

ASSESSMENT UPDATE: SHARING OUR SUCCESSES

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This issue of Dialogue brings good news: Western is doing a terrific job of retaining and graduating students.

In this issue, we'll share this good news, recount some assessment resources, discuss current and forthcoming

Fact: WWU now retains more of its freshman and graduates a higher percentage of students than Eastern Washington University, Central Washington University, The Evergreen State College, or Washington State University.

—WA state Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) data

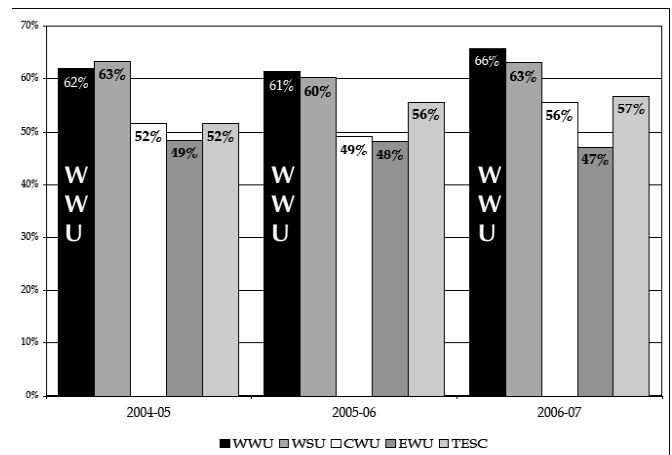
assessment initiatives, plus highlight other assessment findings that demonstrate the university's outstanding performance.

The most closely tracked metrics for university performance, freshman retention and the six-year graduation rate describe how successfully Western fulfills its state-supported mission.

Our achievements in these and other areas mark continued progress toward the Western vision of becoming the nation's premier public comprehensive university. (Please see Figure 1 and 2 in the next column.)

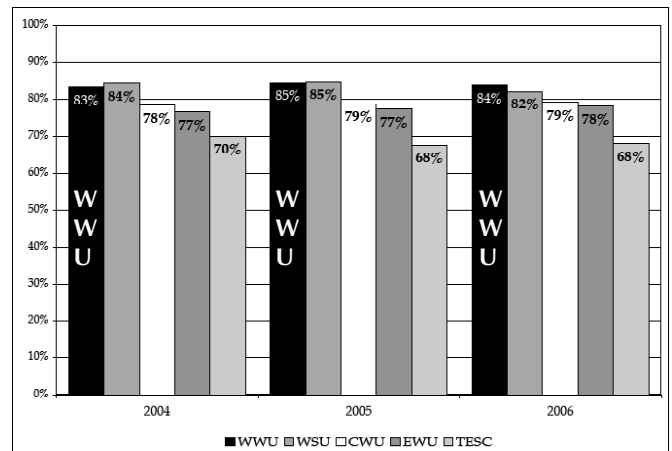
Sharing this good news is one part of a larger university effort to improve the use of assessment data. And while it is true that we are not only meeting expectations, but meeting them at a high level, as a university we need to better communicate our successes, as well as our challenges, in order to make the informed decisions that continuous improvement requires. Western's performance success extends to

Figure 1: Six-Year Graduation Rates within Washington State



(WA state HECB data)

Figure 2: Freshmen Retention Rates within Washington State



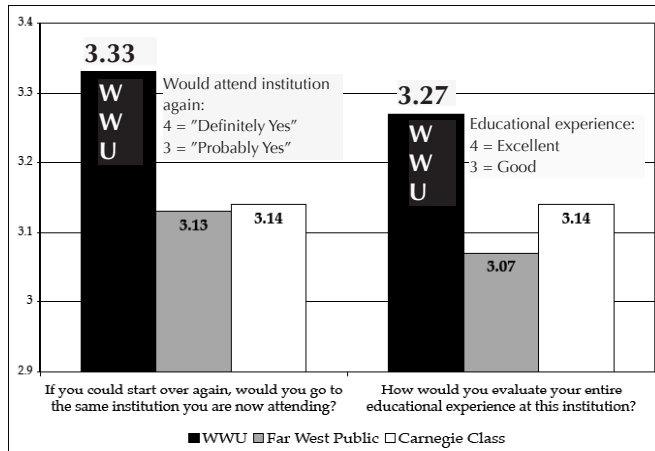
(WA state HECB data)

our processes as well as our results. **Indeed, we are arguably the most efficient public baccalaureate institution in the state**, accomplishing much more than our competitors on fewer dollars than they receive. (See Figure 3, right.)

