, and none of the reasons given for making slow progress had anything to do with the major. In addition, for entering freshmen and transfers, we compared the reasons given for failure to make progress among those decided and undecided regarding majors and those with and without courses in the major field. These findings reintroduce the importance of subjective perception.

The explanation that progress was poor because of indecision about a major was heavily concentrated among those who report being undecided about the major. That is almost true by definition. On the other hand, among those with declared or intended majors, a majority of reasons for non-progress were the complaint that they were taking courses not in the major - about three times the rate as among those undecided about the major. Here, the picture is of dissatisfaction because, having decided upon a major, the student is still waiting to experience it.

Combining these findings, our best interpretation appears to be that making progress more often “falls into place” after one has a major and is participating in it, but that having decided on a major also leads one to be more adamant about wanting to be taking some courses in that major. In addition, some reports of lack of progress are influenced by concrete matters such as GPA and number of credits completed, and some apparently result from subjective interpretations of the typical college experience. We move now to an analysis of the more concrete correlates of “making progress.”

### **Who is making progress: A Profile**

It is useful to profile what factors are associated with reports of making solid progress versus not, to get a clearer picture of whether personal characteristics such as gender or high school GPA influence “making progress”, or events/behaviors such as completing few credits or failing to get advising do so. We compact the presentation of these analyses by listing a series of summarized findings rather than presenting the full data display. Any reader who wishes greater detail or validation of the summarized findings may contact the authors.

#### Demographic Background

- *Gender.* As entering freshmen, women significantly less often report making solid progress than men. As upper-class students, however, women somewhat more often report making solid progress.
- *Age.* Among transfers, but not among freshmen, older students more often report making solid progress. The difference is modest but statistically reliable and occurs both at entry and in Spring quarter.
- *Ethnicity.* Neither ethnic minority students nor foreign students differ from U. S. citizens of European ancestry.

#### Transition to Western

- *Difficulty of transition.* Surprisingly, the report that the transition to Western was “very” to “not at all” difficult is unrelated to reports of making progress among entering freshmen. Among transfers, these two reports are associated, although not strongly.
- *Academic Difficulty.* Ironically, transfers who found Western to be academically more difficult than their previous schools more often report making solid progress to their degrees. No difference exists among freshmen.
- *Attending Summer Orientation.* Attendance at Summer orientation is not associated with reports of making progress in either Fall or Spring quarter.

#### Advising

- *Needing/Receiving Advisement.* We asked whether entering students had felt any need for advice regarding 1) GURs, 2) selecting a major, and 3) preparing for entry into a major. If they had felt a need for advice, we asked whether or not they had received “the advising you needed.” These three advising questions, asked in Fall and in Spring and analyzed for freshmen and transfers, produce twelve tests of the association between advising and making progress. In all but three cases, the pattern is the same: Those who felt a need for advising but did not receive it report substantially lower rates of making progress than either those who felt no need or those who received advising. The margin of difference is substantial, pointing toward advising as a crucial factor.

- Advanced juniors and seniors who have ever worked out a plan of study with a departmental advisor are significantly more likely to report making solid progress.

- The more satisfied students report being with advising in their major, the more likely they are to report making solid progress.

#### Values Regarding Higher Education

- Values measured through reasons for choosing a particular major (income, contributing to society, improving the self, etc.) are unrelated to perception of making progress, as is valuing social life versus "studying hard and learning."
- Students who "know exactly what [they] want to get out of college" somewhat more often report making good progress.

#### Number of Credits Completed

- Students who report making solid progress complete more credits, although the difference is not overwhelming, averaging 1-1.5 credits difference during the quarter in question. This finding holds both Fall and Spring quarters, for both natives and transfers, as well as for advanced upperclassmen.
- Advanced juniors and seniors' judgments about progress during their current quarter is associated with their total accumulation of credits, suggesting either that making progress gets easier with experience, that perceptions of what constitutes making progress gets less demanding over time, or that asking about making progress evokes the issue of overall progress over the years, as well as progress during the particular quarter asked about.
- For new transfers, but not for new natives, dropping a course is associated with reporting failure to make solid progress.
- For upperclassmen, we asked how many courses were dropped after being attended at least two weeks. About four percent of all courses attended that long were dropped. The number dropped after two weeks is strongly associated with reported failure to make solid progress.

