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General University Requirements: Technical Report

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General University Requirements
Technical Report

(Report 1998-02)

Carl Simpson
Gary McKinney
Linda Clark

February, 1998

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Executive Summary

To provide some background for ongoing conversations concerning Western's GURs, relevant findings were collated from ten different surveys conducted on Western students and alumni over the past ten years. There was no central thesis and is therefore no central finding to summarize. However, some highlights from particular findings can be offered.

- Most students are supportive of the idea that Western should offer a strong core of liberal arts instruction rather than primarily technical skills, although in practice GURs are not treated as seriously or valued as highly as courses in the major.
- Students' satisfaction with their GUR courses, while not extremely low, is also not high and is markedly lower than satisfaction with courses in the major. Almost as many are "not at all" as are "very" satisfied with instructional quality and course choices, and barely over 50% are "very" or "mostly" satisfied. Just over 60% say GURs broadened their interests, stimulated new ideas, and provided new cultural insights "a great deal" or "quite a bit."
- Satisfaction is particularly low with "the way GURs are organized and explained" and "the size and structure of most GUR classes."
- One possible change is solidly endorsed by students: to provide "suggested sequences of combinations of GURs." Both graduating seniors and also students who withdrew from Western without graduating overwhelmingly endorse this possibility.
- In two specific senses, GURs can be ranked, with humanities and non-Western areas at the top and mathematics at the bottom. First, students' satisfaction with instructional quality, while fairly similar across areas, sort in this order. Second, indirect analysis strongly suggests that when students think about "GURs," what they have primarily in mind is humanities and non-Western courses, with mathematics and natural sciences not entering their thinking about GURs.
- The value students ascribe to humanities, non-Western and social science GURs is closely connected to students' overall satisfaction with how well GURs broadened their interests and provided insight into diverse groups and cultures.
- GURs play a modest role in helping students decide on a major and also which fields to not major in. One-fourth of students who withdrew from Western without graduating say at least one GUR discouraged their interest in remaining in higher education at Western.

- Students are more positive about the degree to which GURs prepared them for life after university than vocationally-oriented interpretations of higher education suggest, although less so than liberal arts apologists would hope. About half of students say each area of the GUR prepared them for life after college “very” or “moderately” well. Figures vary from 65.5% for the communications GUR to 46.3% for the natural science GUR.
- Perhaps our most disturbing finding is that almost half of students who feel they are not “making solid progress toward the degree” say the reason is that they are taking GURs or other courses outside their major. This is true for entering freshmen as well as for upper division students. In the same vein, the proportion of students who do more than 20 hours per week of homework (indicating greater engagement) doubles from freshman year (24.6%) to senior year (51.9%), with almost all the change occurring between sophomore and junior years, when students move from GURs to majors.

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to collate findings that may provide background for conversations about possible revisions to Western's GURs (General University Requirements). The report is not an evaluation of Western's GURs. Sufficient data for such a systematic endeavor do not exist. To date, no assessment activity has ever focused specifically on GURs, although many surveys have included a few questions on GURs as one issue among many asked about. One survey, in 1991, focused on GURs a bit more than other surveys by asking separately about each of the six content areas within the GUR.

The absence of focused research on GURs means that this report leaves many questions unanswered. It is offered, nonetheless, in the hope that sharing what fragments of knowledge we have will support the ongoing conversation about GURs now undertaken at Western. Further, of course, most curricular issues are not addressed here because students are not the appropriate information source. We have no questions, therefore, on issues such as whether Western should have mathematical reasoning proficiency courses in the GUR, whether we should reduce our unusually large science GURs, etc. The only measures included here are of student satisfaction with and perceptions of their GUR experiences, and a few associated student perceptions we hoped might be of interest.

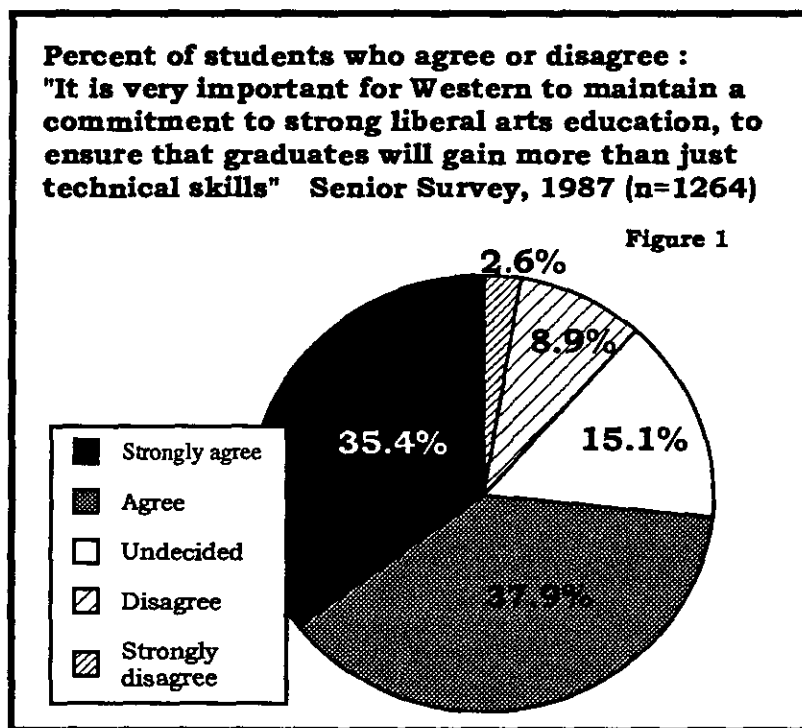
Findings from ten separate surveys are presented in this report. To avoid repetitious descriptions of each, as findings are interspersed, we include here a listing and brief description of each.

- One-year follow-up surveys of Western alumni from the graduating classes of 1989, 1991, 1993, and 1995. These surveys were conducted in Spring of the year following each class's graduation (1990, 1992, etc.). At the time of the interviews, students had been out of Western for between eight and twenty months, with the bulk, who graduate each Spring, out just under one year. Sample sizes vary around 1200, so that the standard 95% confidence error term is about plus or minus three percent for each survey.
- A survey of advanced seniors (those with 120 or more credits) enrolled during the spring quarter of 1987. The sample size and error is approximately the same as for alumni surveys.
- A follow-up survey of those same 1987 seniors in 1991. The sample size of just over 900 produces an error term of about 3.5%.

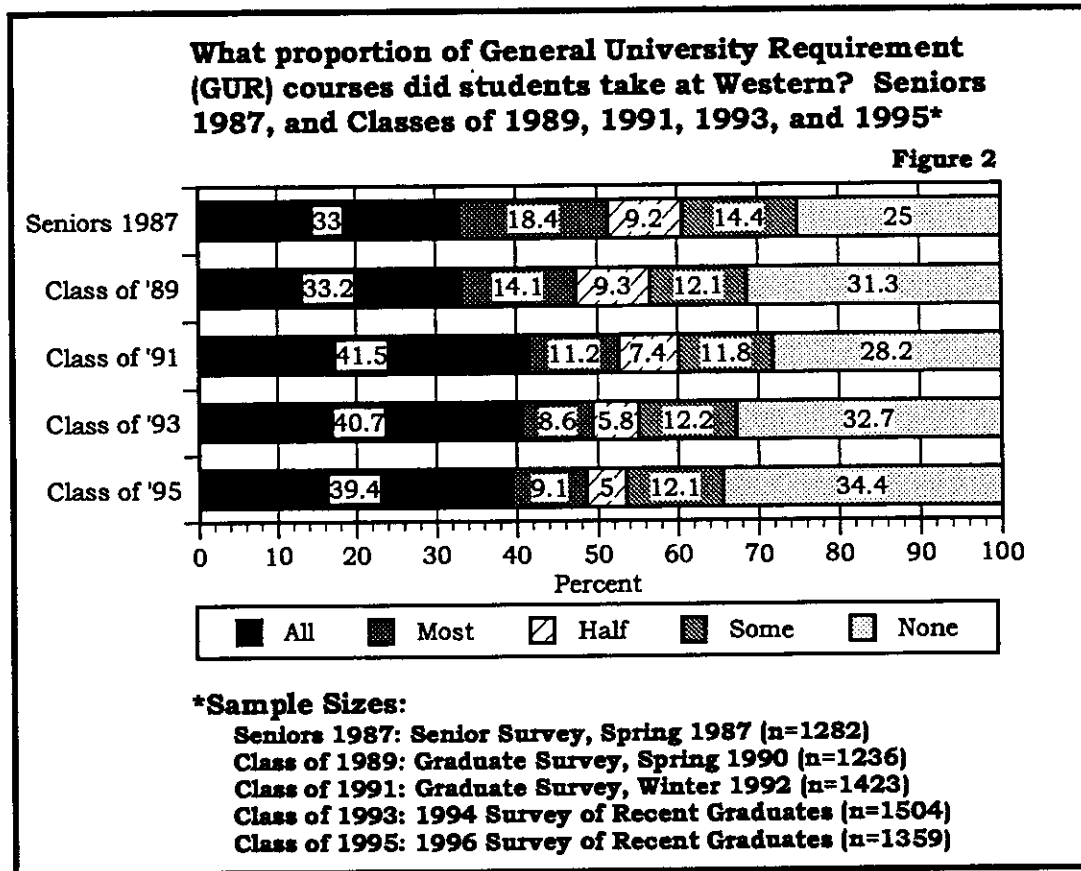
- Two surveys of former Western students (that is, people who had matriculated at Western but then left without graduating), one administered in 1991 and the other in 1997. Each survey interviewed people who had, over a period of 3 years prior to the survey, left Western for at least one full year without having graduated. Sample sizes of about 1200 and about 1000 produce errors of about 3% and just over 3%.
- A survey of newly entered students administered during the Fall of 1994, the quarter of their arrival at Western, plus the follow-up to that survey done in the Spring of 1995. Those surveys included 601 new students in Fall and 521 successfully contacted in Spring. Fifty-three percent were entering freshmen; the others were entering transfers. Error terms for percentages describing the entire sample are about 4% for Fall and 4.5% for Spring. For either freshmen or transfers alone, error terms are approximately 5.5-6.0%.

