
FRESHMEN INTEREST GROUP (FIGS) REPORT
FALL, 2010: FOCUS ON EFFECTIVENESS

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Background

In 1998, after a year of work, the First Year Experience Task Force made the following recommendations:

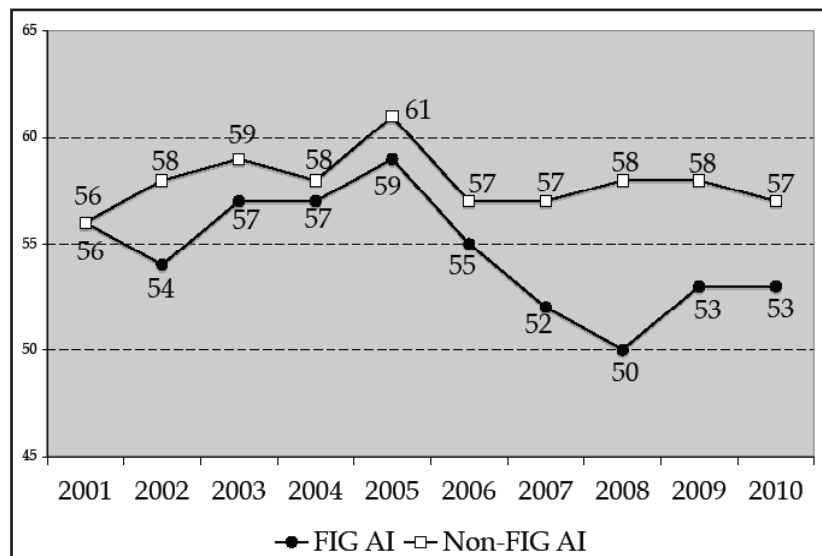
- A Freshman Interest Group (FIG) Program.
- A Freshmen Reading Program.
- Enhanced faculty development in the area of GURs.

The Freshmen Interest Group (FIGs) Program commenced in the fall, 1999. The FIGs program was initially designed, and continues to function, as course clusters: two large lecture courses and one seminar. Clusters are thematically grouped, although each course within the cluster (including the seminar) function discretely. Early in the development of the program, interdisciplinarity was the focus; however, adapting to the needs of first-quarter freshmen, interdisciplinarity, although still a component of the program, has become less emphasized over the years. The current FIG model consists of both rigorous academic content and best practice transition content, including introducing freshmen to Western's social and academic communities. FIG students take a discussion-oriented seminar, are encouraged to form study groups, and are able to meet professors in a small group environment. Depending on the number of clusters offered, enrollments for this self-selecting program have ranged from 175 to 250 freshmen per year.

The Admissions Index

In nearly every year the FIGs program has operated, the Admissions Index (AI) of FIGs participants has been lower than the AI of non-FIGs participants. Importantly for this report, the AI is also the strongest predictor of success at Western, when the indicator of success is retention, graduation rates, and/or Western grade point average (gpa). It will serve as the foundational metric of this report. (See Figure 1.)

FIGURE 1:
Admissions Index (AI) Comparison: FIG versus non-FIG AI Overall

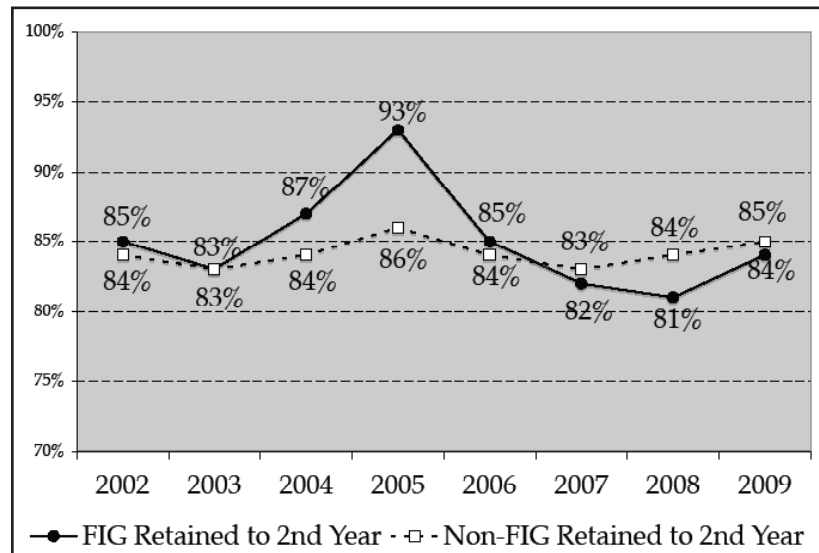


Analysis of Academic Index (AI) Ranges on Retention and Graduation Rates

Retention

Generally, one-year retention trends show FIG freshmen more likely to be retained to their sophomore year than their non-FIG counterparts. This trend is, of course, influenced by the AI gap between the two groups. While non-FIG students have always had a higher AI than FIG students, in recent years (2007-2010, as noted on the previous page) that gap has widened significantly, which in turn has effected retention rates for FIG students. (See Figure 2.)