#### Academic Performance

- Those who report making solid progress have higher GPAs. The difference between those answering yes and no to the making progress question varies between .3 and .5, for Fall and Spring quarter among natives and transfers.
- Part of the association between GPA and making progress arises from the fact that high performers are more likely to do the things that ensure progress, and part because progress is reported as poor when that quarter's GPA is lower than usual. We see the first effect in the fact that high school GPA and transfer GPA are reliably associated with reports of making progress at Western. The latter effect is shown by the fact that the association between GPA and making progress is considerably higher when we measure GPA in the same quarter for which progress is reported than when we measure GPA as Western GPA in a different quarter or as high school or transfer GPA.
- Students who report making good progress also report spending slightly more time engaged in homework, but the difference is not reliable for freshmen and only marginally so for transfers. Also, the slightly greater homework may be accounted for by the fact that these students complete more credits.

#### Competing Engagements

- Both natives and transfers who report not making solid progress spent slightly more time in employment and, during fall quarter only, significantly more time socializing. By spring, the

difference in social life had disappeared. None of these differences is great enough to explain much about who is and who is not making progress.

### Course Access

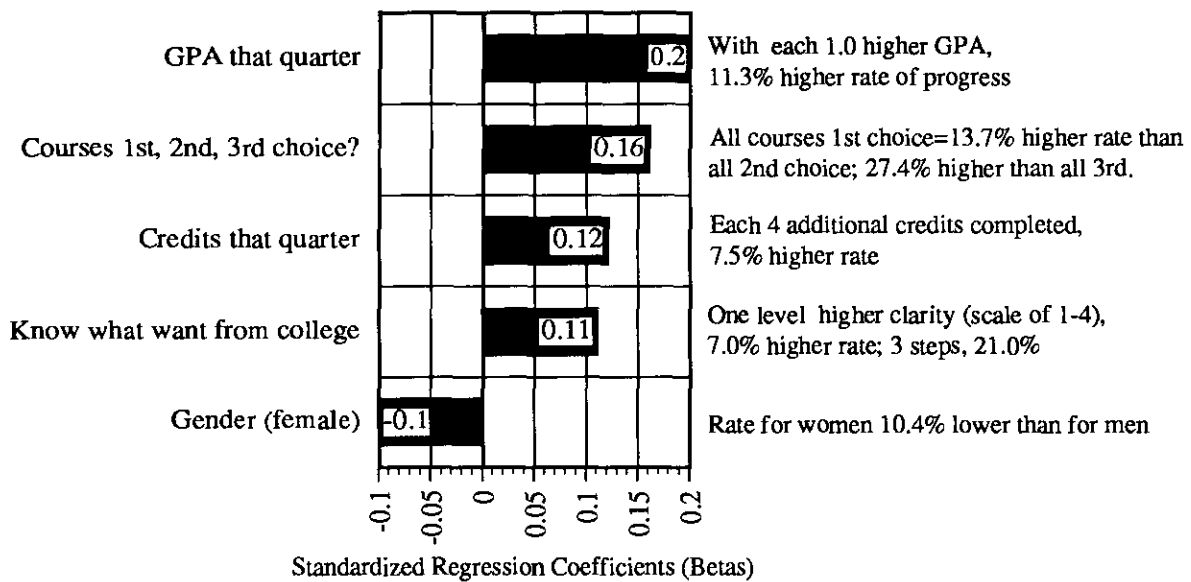
- Needing to use the RSVP drop/add to get into courses has no association with whether or not a student reports making progress for that quarter.
- Needing to get courses through departmental add codes is associated with making poor progress both Fall and Spring for transfers. Few freshmen got courses in that way, and doing so was not associated with progress among freshmen.
- In all samples, students who report that “any of your first choice courses [was] unavailable to you” also more often reported failure to make solid progress for that quarter. The impact of course unavailability is greater on new transfers than on new freshmen.
- We asked students to indicate whether each of their courses was 1) “a first choice that you wanted or needed,” 2) “a second choice that was still useful for your program of study,” or 3) “all you could get at the time.” Entering students reported that about 9% of their courses were second choices and about 13% were “all they could get.” For advanced juniors and seniors, the corresponding figures are only 3% and 5%. In both samples, the larger the number of courses that were first choices, the more often students reported making solid progress. This association is substantial.
- All these course access measures uncover more problems for new students than for advanced juniors and seniors. They are also less strongly linked to reports of making progress among advanced juniors and seniors.