Findings

As shown in Figure 1, nearly three-quarters (73.3%) of Western seniors surveyed in the spring of 1987 agreed that a liberal arts education was very important. This finding probably means that most students agree in theory with GURs, since it is through them that “graduates gain more than just technical skills.” Anecdotally, it appears that more recent cohorts of students may have become vocationally oriented, although we have no repetitions of this item.



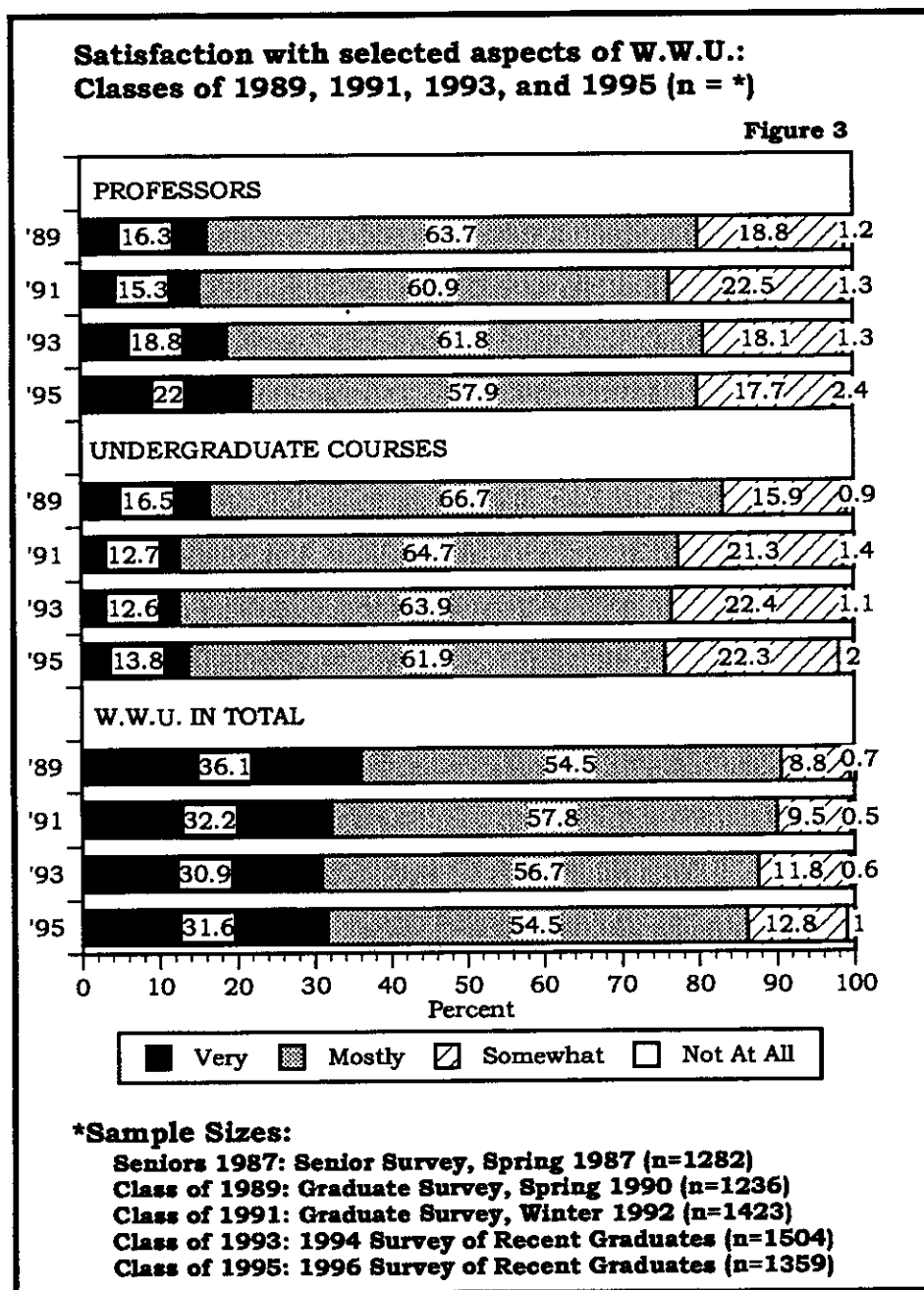
In Figure 2, seniors surveyed during the spring of 1987, plus four successive classes of alumni (biannual surveys administered between 1990 and 1996) were asked what proportion of their GURs were taken at Western. In this figure, the most notable trend was that the percentage of survey respondents reporting that they took most or about half their GURs at Western has steadily decreased, while the percent who took "none" has increased. This is likely attributable to the fact that since the beginning of the 1990's fewer students without an AA degree have been able to transfer to Western. The findings are falling along admit status lines, with natives taking their GURs at Western, and A.A. transfers completing theirs before arriving.



Findings throughout the remainder of this report are based on the two-thirds of Western students who took at least some GURs at Western.

In Figures 3 through 5, a series of satisfaction questions are presented. Each chart tracks the responses from four sequential surveys of Western alumni, each implemented approximately one year after graduation. The purpose of this series is to show satisfaction with GURs in the context of satisfaction with other aspects of Western.

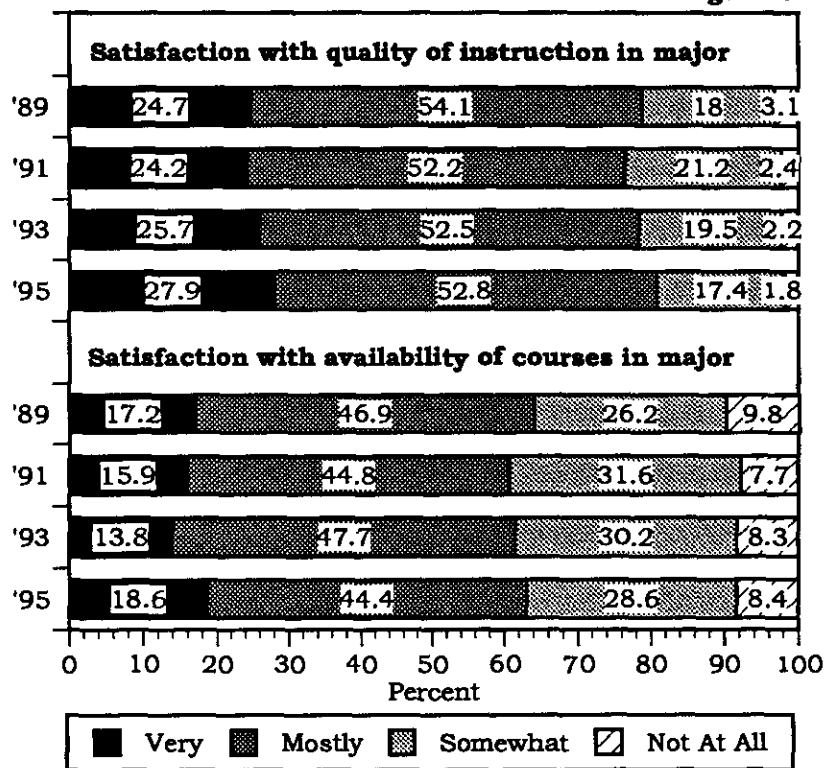
In Figure 3, three overarching concerns are addressed: satisfaction with professors, undergraduate courses, and Western overall. For these cohorts, satisfaction with professors has increased slightly, while satisfaction with undergraduate courses and Western overall has decreased slightly. It is tempting to speculate that large class sizes and scheduling problems that arose from budget cuts during this period may explain why satisfaction with Western and with courses declined even though satisfaction with professors improved slightly. There are, however, too few data points to confirm this possibility.



In Figure 4, satisfaction with the quality of instruction and availability of courses in the major are presented. Both have remained relatively stable over the four survey administrations. The percentage very or mostly satisfied with the quality of instruction within the major has been between 75 and 80 percent, while the percentage satisfied with the availability of courses within the major has been around 60%.

Satisfaction with quality of instruction and with availability of courses in MAJOR
Classes of 1989, 1991, 1993, and 1995 (n= *)

Figure 4



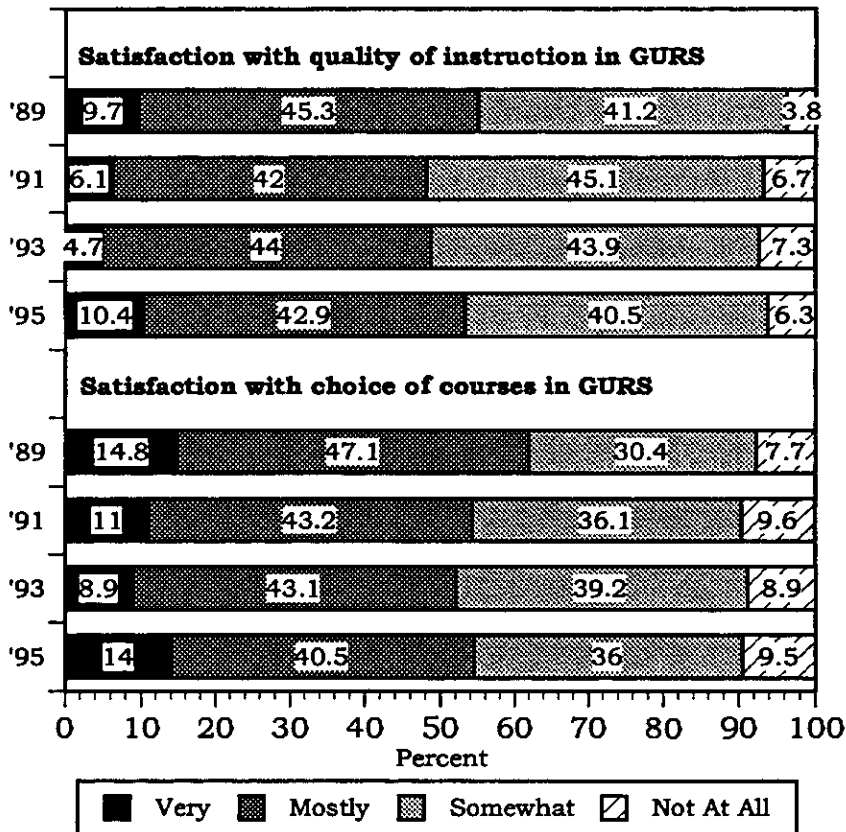
***Sample Sizes:**

- Seniors 1987: Senior Survey, Spring 1987 (n=1282)
- Class of 1989: Graduate Survey, Spring 1990 (n=1236)
- Class of 1991: Graduate Survey, Winter 1992 (n=1423)
- Class of 1993: 1994 Survey of Recent Graduates (n=1504)
- Class of 1995: 1996 Survey of Recent Graduates (n=1359)

In Figure 5, satisfaction with the quality of instruction and choice of courses **in the GURs** is presented and can be contrasted to levels within the major. Findings are relatively stable, but suggest a pattern of decline through 1993, with a rebound in 1995. These changes are consistent with the pattern of budget cuts. Of primary interest here is to compare satisfaction with major and GURs. About half of students are “very” or “mostly” satisfied with quality of instruction in GURs. By comparison, over three-fourths offer the same reports for courses in the major. Other comparisons are similar--showing a marked difference in perceived levels of instructional quality.