FIGURE 2:
Retention to 2nd
Year, Overall, by
FIG versus non-
FIG



Previous FIG analyses had not asked which students may be benefiting from the program most: lesser or better prepared students. Using AI as the determining factor in college preparedness, three ranges of AI scores were utilized: below average (41-50); average (51-60); and above average (61-70). (Note: students with AIs 40 and lower, and with AIs 70 and higher, were too few—especially on the FIG’s side—to warrant meaningful analyses.)

Looking first at retention to the sophomore year—with the charts displayed on the next page (Figures 3, 4, and 5)—the findings indicate that the higher the AI, the more consistently the FIG program seems to help.

- FIG freshmen with below average AIs benefit from the program, although not in a particularly consistent manner. Sometimes (2003, 2005, 2008) they are more likely than non-FIG freshmen within the same range to be retained, in other years not.
- FIG freshmen with average AIs benefit from the program more consistently than freshmen with below average AIs. In all years except one (2003) these freshmen were more likely to be retained than non-FIG freshmen within the same range.
- FIG freshmen with above average AIs appear to benefit from the program most. Although in two recent years (2008, 2009) they were less likely to be retained than non-FIG freshmen within the same range, in all other years, they were considerably more likely to be retained. (Note: findings from 2008 are an anomaly, as only 81% were retained, less even than FIG freshmen with average and below average AI scores.)

FIGURE 3:
Retention to 2nd
Year, AI score
range 41-50 (below
average), by FIG
versus non-FIG

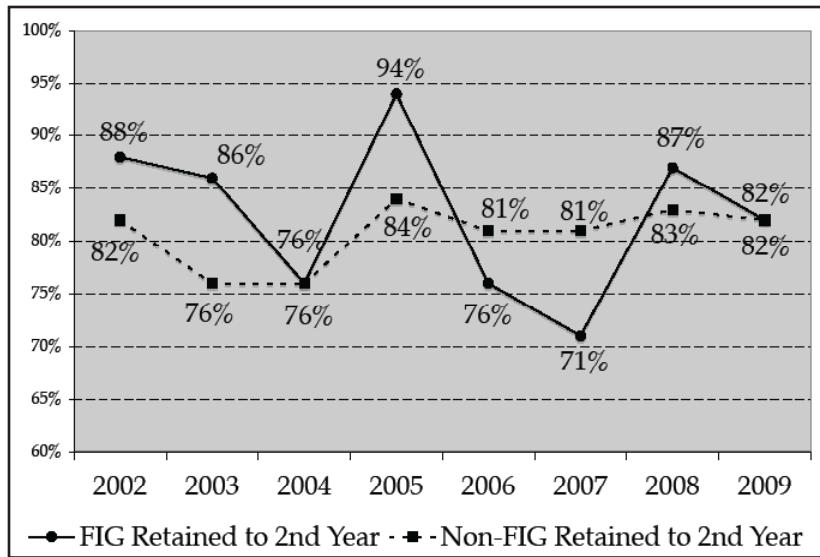


FIGURE 4:
Retention to 2nd
Year, AI score range
51-60 (average), by
FIG versus non-
FIG

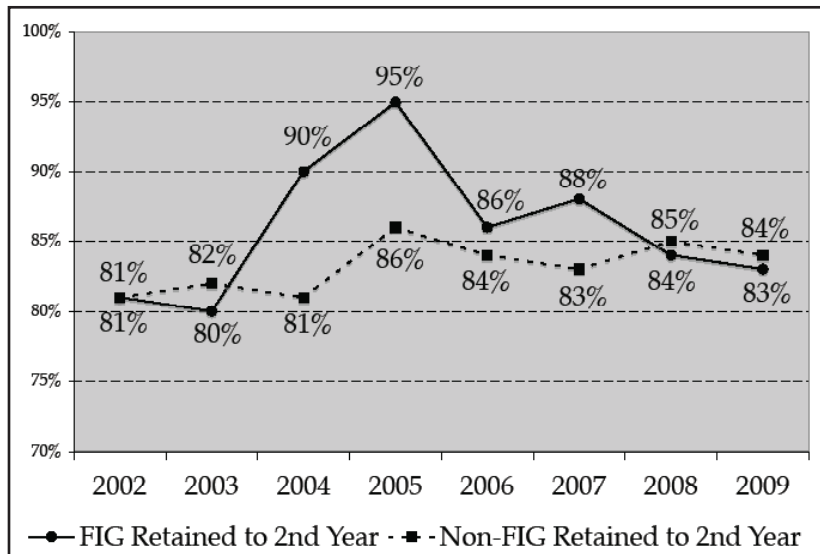
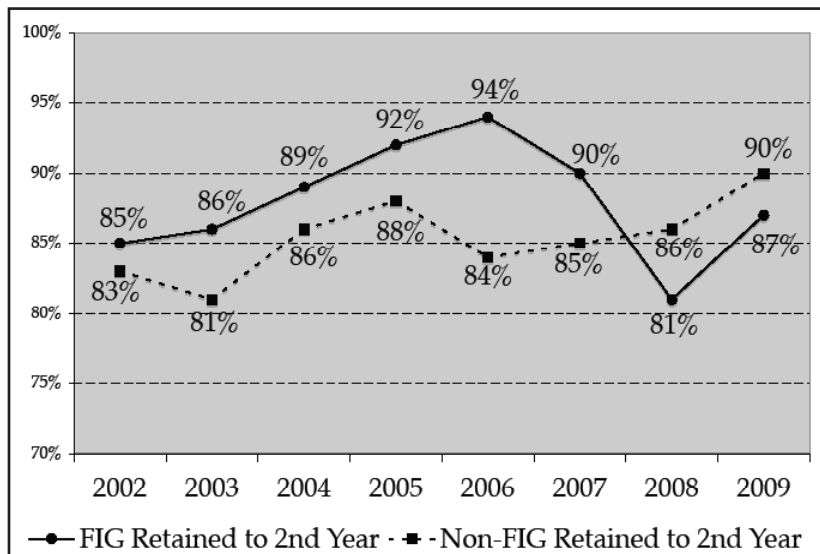