### **Who is making progress: Multivariate Analysis**

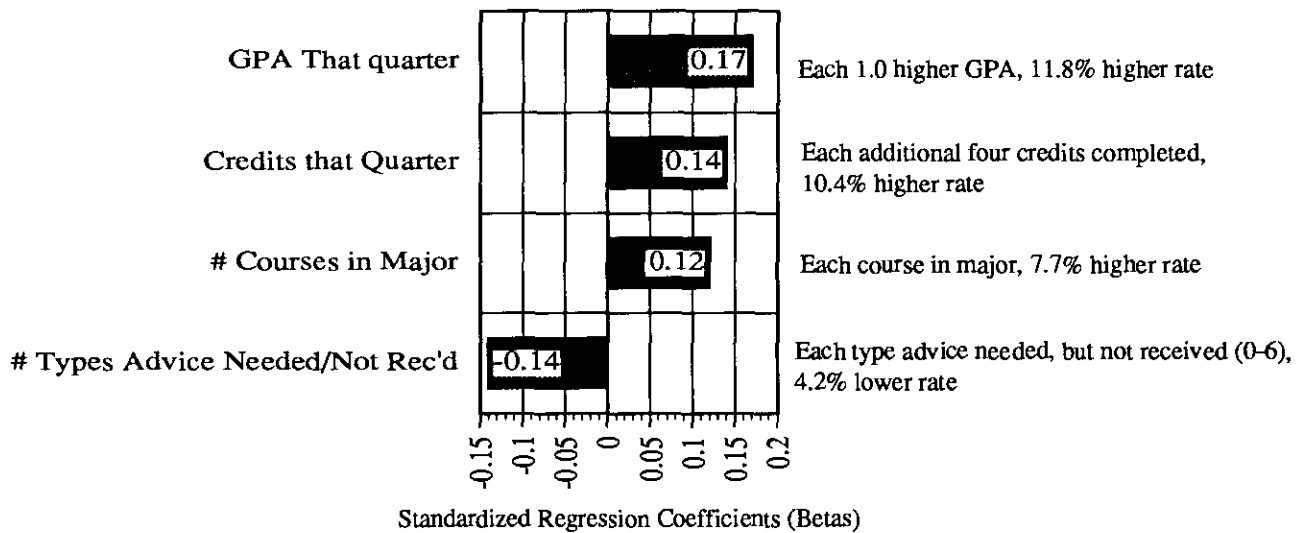
The profile just presented is a useful description of those who reported solid progress or not, but it is subject to the problem that these descriptive characteristics overlap with each other. Some of the associations detailed may therefore be “spurious” - may be shadows, piggybacked on other factors that are more likely to actually have impact on reported progress. Multivariate analysis of all the factors associated with reported progress allows us to identify those few factors that are most policy-relevant because they have the strongest unique effects on reported progress. This form of analysis eliminates overlap among variables associated with reported progress and identifies those with the largest unique (non-overlapping) impact on reported progress. Such factors are of greatest policy relevance because they explain most of the phenomenon under study and because changing them is most likely to produce a change in reported progress. One might call them “Key Predictors.” They are powerful; they are additive (the estimated impact of each may be added to the estimated impact of the others); and they are unique (their effects are estimated over and above the effects of other key predictors).

The figures below express these findings in both standardized and unstandardized terms. The length and direction of the bars in each chart indicate standardized measures indicating the relative strength of each factor’s unique influence on students’ reports of making progress. The written note across from each bar indicates the unstandardized effect estimated for each factor, each stated in the metric of the particular variable in question.