Satisfaction with quality of instruction and with choice of courses in GURS: Classes of 1989, 1991, 1993, and 1995*

Figure 5

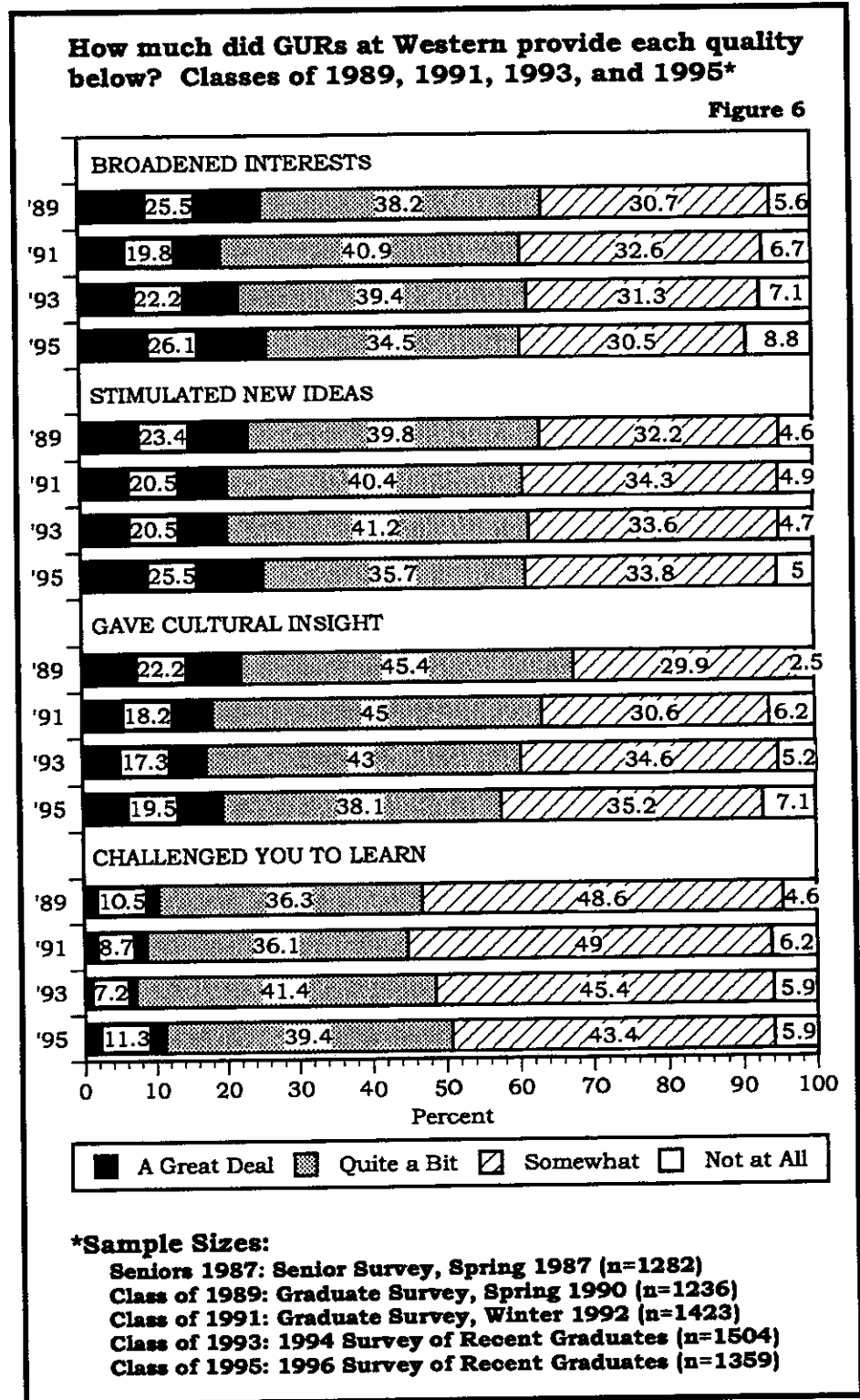


***Sample Sizes:**

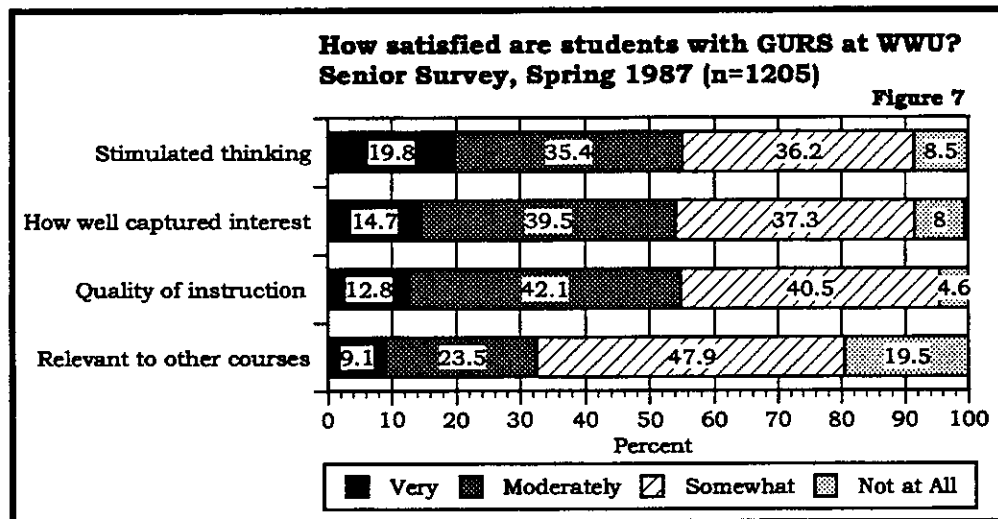
- Seniors 1987: Senior Survey, Spring 1987 (n=1282)
- Class of 1989: Graduate Survey, Spring 1990 (n=1236)
- Class of 1991: Graduate Survey, Winter 1992 (n=1423)
- Class of 1993: 1994 Survey of Recent Graduates (n=1504)
- Class of 1995: 1996 Survey of Recent Graduates (n=1359)

In Figure 6, the same cohorts of Western alumni were asked their impressions of four qualities germane to the mission of GURs.

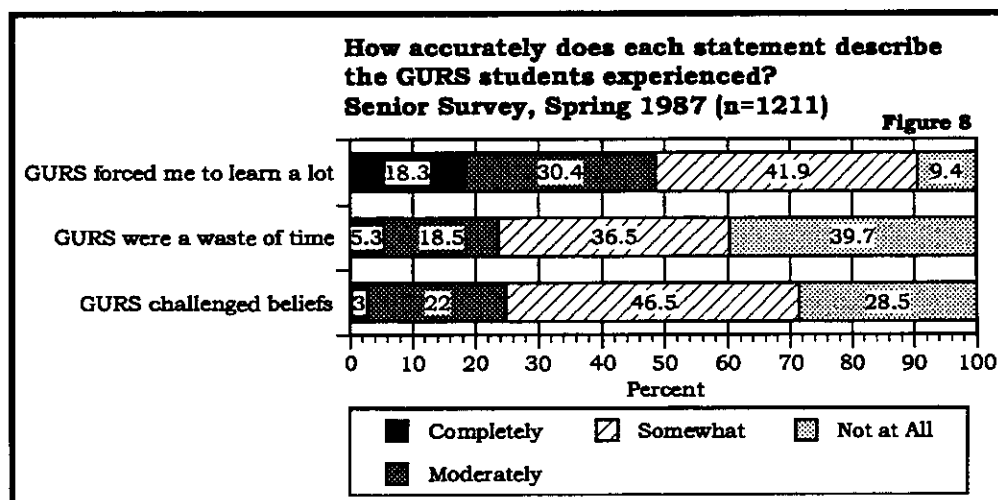
Did they:
 1) broaden interests;
 2) stimulate new ideas;
 3) give cultural insight; and
 4) challenge one to learn. Trends indicate little change in the percentage of alumni reporting that GURs broadened their interests or stimulated new ideas 'a great deal' or 'quite a bit'. Percentages held at about 60% in each survey year. The percentage of alumni reporting that GURs gave cultural insight fell over the four administrations, while the percentage reporting that GURs challenged students to learn increased slightly. In all cases, we can view the survey response "quite a bit" as relatively positive but "somewhat" as relatively negative. In these four areas, GURs are getting positive evaluations from about 60% of those who take any GURs at W.W.U.



