Improving the Freshman Year
Prepared by Steven Vanderstaay and Gary McKinney

Introduction
This issue of Dialogue describes recent assessments of Western’s freshman year and current efforts to improve our students’ first-year experience. These improvement efforts include a new first-year mission, new faculty initiatives, a new fall early start program, a pilot expansion within Honors, and revisions to the FIG program.

Assessing the First Year at Western
Students shape their academic trajectories in their first year in college. Students who establish high initial academic expectations, find a faculty mentor, and get off to a successful first-quarter start are much more likely to graduate than students of similar ability who don’t. Consequently, assessments of the freshman year are widely used as a useful indicator of university quality and a powerful predictor of student success. Typical assessments of the freshman year include the freshman retention rate and benchmark survey results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

Assessment results pertaining to the first-year at Western are mixed. On the one hand, our freshman-sophomore retention rate is very high. On the other hand, as reported on the NSSE, our freshman report that they experience slightly less academic challenge, less active and engaged learning, and that they interact with faculty less often than do freshman at other regionals and far-west public universities.

Freshman Retention
Few metrics are more important to student academic success and benchmark ratings of university quality than freshman retention. Freshmen return for their sophomore year when they are academically successful and satisfied with their freshman experience. Consequently, retention is widely used as an indicator of university quality by many rating systems, including ones used by U.S. News & World Reports and others.

The freshman-sophomore retention rates at Western and the UW have risen slightly over the last few years; in contrast, other state universities have seen modest declines. Rates as of fall, 2010, are displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Freshman to Sophomore Retention Rates, Fall, 2010, Washington State Public Universities.
Controlling for academic index, we can regress for other variables to assess the university’s success in retaining specific sectors of students. This analysis demonstrates that freshman-sophomore retention for Western PELL Grant recipients, 1st generation (to go to college) students, and students of color is slightly less (under 3%) than predicted by AI. (See Table 1.)

As it turns out, the difference between predicted and actual retention is greatest for students who get off to a bad start and earn a GPA lower than 1.5 in their first term. Retention rates for this sector of students are almost 20% lower than that of students with similar high school records who earn a fall GPA of 1.5 or higher (See Table 2.)

Table 2: Predicted (based on AI score) vs. Actual Freshman (2009) to Sophomore (2010) Year Retention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Fall Qtr Academic Standing</th>
<th>Good Fall Qtr Academic Standing</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predicted Retention</td>
<td>82.7%</td>
<td>85.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Retention</td>
<td>63.6%</td>
<td>88.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>-19.1%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

**THE NATIONAL STUDY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

The National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) asks freshmen and seniors to report various activities associated with rigorous and effective instruction. For instance, for the metric “Level of Academic Challenge,” students are asked how much time they spend preparing for class and completing homework and labs, how many formal papers they write, how much reading their courses require, and how often their coursework requires that they integrate sources, compare cultural perspectives, make value judgments, and so on. Student responses are scored on a 4-point scale and combined to yield a score that can be compared to that of students at the same institution and students at similar institutions.

Seniors at Western report higher levels of satisfaction than do seniors at other universities within our Carnegie class on nearly every metric assessed by NSSE. However, Western freshman report lower scores, and lower rates of satisfaction, than freshman at other regional universities and other far west public universities. Compared to these students, Western freshmen report that they wrote fewer papers, engaged in fewer higher order thinking activities, and spent less time on homework and course activities. Western freshmen also reported fewer interactions with faculty within class, during office hours, and outside of class. These findings are reflected in the NSSE found in Figures 3 and 4.

Western last administered the NSSE in 2008. It will be administered again this year, 2011.
At Western several offices and programs serve to support students in their first-year. To better coordinate and assess these efforts, and to respond to the 2008 NSSE results, the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and the Assistant Vice-President for Student Affairs and Academic Support Services convened a planning group of faculty and staff to propose a first-year mission for the university. This mission statement, endorsed by the ACC in 2010, recognizes that success in one’s major is facilitated by a successful transition to university life that communicates high academic expectations and an understanding of the value and purpose of liberal education.

**Western Washington University’s First-Year Mission**

The first year at Western is a time of significant intellectual and personal development. The entire Western community—faculty, administrators, staff, and students—is committed to helping students...

- understand the intellectual, moral, civic, and personal purposes of their liberal arts education;
- negotiate successfully the academic and personal opportunities and challenges of their first year; and
- connect to Western faculty and the larger campus community.

