

# *Overview of the Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS)*

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The idea of the WELS started with conversations in staff meetings in the Office of Institutional Assessment, Research and Testing (OIART) about finding a way to be more responsive to the data needs of the University. Many of these conversations were about developing a Western-specific survey that we would get all freshmen to take, and then resurvey them as they moved through their academic careers and beyond. The process itself was begun by Pamela Jull, the then director of the Office of Survey Research, with a year-long series of meetings with Western departments, offices, units, and individuals who we identified as having a need for, and therefore a stake in, the quality and content of student survey data. As much as possible we began designing the survey to fit these needs.

The first wave of the WELS was administered to all incoming freshmen in the year 2003 with a response rate of 71%. These same students were then surveyed again late in the Fall of 2003 and then again in the Spring of 2004 and Spring of 2005. They will be assessed again in the Spring of 2006 and Spring of 2007; as well as after they leave Western, when they become part of our annual alumni surveys. The original plan was to repeat this process for the incoming class of 2006, but due to recent significant changes in university requirements and first year programs, we decided to start a new cycle of surveys for the incoming freshmen class of 2005. We also instituted a version of the WELS for incoming transfer students in 2005. This transfer version has thus far yielded over a 90% response rate and the data should be invaluable to admissions and our feeder community college institutions.

What do we ask students on the WELS? In the first cycle of surveys we borrowed heavily from several national surveys of first year students and also developed measures to assess our own unique concerns. For the second WELS survey, the focus has turned more specifically to gathering baseline data on student learning outcomes; as well as data on pre-existing differences between students that we could use later in conducting more valid assessments of program outcomes. Again, many departments, offices, and individuals were consulted, but in this round, stakeholders were encouraged to share with researchers what they were hoping to know about students further on in their academic careers - what they hoped students would take with them

when they graduated from Western. Specifically, in the 2005 WELS we ask about the following: high school engagement and preparation in the areas of academics, school, social relationships, family, work, and technology; self-ratings of knowledge, skills and abilities across the “fourteen common items” specified in response to state legislation; initial perceptions of Western student culture; awareness of various academic policies, procedures and options; awareness of, and attitudes toward, service learning; academic career expectations (e.g., time to degree, transfer expectations); high school study strategies, learning styles, academic motivations, engagement levels and lifestyles; college preparation, motivations and concerns; academic self-concept, self-awareness, and effort regulation; and attitudes about disciplinary and interdisciplinarity.

In the first year of the 2003 survey alone, data from the WELS revealed student traits that heretofore were unknown. For instance, that only about 20% of in-coming freshmen worked for pay. Previously, no data had been generated on the work behaviors of freshmen, only on incoming freshmen as high school seniors and later as college seniors. Also, because the WELS data was actually representative of the 2003 incoming class, it was discovered that a much higher percentage of students than had been thought previously planned to transfer from Western before they even began. Currently, data from the WELS is being used to help inform faculty senate discussions of the FIGs program by dispelling myths about the “selectivity” of students who take FIGs. It had been argued that FIGs students obtained higher GPAs and had higher retention rates than non-FIGs students because they were better prepared and were stronger academically to begin with. Our preliminary analyses using student records and data from the 2003 WELS actually show the opposite, as the 2003 FIGs students had lower SAT scores, were less well prepared for college, and had more concerns about experiencing various difficulties at college before they entered. Thus, equal or higher GPAs and retention rates for this group would be indicative of program success.

Data from the WELS surveys should prove invaluable for assessing the effectiveness of newly developed or revised first year experience programs, service learning initiatives, advising and tutorial services, and other initiatives at the college and department levels. These data will also be important for our upcoming accreditation and for answering questions related to state mandated accountability. In fact, other public baccalaureates in the state are looking toward our work as groundbreaking and are likely to emulate or use our data to help answer some collective state issues such as affordability, transfer articulation, enrollment projections, and others.

For more information about WELS and to find published reports based on these data, please visit our website at: <http://www.ac.wvu.edu/%7Esocad/OSR.html> and click on *Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS)* and the *Search Reports and Documents*.