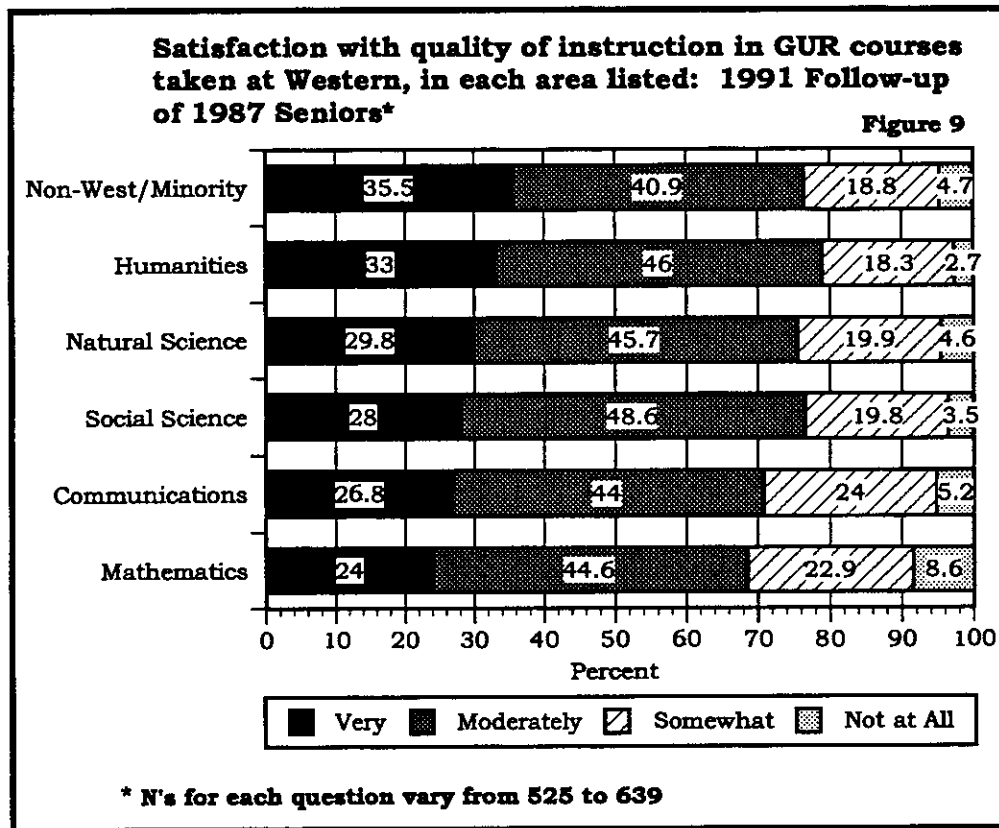
A set of additional measures, displayed as Figures 7 through 9, present findings from a survey of advanced seniors administered during the spring of 1987, and of the follow-up survey in 1991 of those same students. In Figure 7, those seniors were asked how satisfied they were with various aspect of GURs. Satisfaction with quality of instruction was about the same as found in the alumni surveys, with about 50% indicating they were 'very' or 'moderately' satisfied. A slightly lower percentage of seniors in the spring of 1987 than alumni indicated they were satisfied with 'amount stimulated thinking/new ideas'. However, two-thirds indicated dissatisfaction with 'how relevant GURs were to other courses'.



Shown in Figure 8, most seniors in the spring of 1987 indicated they did not consider GURs a waste of time: 39.7% indicated 'not at all', with another 36.5% indicating 'somewhat'. Only 5.3% indicated GURs had been a complete waste of time. Nearly 50% of seniors indicated that GURs had 'forced me to learn a lot', while half said only "somewhat" or "not at all". Surprisingly few felt GURs challenged their beliefs.

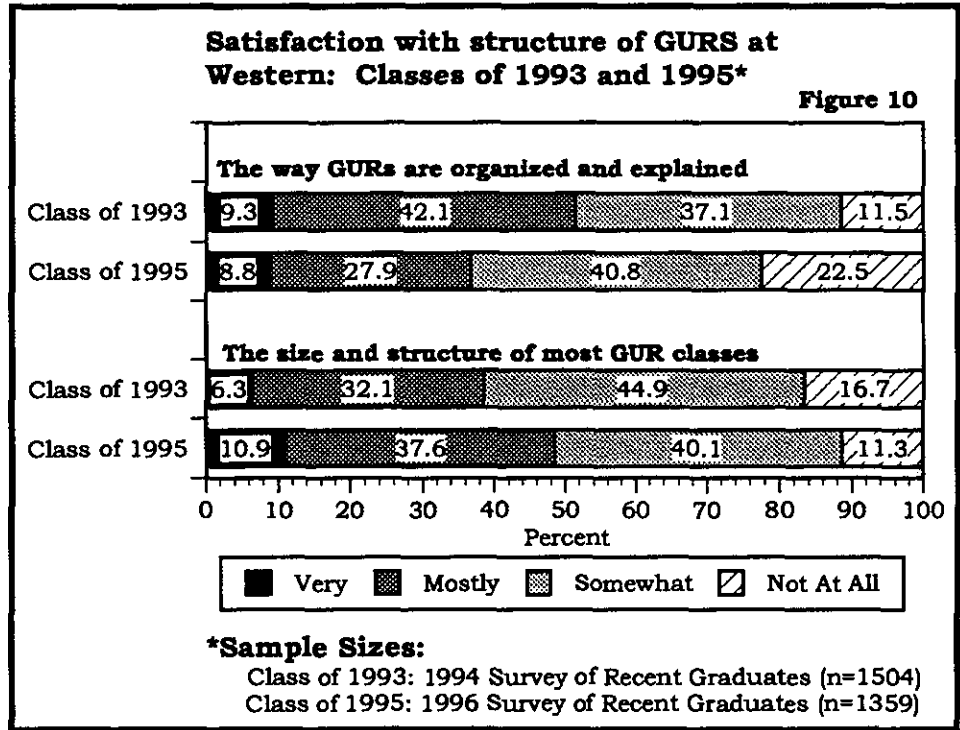


The only time Western has emphasized GURs in an alumni survey was in our 1991 follow-up of seniors enrolled in 1987. These findings are dated, but still worth a brief review. That survey asked alumni to reflect on the six areas of the GUR, asking first for satisfaction with the quality of instruction in each area and then how valuable each had been in their lives since graduation. Figure 9 presents findings for the first of these questions, quality of instruction. Satisfaction was highest in the areas of humanities and non-Western and lowest in mathematics.



Interpretations of those differences is complicated by the difficulty respondents no doubt had disentangling how much they enjoy the material from how well the instructor teaches it. When we calculate satisfaction separately by major field, the picture becomes a bit clearer. For each GUR area, majors in the aligned area express much greater satisfaction with the quality of instruction than do majors in other areas. For example, 83.1% of math and natural science majors are “very” or “moderately” satisfied with instruction in math, whereas the range is from mid 50% to high 60% for other areas. For the humanities GUR, humanities majors are that satisfied 95.9% of the time, compared to high 70% for other areas. When major field is taken into account, we see a) much higher satisfaction by majors within each area for their own area, and b) somewhat lower satisfaction both by those in the major and by those outside the major for the quality of instruction in math and natural sciences than in other areas. The magnitudes of those differences are approximately the same as shown in Figure 9.

In Figures 10 through 13, the focus is on the logistics of taking GURs and opinions about the structure of GURs. In Figure 10, for instance, alumni from the classes of 1993 and 1995 were asked their level of satisfaction with the way GURs are organized and explained, and with the size and structure of most GUR classes.



Satisfaction was low in both years. An odd reversal occurred that we cannot explain: the class of 1993 expressed more satisfaction with the way GURs were organized and explained than did the class of 1995, while the class of 1995 expressed more satisfaction with the size and structure of most GUR classes.

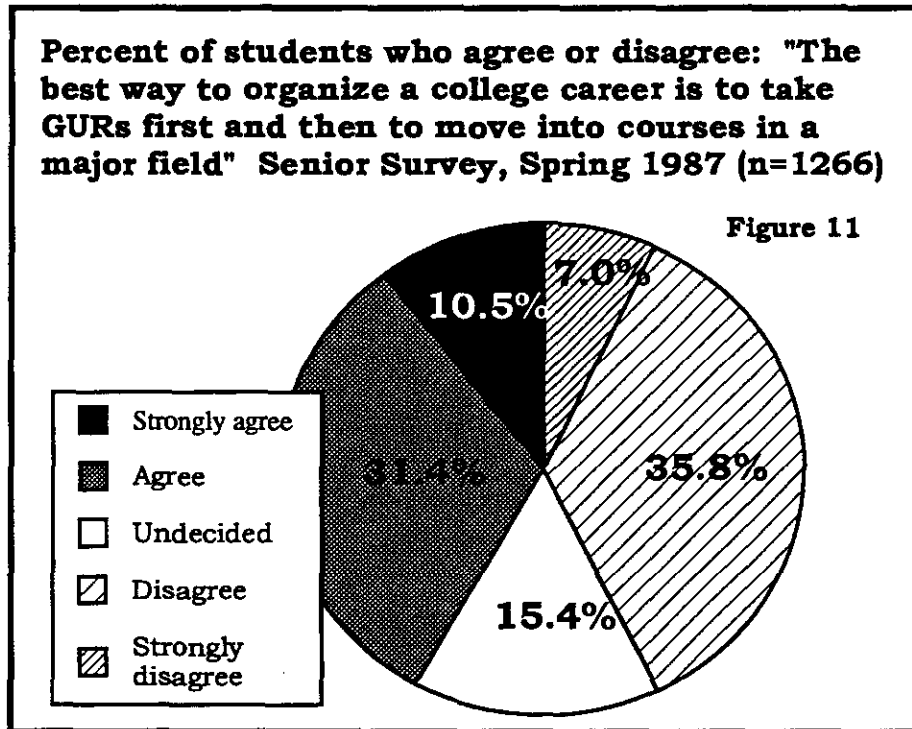
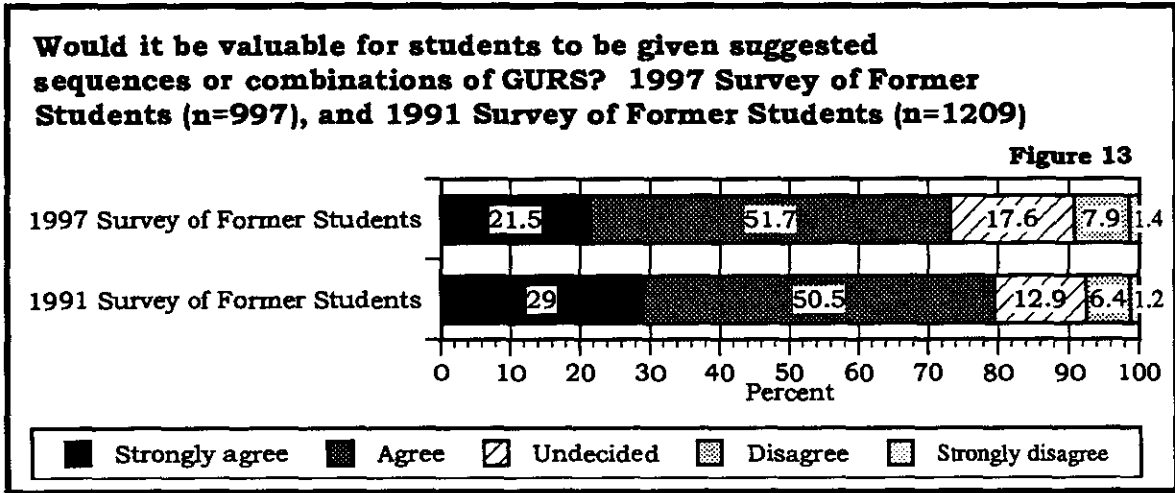
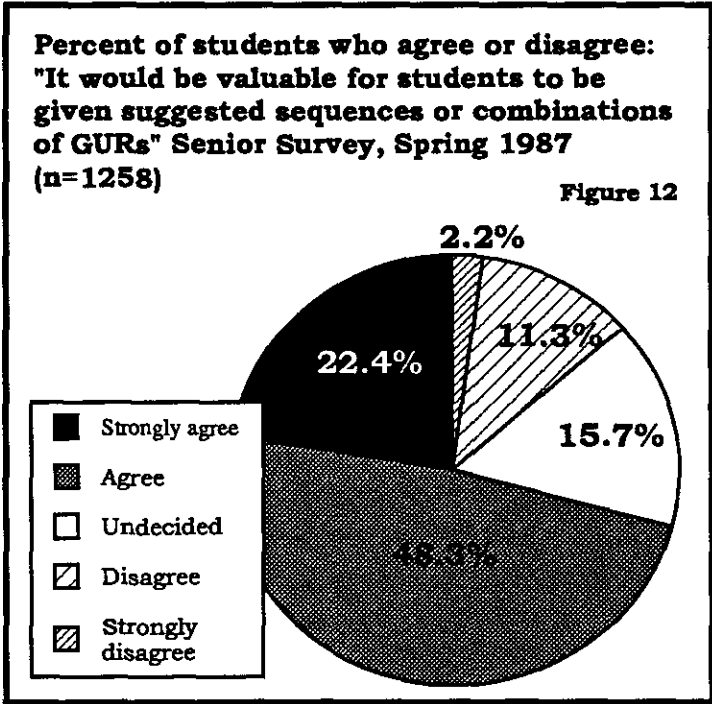