**Figure 4a. Determinants of "Making Progress," Fall Freshmen (N=277)**

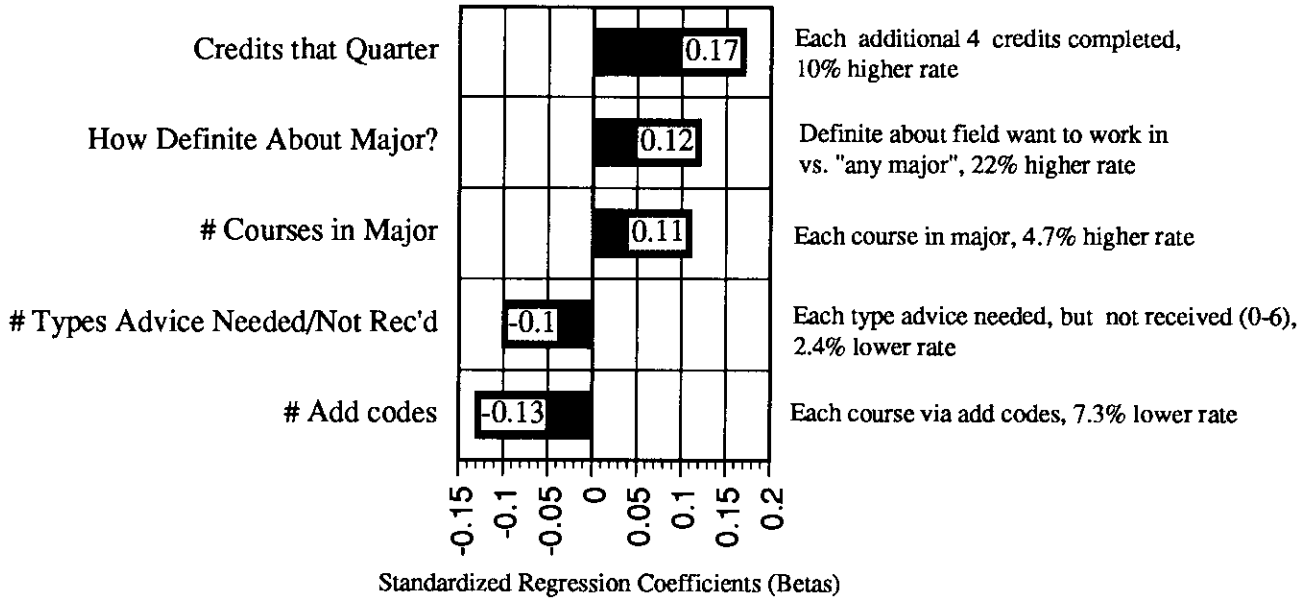


**Figure 4b. Determinants of "Making Progress," Freshmen, Spring Follow-up (N=273)**

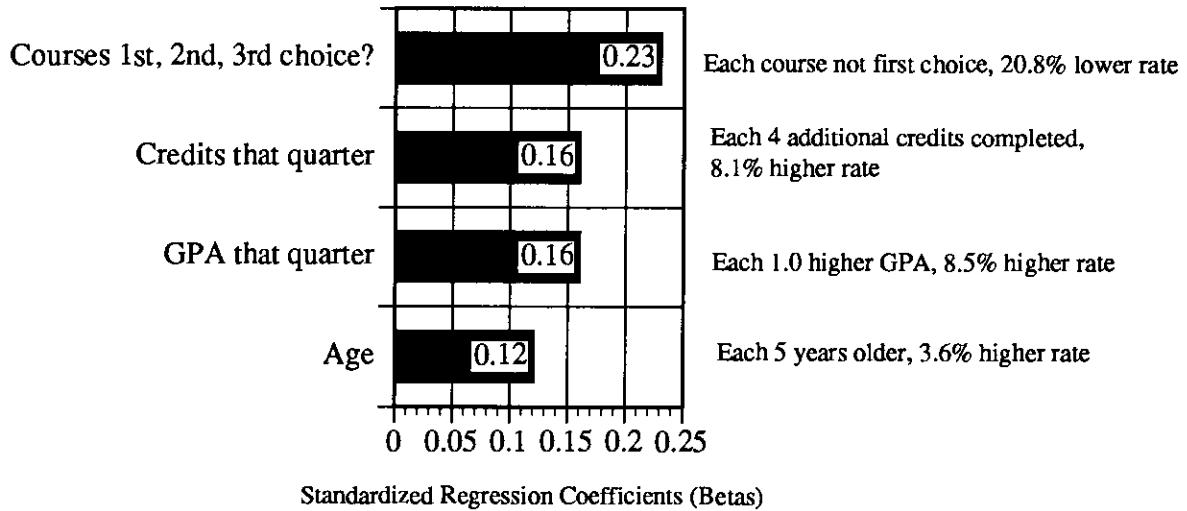




**Figure 4c. Determinants of "Making Progress," Fall Transfers (N=235)**



**Figure 4d. Determinants of "Making Progress," Transfers, Spring Follow-up (N=215)**



The specific factors that emerge from each of the four multivariate analysis (see figures 4a-4d) differ because different forces are working on each group and at each time and, in part, because of chance. Reviewing the four figures, some conclusions may be drawn.