**Census of First-Year Programs**

Publication and distribution of the First-Year Mission has been followed by a census of all first-year programs. We hope that cataloging the many disparate programs within Academic Affairs and Student Affairs that serve freshmen and transfer students will lead to a better and more comprehensive service. For instance, the departmental Distinguished Scholar programs serve freshmen but have not been coordinated with other first-year programs or services.

**New Faculty Initiatives**

Faculty who participate in First Year Experience (FYE) courses and the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program serve the first-year mission. However, many faculty feel that a larger effort to improve the academic quality of the freshman year is needed. Faculty have expressed this view in discussions with Senate President Scott Pearce, ACC Chair Roger Anderson, CUE Chair Kathleen Kennedy, VPUE VanderStaay, and in events sponsored by the Faculty GUR group. Many of these discussions concerned coordinated ways to better serve first-year students within fall courses not affiliated with the FYES or FIGS. Topics discussed include:

- Freshmen-only GURs.
- Improved freshman advising.
- Efforts to create an academic first-impression of Western for fall freshmen.
- Brief, common readings about the value and purpose of a liberal arts education.
- Peer support for faculty committed to teaching rigorous and interactive GURs.

Scott Pearce, Kathleen Kennedy, Roger Anderson, and Steve VanderStaay wish to convene a larger meeting of faculty who might wish to lead and participate in faculty initiatives to improve the freshman year. Interested faculty should contact Steve at: Steven.VanderStaay@wwu.edu
A New Fall Early Start Program
In September, 2010 “Viking Launch” (VL), a fall early start program for freshman, was piloted. Nearly 100 freshmen participated in this self-sustaining program, which brought students to campus ten days early for an intensive, two-credit seminar, a day of service-learning, and extended orientation and community-building activities. Viking Launch was a collaborative effort involving University Residences, Extended Education and Summer Programs (EESP), Dining Services, the Office of Admissions and seven academic departments. Plans are to expand this pilot program to 150 freshmen next fall.

Honors Expansion
As part of a larger effort to attract and serve more high-achieving students, Honors recruited an additional 25 students, growing its freshman class from 100 to 125. This expansion raised the percentage of high-achieving non-resident students within Honors to 33%. This boost in well-prepared, non-resident students partially offset a decrease in the preparedness of non-Honors resident students (as measured by AI scores), thereby improving the overall quality of the freshman class. Honors combined the pilot expansion with curriculum improvements, changes in the Honors residence cluster, a new Honors Student Center, and other program improvements. The pilot expansion will be continued for academic year 2011-2012.

FIGs Program Revision and Expansion
Modeled after programs at the Universities of Oregon and Washington, Western’s FIG program creates linked clusters of two large lecture courses and one 25-student seminar. For fall, 2010, the FIG program was expanded to 14 clusters and revised to strengthen the academic content of the seminars and to permit academic departments to select the FIG seminar instructors.

FIGs Performance Indicators
The changes noted above contributed to a successful fall cohort. Consistent with most FIG cohorts, fall 2009 FIG participants entered Western with a lower Academic Index than did non-FIG freshman, yet earned fall quarter grades that were higher than average and higher than predicted. (See Figures 5 and 6 in next column.) FIG freshman were also less apt to withdraw from a class and less apt to be placed on academic probation. It is also expected that relative to their AI score, FIG participants will be retained to their second year at a rate equal to or more than their non-FIG counterparts. (See Figure 7 in the next column.)
**AI Effect on Retention and Four-Year Graduation Rates, FIGs and Non-FIGs Freshmen**

As noted previously, assessed longitudinally, FIG participants typically demonstrate retention and 4-year-graduation rates that are higher than predicted.

Somewhat surprisingly—because previous analysis of FIG data focused on the lower AI scores—this FIG effect is actually highest for students whose high school GPA and SAT scores place them in the top third of the entering freshman class. (See Figures 8 and 9 below.)

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**Figure 8:** Freshman to Sophomore Retention, Above Average AI Score (61-70) by FIG vs. Non-FIG, 2001 through 2010

**Figure 9:** Four-Year Graduation Rates, Above Average AI Score (61-70) by FIG vs. Non-FIG, 2001 through 2010

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A full assessment of the FIG program can be found at:

Past issues of the Dialogue series can be found at:
http://www.wwu.edu/depts/vpue/dialogue.shtml

To read more about the FIG program, go to:
http://figs.wwu.edu/

To read more about the Viking Launch program, go to:
http://www.acadweb.wwu.edu/eesp/v_launch/index.shtml

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