BUILDING ON OUR STRENGTHS

A key strategy in program improvement is to build on demonstrated strengths. For example, according

Figure 4: NSSE Satisfaction

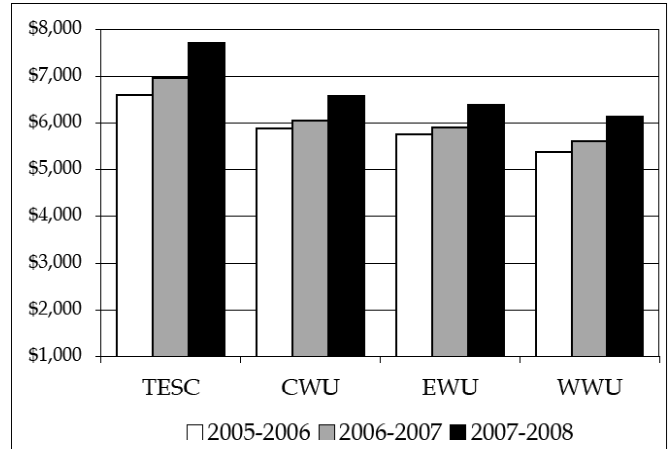


to findings in the 2008 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Western’s seniors are significantly more satisfied with their educational experience than peers at other Far West Public Universities and universities in our Carnegie class. (See Figure 4, above.)

What’s more, our seniors report more faculty-student interaction, more academic challenge, and more engaged learning than students at other public universities in our Carnegie class.

However, our freshman are less pleased with Western on these same measures. Figure 5,

Figure 3: Cost per Budgeted FTE Student Enrollment

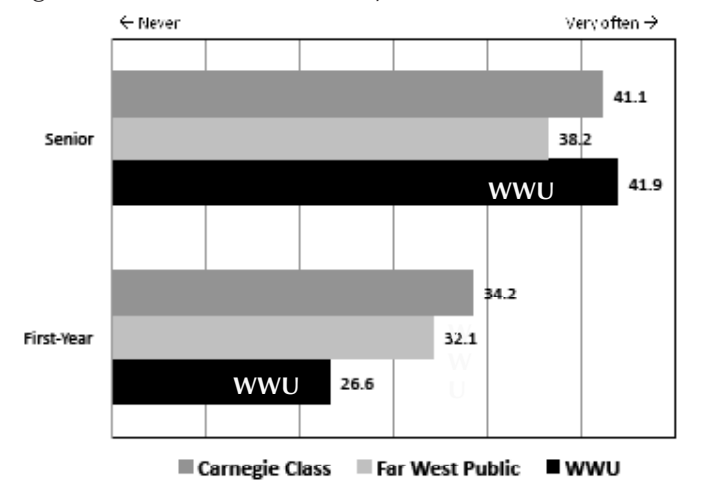


(WWU WA State Quality Award [Baldrige] Application 2008)

below, charts student responses to a series of questions regarding opportunities to meet with, speak with, get feedback from and otherwise interact with faculty.

Clearly, we know how to structure rich student-faculty interaction with our seniors. Our task now is to share more of these riches with our freshmen. Programmatic changes, such as building more First Year Experience (FYE) seminars, could help make this possible. However, research also shows that simple acts, such as requiring office hour visits, or walking across campus with students after class, register very strongly for freshmen.

Figure 5: NSSE Student - Faculty Interactions*



*Mean average weighted response to 6 measures: How often do you interact with faculty to discuss grades or assignment; talk about career plans; discuss ideas from readings outside of class; work on committees or research; or get feedback on your academic performance? (NSSE 2008)

The satisfaction of our seniors as exhibited in NSSE findings is echoed strongly in findings from the Office of Survey Research’s (OSR) Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS) Alumni Surveys.

In 2008, 62% of alumni reported that Western had prepared them “very” to “extremely” well for success in the job market. This was up from 53% in 2006. In addition, the WELS surveys from 2003 to 2007 noted

student-reported gains on key academic competencies, including understanding quantitative and scientific principles, critically analyzing written information, and writing effectively. (See Figure 6 on the next page.)

CLOSING THE ASSESSMENT LOOP

Another area in which Western is showing excellent promise is that of student learning outcomes assessment. True, the most recent accreditation report

ASSESSMENT MATRIX				
Objective or outcomes	Method	Results	Analysis	Action to take

The "Assessment Matrix" is one of many strategies and resources found in the OIART assessment handbooks.

On the web: <http://www.wvu.edu/depts/assess/oiasl.htm>

noted that more needed to be done in order to "close the assessment loop," but what the accreditation report also noted was that much, too, had been done. For instance, Western's Office of Institutional Assessment, Research, and Testing (OIART) was commended for having written and published two highly useful handbooks on student learning outcomes assessment: *Tools and Techniques for Course Improvement: A Handbook for Course Review and Assessment of Student Learning*; and *Tools and Techniques for Program Improvement: A Handbook for Program Review and Assessment of Student Learning*. There are many assessment resources in these extremely useful and well-done volumes that can be

utilized to effectively demonstrate that a program or department has "closed the assessment loop" on both student learning in courses and program improvement.