Figure 11 shows the percentage of seniors in the spring of 1987 who agreed or disagreed that "the best way to organize a college career is take GURs first then move into courses in a major field." Opinion was split about equally.

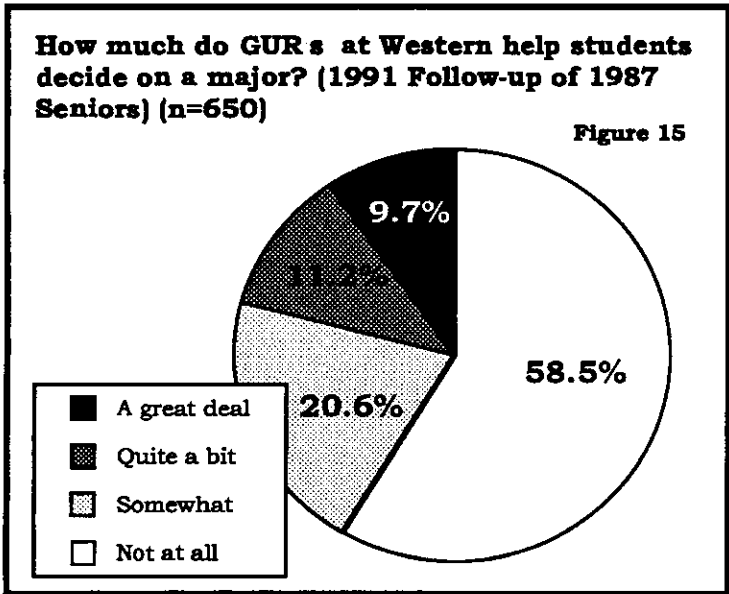
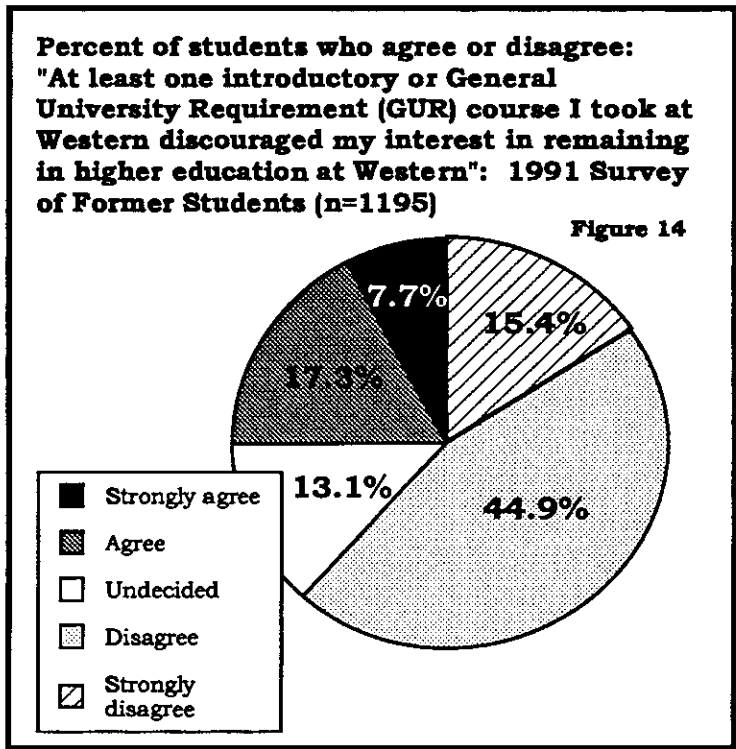
Figures 12 and 13 present findings for the same question ('It would be valuable for students to be given suggested sequences or combinations of GURs') asked in three different surveys: seniors enrolled in Spring 1987, and 1991 and 1997 surveys of former Western students who left Western without graduating. (Over half of those who left transferred elsewhere; the rest left higher education.)

What is most apparent here is that most students agree with this statement, with agreement increasing over time: from 70.1% for the 1987 seniors, to 79.5% of the cohort former students surveyed in 1997.



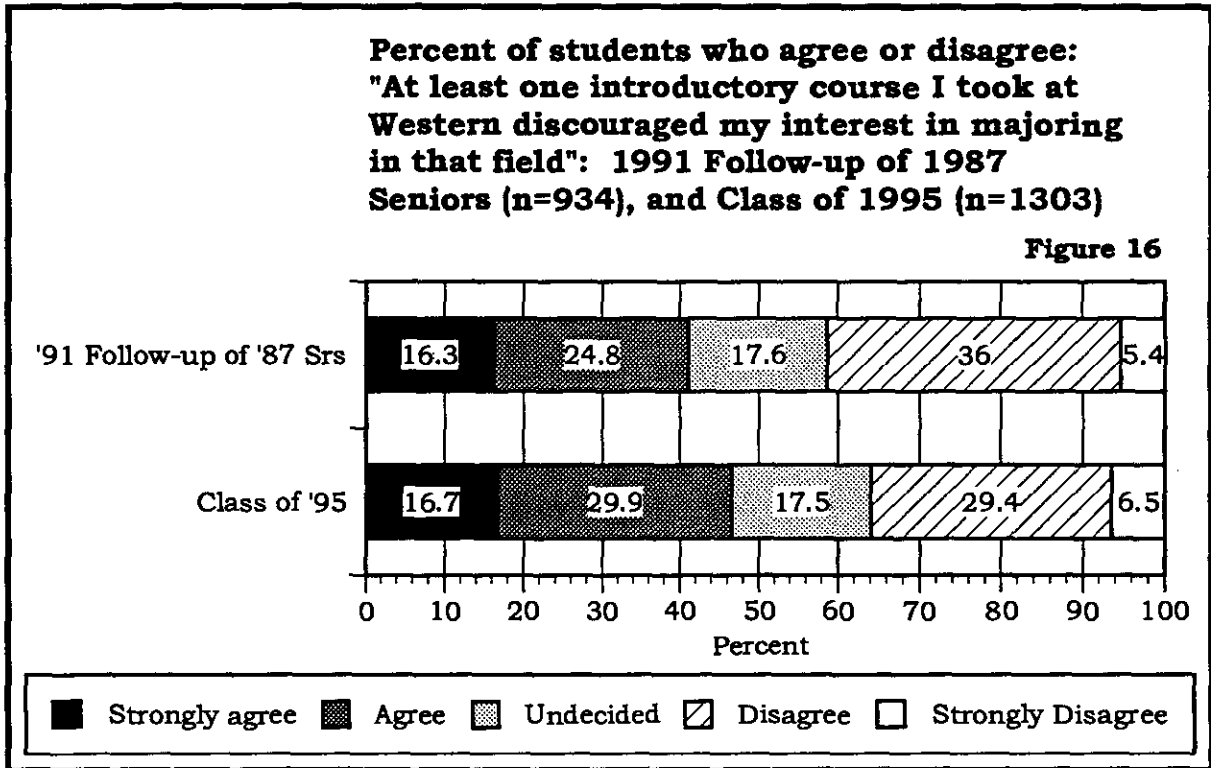
Figures 14 through 16 focus on the impact of GURs on the decisions students make regarding choosing a major and, indeed, whether even to remain in higher education.

Figure 14 shows that 25.0% of former Western students who left without graduating felt their decision to not remain in higher education was influenced by a GUR.



In Figure 15, findings from the 1991 follow-up of 1987 seniors show that 20.9% of that cohort felt GURs helped 'a great deal' or 'quite a bit' when it came to deciding on a major.