- Number of credits completed during the quarter in question is one of the key predictors in all four analyses. On average, each additional credit completed raises the rate of making progress 2-2.5%. The average number of credits is about 14 for natives and 13 for transfers. The rate of making progress for students taking 17 credits is estimated to be 8-10% higher than for students taking 13 credits, holding constant other influences.
- In every case except first quarter transfers, GPA for the quarter is also a key predictor. A student whose GPA is one point higher than another's has about a ten percent higher probability of reporting that s/he is making solid progress.
- In two analyses, among Fall freshmen and among Spring transfers, our best indicator of course access - whether each courses taken that quarter was a first choice, a useful second choice, or "all you could get at the time" - is a key predictor of perceived progress. Over half of each group reported that all their courses were first choice, but over ten percent said none were. Students whose average score was "1" (all first choice) were 14% more likely to report solid progress among Fall freshmen and 21% more likely among Spring transfers than students whose average was "2" (all second choice) and double that difference compared to the few whose average was "3" (all that was available). While most students get all first choice courses, the rate of progress is much lower for those who did not.
- In a third analysis, Fall transfers, a different measure of course access was a key predictor: the number of courses that were finally arranged through departmental add codes.
- In two analyses, Spring freshmen and Fall transfers, the number of courses taken in the major field is a key predictor of reported progress. Each additional course in the major field increases the probability of reporting solid progress by 4.7% among Fall transfers and 7.7% among Spring freshmen.
- In two analyses, Spring freshmen and Fall transfers, feeling a need for advising but not receiving it is a key predictor of failing to report solid progress. In each case, about half of the group reported having no unsatisfied need for advising (i.e., either feeling no need or having their need met), with the rest reporting need on one to five of five different possible types of advising. An unmet need for advice with one type of problem raised the probability of reporting progress by 2.4% for Fall transfers and 4.2% for Spring freshmen. Unmet need for advice with two types of problems doubles those figures, and so forth.
- In two analyses, a measure of clarity about college goals was a key predictor. For Fall freshmen, greater clarity about what one wants from College and for Fall transfers, a more definite feeling about what field to choose as major were associated with higher rates of making progress.
- Even in analyses where course access, need for advising, and number of courses in the major were not key predictors, they were still part of the picture as correlates and as marginally significant in multivariate analyses. That is, these factors along with number of credits completed and GPA emerge as the strongest, most consistent factors explaining perceived progress, among those factors we were able to test.
- In no case do the key predictors identified in these analyses explain a great deal of who reports making progress and who does not. The percentage of variance explained by these models varies between 10.2% and 14.9%. It is likely that several unmeasured perceptual variables are especially powerful here: students' definition of "solid progress," their

expectations for their own success at college, and their definitions of the relative value of majors versus liberal arts background.

### Policy Implications

Western's Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing's assessment research program has a stated policy of not making policy recommendations. It is our task to gather information relevant to questions of university quality and efficiency, not to recommend answers to such questions. It is, however, useful to include a brief explication of some policy areas that this research touches on and/or questions it raises. Some observations in this vein follow.

- A large enough proportion of students feel they are failing to make "solid progress toward the degree" each quarter to be of concern. This is especially true of entering students and of freshmen in Spring of their first years. Further, the perception of making progress is associated with plans to complete at Western and with actually remaining at Western through Spring quarter. That is, while the report that one is or is not "making solid progress toward the degree" is perceptual and has many of its roots in other student perceptions, it is important both for its subjective impact on the student body and because it influences retention.
- The intriguing and widely shared perception that taking courses outside the major constitutes failure to make progress represents a fundamental challenge to the liberal arts tradition at Western. While student grumbling about GURs is commonplace, the finding that many students consider GURs not to constitute a meaningful part of their educational progression may be more serious than grumbling about requirements. Questions are raised concerning how Western can define itself and higher education to students and about the nature of students' GUR experience. On the other hand, the appropriate policy question may have to do with who is admitted to Western: whether it is appropriate for students who do not consider GURs a legitimate part of education to pursue a degree at Western.
- Concern about course access is not new; in fact, that concern spawned this set of studies. The findings here do, however, add to that concern by confirming not only that a significant minority of Western students have difficulty getting courses they want or need, but also that failure of access depresses the perception of making progress. On the other hand, these studies also show course access problems becoming much less severe as students accumulate credits and get well into their majors, and it shows the Summerstart program's provision of special access to freshmen having the desired effect.
- Previous alumni surveys have uncovered consistent evidence that Western students, like students across the nation, are dissatisfied with academic advising. In these close-in studies we see more starkly one implication of the need for advising--that failure to receive it when it is needed increases reported failure to make solid progress to the degree. For upperclassmen, we also see the particular role of departmental advisors and plans of study in assisting students to make satisfactory progress. However, from the standpoint of the issues in this study, the critical period of advising, aside from orientation upon entry, occurs late in the freshman year (and probably on into the sophomore year, although our measurement does not yet extend that far), and involves the question of choosing a major field and therefore a desired life direction.
- One consistent and logical influence on "making progress" is typically seen as a student's choice and not particularly the business of the institution: the number of credits a student completes during each quarter. However, both the number of credits a student begins and also the process of dropping courses can be influenced by the university. These findings raise the question of whether the university should perhaps be thinking about the advice it

gives students, whether course credits are compatible with making progress as a full-time student, and the like.