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The Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS). Instituted in 2000, the WELS is Western's signature internal survey findings instrument. As a longitudinal study, the WELS series of surveys tracks students from entry to post graduation, and permits useful comparisons between students' self-perceptions throughout their academic career. (For the complete data set please contact Gary McKinney at x3409 or via email: gary.mckinney@wvu.edu)

WELS Alumni Survey. Also part of the WELS series of surveys, the OSR has surveyed alumni biennially since 1990. Alumni who are a year to a year-and-a-half past graduation are invited to participate. They reflect on their experiences at Western, and on their current situation regarding family, education, and employment. When applicable, survey results are linked with Western's student records, thus expanding their usefulness to researchers.

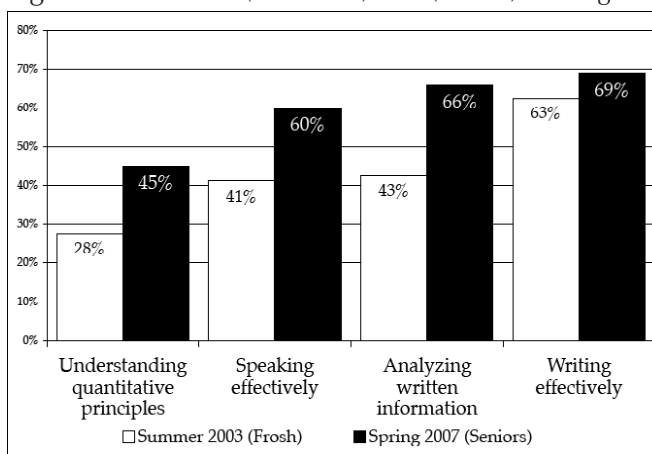
National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE, a nation-wide study of student engagement that uses samples of seniors and freshmen, is administered bi-annually.

Additionally, on the near horizon is the long anticipated survey of exiting seniors:

WELS Senior Exit Survey. Another part of the WELS series, the Senior Exit Survey will be launched in May, 2009. All graduating seniors will be invited to participate. Reports will be distributed to administrators, deans and chairs—including findings by academic unit. Among other questions, seniors will be asked about the following:

- Satisfaction with their experience at Western;
- Experiences with influential professors, advisors or staff;
- Satisfaction with and importance of various aspects of the major;
- Experiential learning experiences (including internships, practica, field work, service learning);
- Educational expenses incurred; and
- Plans for next year (employment, education, service, etc.).

Figure 6: WELS Pre (Freshman)/Post (Senior) Findings



COMMUNICATION/TRANSPARENCY

The quandary for Western is not simply the availability of quality data, but also how that data is disseminated and utilized. Two important projects that will help shape both the use of data and how it is communicated to constituents include:

Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA).

Western recently joined more than 300 universities and colleges nationwide in the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), a nationwide initiative for 4-year public colleges and universities. The VSA provides a consistent platform for the publication and reporting of key outcome data on retention, graduation, enrollment, student satisfaction, and other variables.

Developed in partnership with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASC&U) and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC), the VSA is designed to help institutions meet the following objectives:

- Demonstrate accountability and stewardship to public;
- Measure educational outcomes to identify effective educational practices; and
- Assemble information that is accessible, understandable, and comparable.

During 2007, over 80 higher education leaders from 70 public colleges and universities contributed to the development of the VSA program and its data reporting template. Prospective students, parents and university stakeholders will be able to easily access this information directly from the WWU website and at: <http://www.collegeportraits.org/WA/WWU>

The GUR Assessment Initiative. Western's accrediting body, the Northwest Commission on

Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), noted in its accreditation evaluation report last year that while enormous strides on our general education curricula and data collection had been made, Western nevertheless needed to put in place an institution-wide assessment plan.

To this end, Western will begin implementation of a GUR assessment plan over the 2009-2010 academic year. The plan includes two steps:

1. A concerted effort will be made to "close the assessment loop" by using existing assessment data to make improvements to the GUR program. The OIART will summarize existing GUR assessment data for distribution to colleges and departments.
2. A sample of freshmen and graduating seniors will take an achievement exam. Scores on select areas of the exam will be compared with GUR competencies to provide a baseline of performance data on how well Western graduates meet the curricular standards of the GUR program.

Eventually, far more robust data on GUR achievement than can be extracted from a standardized test will be necessary. Most universities combine the results of a standardized measure with a sample of qualitative data drawn from course-based assessments, portfolios, or capstone courses. However, given the time and energy currently devoted to resolving the budget crisis, chairs and deans have asked that such measures be temporarily postponed. Discussion of a qualitative GUR data source will begin anew later next year.

Steven VanderStaa is Western's Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, and is leading efforts to develop an institution-wide assessment plan for the general education program and to prepare for the 2010 Focused Interim Accreditation Report. Faculty who wish to comment on these initiatives, learn more about WWU assessment efforts—or assist with Western's GUR assessment—can contact him at x3004 or via email: Steven.VanderStaa@wwu.edu

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