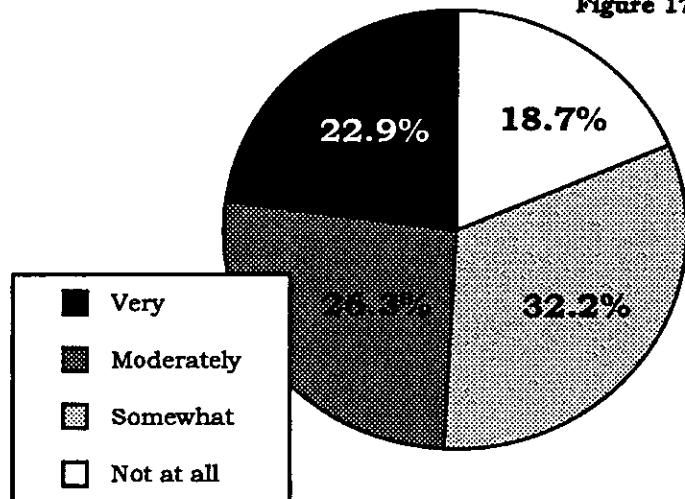
In Figure 16, 41.1% of 1987 seniors surveyed in 1991, and 46.6% of alumni from the class of 1995 indicated that 'at least one introductory course (GUR, presumably) I took at Western *discouraged* my interest in majoring in that field'.



In Figures 17 and 18, findings from the survey of alumni from the class of 1995 are presented. Nearly half (49.2%) indicated that courses taken in their major were very or moderately valuable in preparing alumni for their current jobs. Far fewer (16.7%) indicated that GURs were valuable in preparing them for their current jobs.

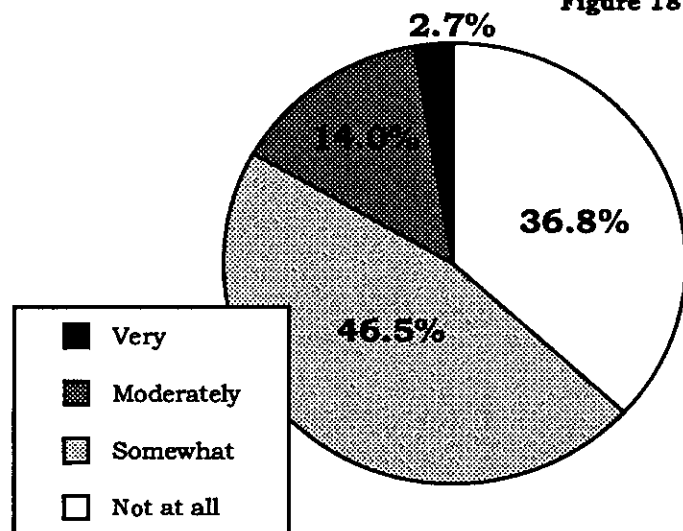
How valuable were courses taken in the major at Western in preparing students for their current job? 1996 Survey of Recent Graduates (Class of 1995) (n=1120)

Figure 17



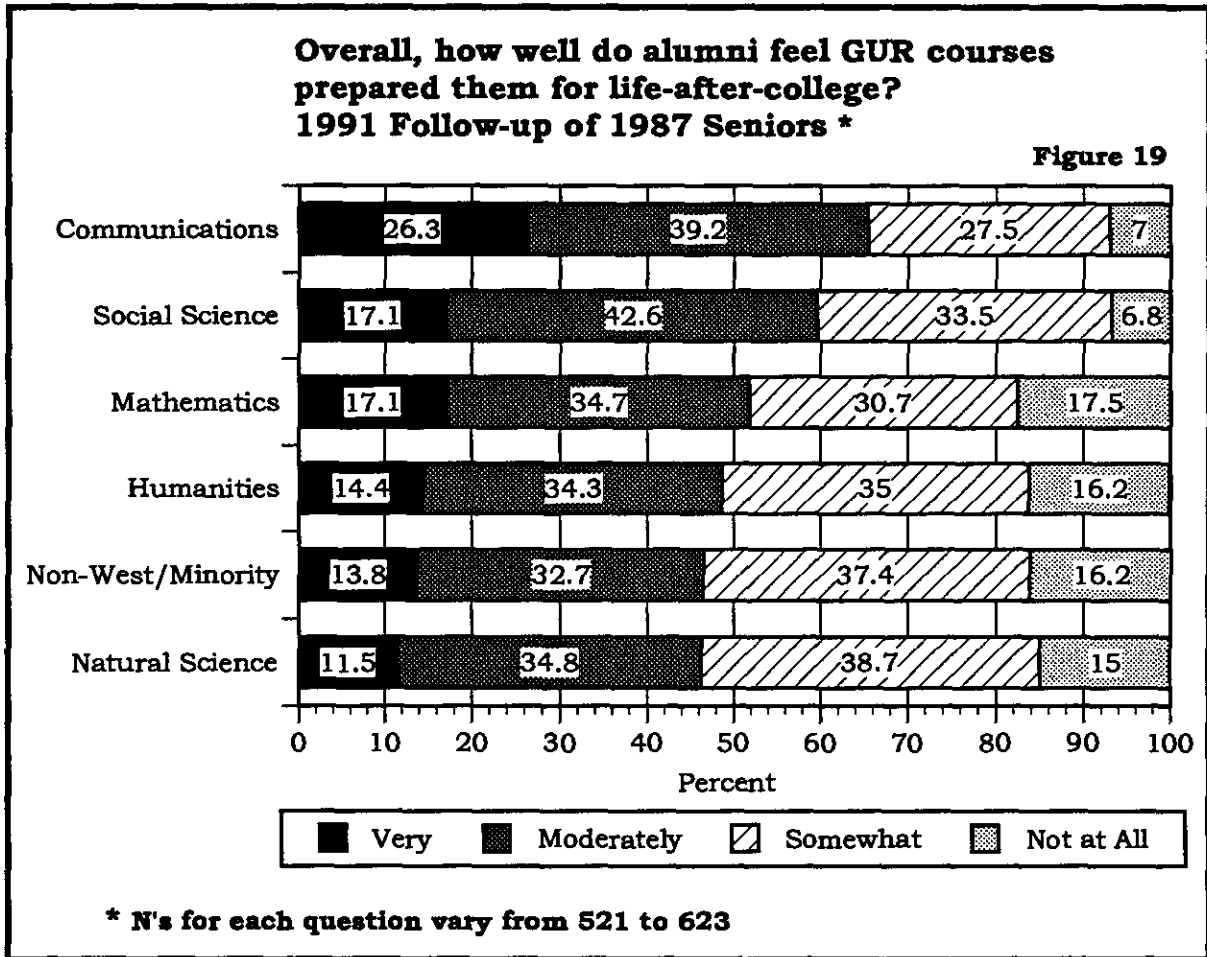
How valuable were the GUR courses taken at Western in preparing students for their current job? 1996 Survey of Recent Graduates (Class of 1995) (n=929)

Figure 18



(A note of interest here is that this survey was of alumni six to eighteen months after graduation. At that point, only two-thirds were working in jobs related to their majors. As alumni move into jobs more closely related to their majors, perceived value of major courses should increase. No change would be expected for GURs.)

In Figure 19, findings from the 1991 follow-up survey of 1987 seniors are presented. Respondents were asked how well GUR courses prepared them for life-after-college. These results were then cross-tabulated by academic areas.



The highest percentages of 'very' or 'moderately' well prepared were for communications, social science, and mathematics. The lowest percentages were for natural science, non-Western/minority culture, and humanities.

Tables 1 and 2 present findings from a survey of new students who had just entered Western during the Fall of 1994, plus the follow-up to that survey done in the spring of 1995. In Table 1, students were asked if courses taken during those quarters were their first choice, a second choice that was still useful, or all they could get at the time. GUR courses were slightly more likely than non-GUR courses to have been second choice but still useful or all that was available. In Table 2, students were asked to evaluate their courses, with non-GUR courses receiving a higher percentage of 'excellent' or 'good' responses.

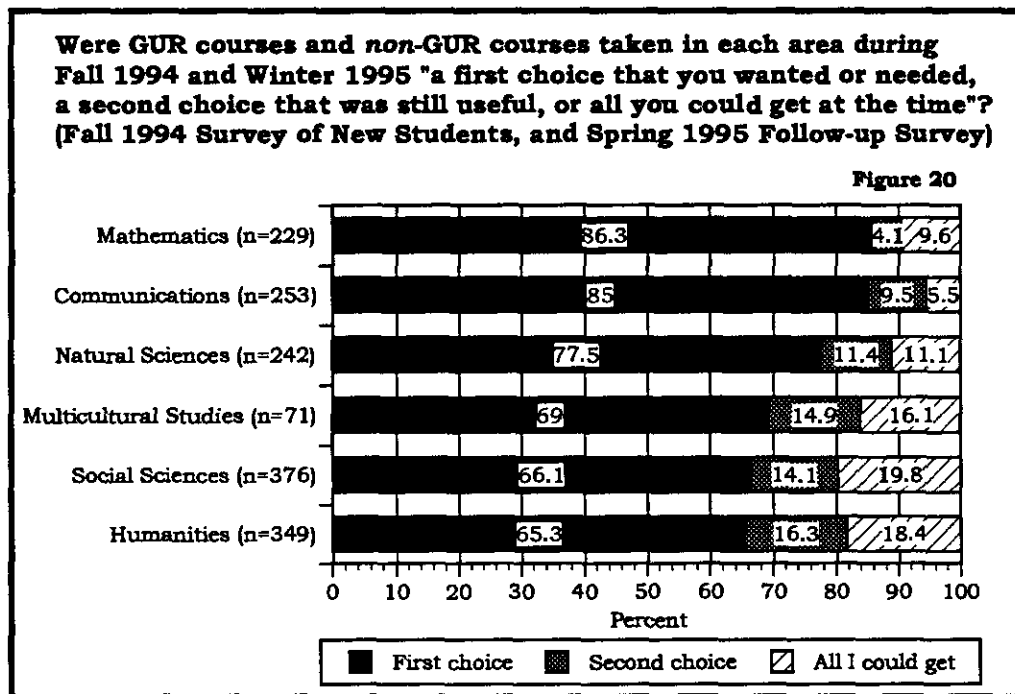
Table 1. Were GUR courses and non-GUR courses taken during Fall 1994 and Winter 1995 "a first choice that you wanted or needed, a second choice that was still useful, or all you could get at the time"? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students, and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey; n=538)

Courses Taken	GUR Courses	Non-GUR Courses
First choice	73.1	77.8
Second choice, still useful	12.3	9.8
All I could get at the time	<u>14.6</u>	<u>12.4</u>
	100.0%	100.0%

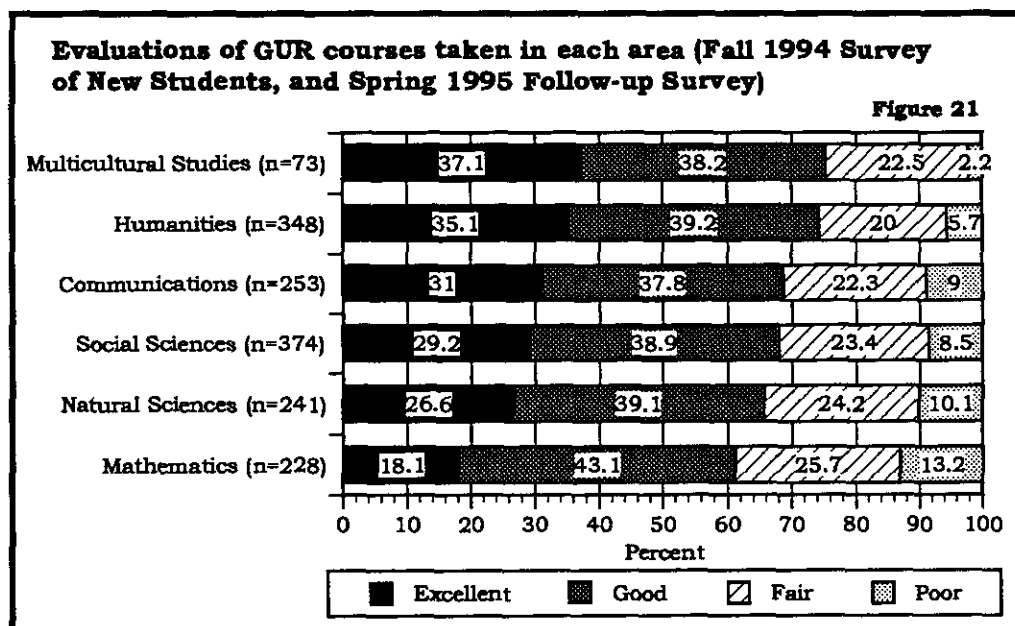
Table 2. Evaluations of GUR courses and non-GUR courses (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students, and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey; n=538)

Evaluations	GUR Courses	Non-GUR Courses
Excellent	29.4	42.6
Good	39.4	35.8
Fair	22.8	16.5
Poor	<u>8.5</u>	<u>5.2</u>
	100.0%	100.0%

From the same survey of new students administered during the fall of 1994, plus the follow-up to that survey done in the spring of 1995, findings in Figure 20 indicate that, whether GUR or non-GUR, students were most likely to have gotten their first choice course in mathematics, communications, or natural science, and less likely to have gotten their first course in humanities, social science, or multicultural studies.



Also from the survey of new students administered during the fall of 1994, plus the follow-up to that survey done in the spring of 1995, Figure 21 presents students' overall evaluations of GUR courses by academic areas. These evaluations have immediacy since they were solicited while the courses were in progress.



In Table 3, overall satisfaction with quality of instruction is correlated to quality of instruction in each GUR area. Findings are from the survey of seniors in the spring of 1987 and the follow-up survey of those same students in 1991. These findings tell us a bit about the phenomenology of students' perceptions of "GUR". When students mentally "average" all their GURs into a single evaluation, which of the areas within the GUR are most and least salient?

The stronger correlations for humanities and non-Western/minority studies indicates that when students think of GURs, they have a tendency to think of those areas, rather than mathematics and science. Students' evaluations of math and science GURs essentially don't count as part of the averaging process when they report perceptions of overall GURs.

Table 3. Overall satisfaction with quality of instruction in GURS correlated with quality of instruction in each area (Senior Survey, Spring 1987 and Follow-up Survey, Winter 1991)

GUR Area	Correlation
Humanities	.256**
Non Western/Minority	.225**
Social Science	.179**
Communications	.164**
Mathematics	.104*
Natural Sciences	.097*
<i>Mean Across All Areas</i>	.290**

* p < .05 ** p < .01

1 We are grateful to E. R. Mahoney for first suggesting the analysis shown here in Tables 3 and 4.

In Table 4, three perceived educational values of GUR courses are correlated to satisfaction with how well courses in each specific GUR area prepared students for life. Findings are from the survey of seniors in the spring of 1987 and the follow-up survey of those same students in 1991. As seniors, students rated GURs, overall, on the three dimensions shown in Table 4. Four years later, they rated how valuable GURs in each area had been to their lives. The findings (see Table 4) examine another aspect of the phenomenology of students' understanding of GURs. In this case, the analysis ties the general perception of GURs as broadening and providing insight into diverse cultures to the perceived value for life after college. A high correlation suggests that the perceived value of a particular type of GURs for life lies in its ability to broaden and sensitize one's perspective. The findings display a logical pattern suggesting that GURs are working as intended. The highest correlations are with multicultural, humanities, and social science GURs, linking these GURs to their major purpose: providing new insight and broader viewpoints. There is no reason why math should be connected with students' perceptions of GURs as broadening. These findings also reinforce the pattern found in Table 3, that when students think about GURs as a whole, they are thinking mostly about the non-Western, humanities, and perhaps social science and communication areas.

An additional finding in Table 4 is that one value for life from taking GURs in some areas may be that they helped students decide on a major.

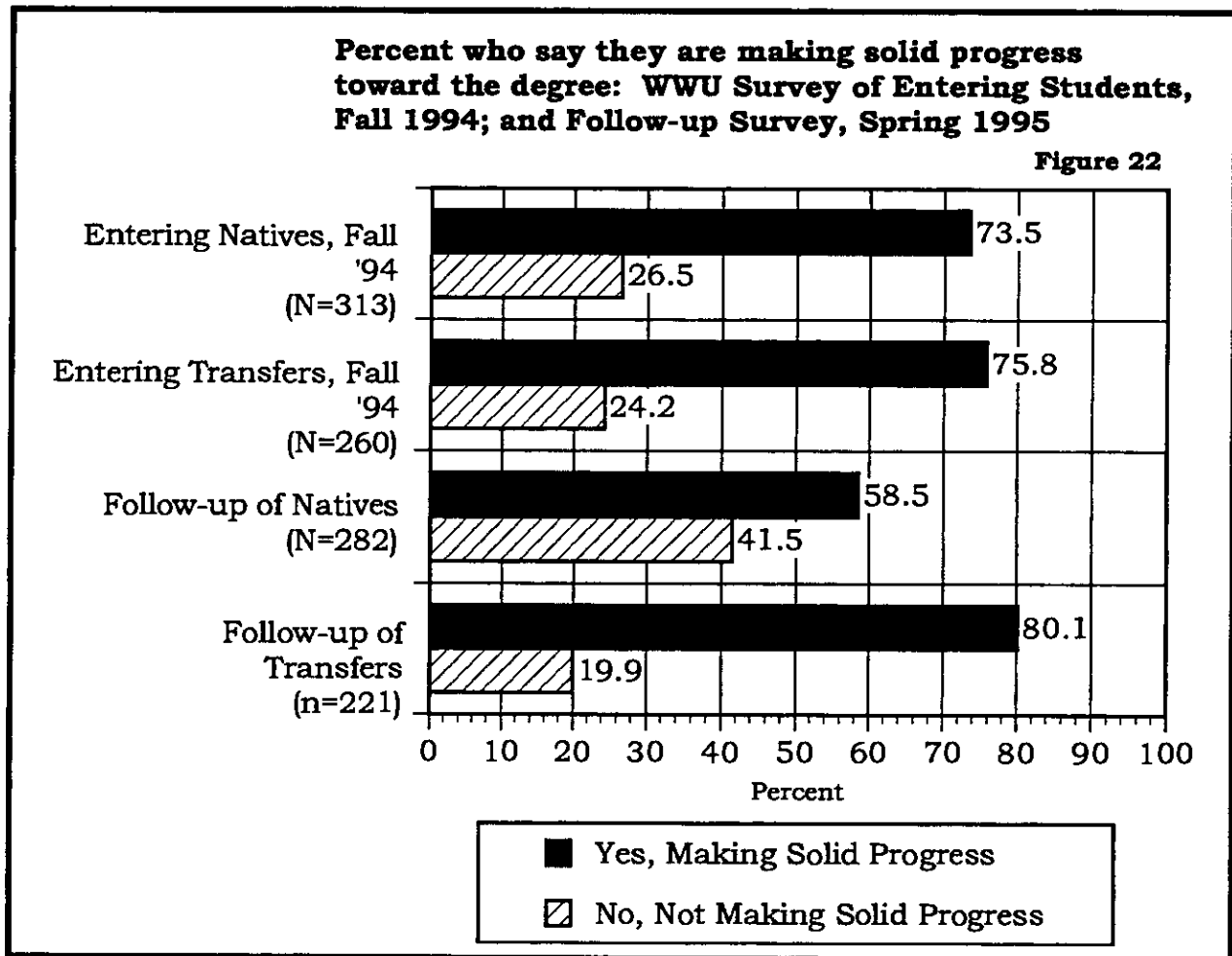
Table 4. Correlation (r) between perceived educational value of GUR courses and satisfaction with how well GUR courses in specific GUR area prepared for life (Senior Survey, Spring 1987 and Follow-up Survey, Winter 1991)

GUR Area	Provided Insight into Groups and Cultures	How Much Broadened Interests	Helped to Decide Major
Non-Western/Minority	.44*	.44*	.17
Humanities	.36*	.44*	.22*
Social Science	.36*	.37*	.23*
Communications	.24*	.38*	.19*
Natural Sciences	.17*	.21*	.08
Mathematics	.03	.05	-.02

* p < .05

Another viewpoint on GURs continues the phenomenological approach, seeking to understand how students think about the GURs. The next findings reflect on the degree to which students devalue the GURs as not the “real” education they came to Western to get.

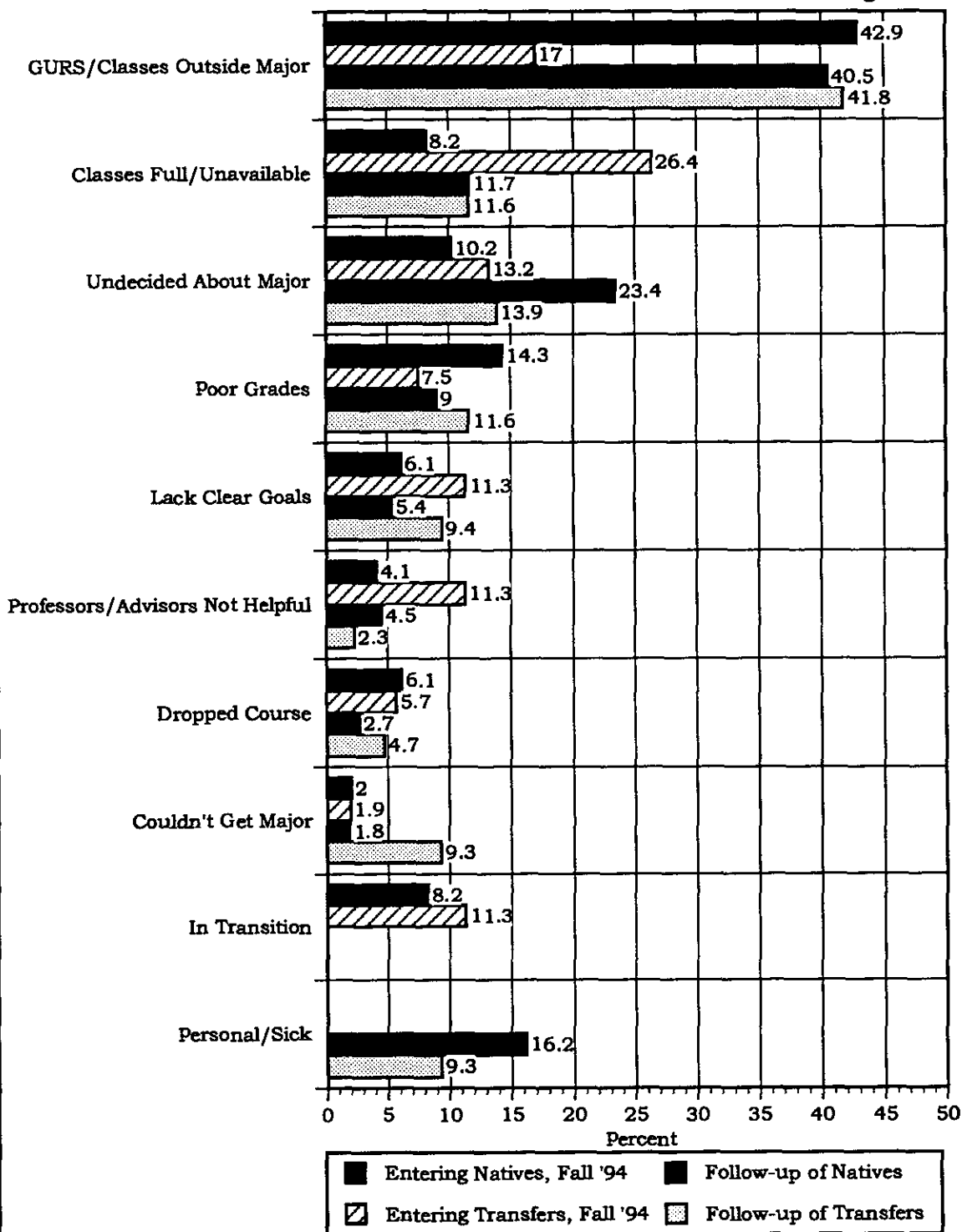
Figure 22 presents findings from the survey of new students administered during the fall of 1994, plus the follow-up to that survey done in the spring of 1995. In the fall quarter, the majority of both first-time freshmen (natives) and new transfers felt they were making progress toward their degrees. In the follow-up survey, a considerably lower percentage of natives felt they were making progress, while an even higher percentage of new transfers felt they were making progress.



Also from the survey of new students administered during the fall of 1994, plus the follow-up to that survey done in the spring of 1995, Figure 23 (following) presents the reasons students gave as to why they did not think they were making progress towards their degree. The finding that stands out is that many students did not feel that taking GURs constituted making progress toward the degree.

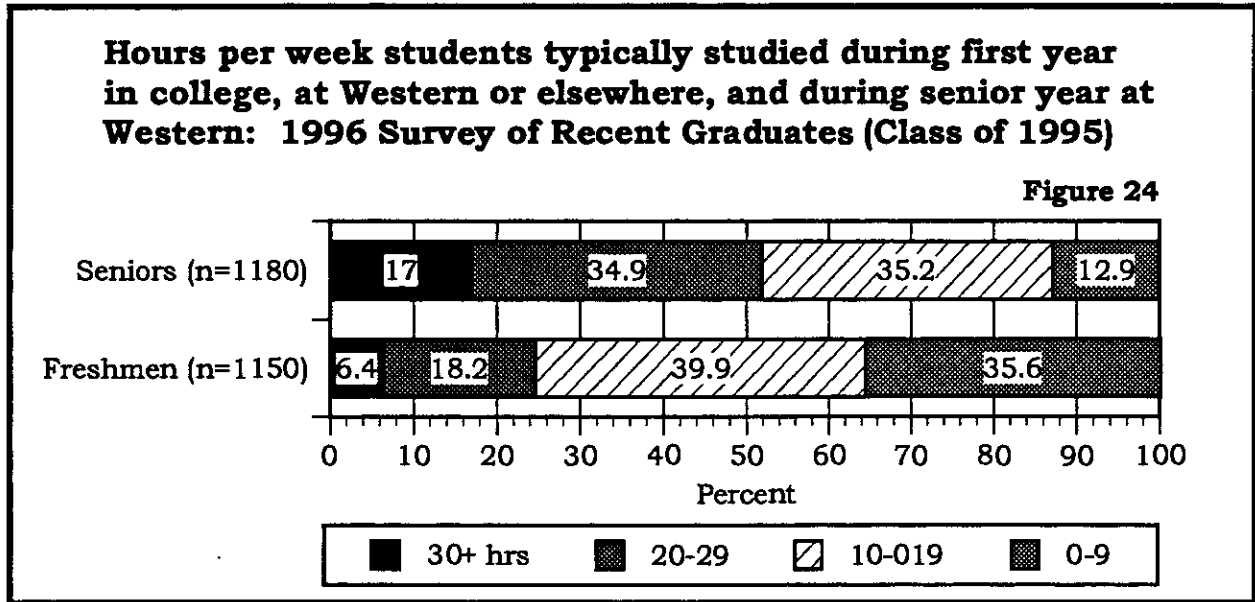
**Why Not Making Solid Progress Toward Degree*:
 WWU Survey of Entering Students, Fall 1994 (N=49)
 and Follow-up Survey, Spring 1995 (N=53)**

Figure 23



* Percentages add to more than 100%, because respondents were allowed up to 2 responses

Consistent with students' perception of the GUR stage of their education as less real and less important than their majors, students increase their homework investment in courses tremendously when they enter their junior year. In Figure 24, findings from the alumni survey for the class of 1995 are presented. Alumni were asked to estimate the number of hours they typically studied during their first year in college—at Western or elsewhere—and during their senior year at Western. Clearly, alumni had better study habits as seniors than freshmen.



In Table 5 (following), open-ended comments from Western's alumni of the class of 1991 are presented. Comments have been collated by theme. These are offered here to provide greater detail as to students' understanding of and perceptions of GURs. The question asked: "From the perspective of your experience since graduating, what feedback would you like to offer regarding Western's GURs?"

Table 5. From the perspective of students' experience since graduating, comments regarding Western's GURs: Class of 1991 (Graduate Survey, Winter 1992, Sample Size: 1423)

	Frequency	Percent
Complaints About Professors	56	16.24
No enthusiasm/negative attitude about GUR's	24	6.96
Not enough interaction/discussion	11	3.19
Other complaints about professors	21	6.09
Complaints About Course Content	98	28.41
Rote memorization	16	4.64
Not useful for career	14	4.05
Not challenging/too easy	11	3.18
Not enough emphasis on writing	10	2.89
Not stimulating	9	2.61
Grades overemphasized	8	2.32
Did not learn much	7	2.02
Too broad/not focused	5	1.44
Workload/credit requirements	5	1.44
Too narrow of a perspective (by gender..)	4	1.15
Other complaints about course content	9	2.61
Complaints, Other	200	57.97
Too many GUR's are requirement/more electives	30	8.70
GUR's delayed grad/increased money and time spent	30	8.70
Class size too large	29	8.41
Better advising concerning GUR's	25	7.25
Need greater variety of GUR courses available	24	6.96
More GUR's should fulfill major requirements	16	4.64
Low accessibility	15	4.35
GUR's did not transfer	6	1.74
Other complaints or suggestions	25	7.25
Suggested Specific Course Requirements	91	26.38
Cross cultural studies	12	3.47
Math/reasoning/more	11	3.18
Foreign language	8	2.32
English/writing	8	2.32
Fairhaven/women studies	7	2.02
Math/reasoning/less	5	1.44
Science/more	5	1.44
Computer class	5	1.44
Misc: career finding class/financial management	4	1.15
Other requirements in specified areas	26	7.54
Praise	184	53.33
Broadened perspective/well-rounded	48	13.91
Liked them	34	9.85
GUR's are important	28	8.11
Enjoyed exposure to other diverse cultures	22	6.37
Informative/gained new knowledge	15	4.34
Liked a specific course	10	2.89
Helped choose major	6	1.73
Other praises	21	6.08