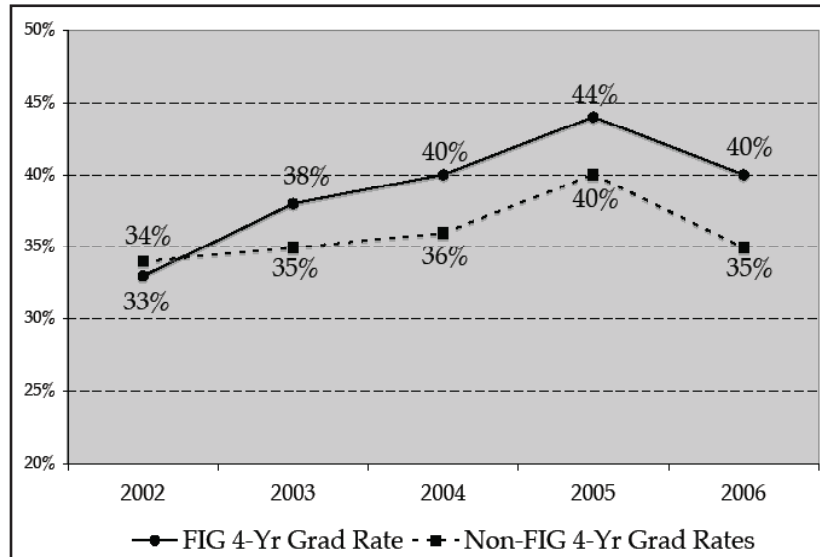
FIGURE 5:
Retention to 2nd
Year, AI score range
61-70 (above
average), by FIG
versus non-FIG



Four-year Graduation Rates

Using the same AI ranges, graduation rates were examined, both four-year and six-year—four-year because of its tradition, six-year because it is currently a statewide accountability metric. As with retention rates, longitudinal four-year graduation rate trends show FIG freshmen more likely to graduate within four years than their non-FIG counterparts. Again note that during these same years FIG students had slightly lower AI's than non-FIG students. (See Figure 6.)

FIGURE 6:
4-year Graduation Rates, Overall, by FIG versus non-FIG



Similarly to findings for retention, the findings indicate that the higher the AI, the more consistently the FIG program seems to help. (Again, findings are displayed on the next page in Figures 7, 8, and 9.)

- FIG students with below average AIs (41-50) benefit from the program, although not in a consistent manner. Sometimes (2002, 2003, 2005) they are more likely than non-FIG students within the same range to graduate within four years, while in other years they were not. Two years stand out: 2004, when FIGs freshmen with below average AIs had a 4-year graduation rate of only 8%; and 2005, when FIGs freshmen with below average AIs had a remarkable 4-year graduation of 50%.
- FIG students with average AIs (51-60) benefit from the program more consistently than freshmen with below average AIs. In all years except one (2002) these freshmen were more like to graduate within four years than non-FIG freshmen within the same range.
- FIG students with above average AIs (61-70) appear to benefit from the program most. The 2002 entering class of FIG freshmen had 4-year graduation rate less than that of non-FIG students, and in 2003 was equal to that of non-FIG students. In all other years, their 4-year graduation rate was higher. For the freshmen class entering in 2006, the 4-year graduation rate for FIGs students was a phenomenal 57%, higher by 16% than non-FIGs students.

FIGURE 7:
4-Year Graduation Rates, AI score range 41-50 (below average), by FIG versus non-FIG

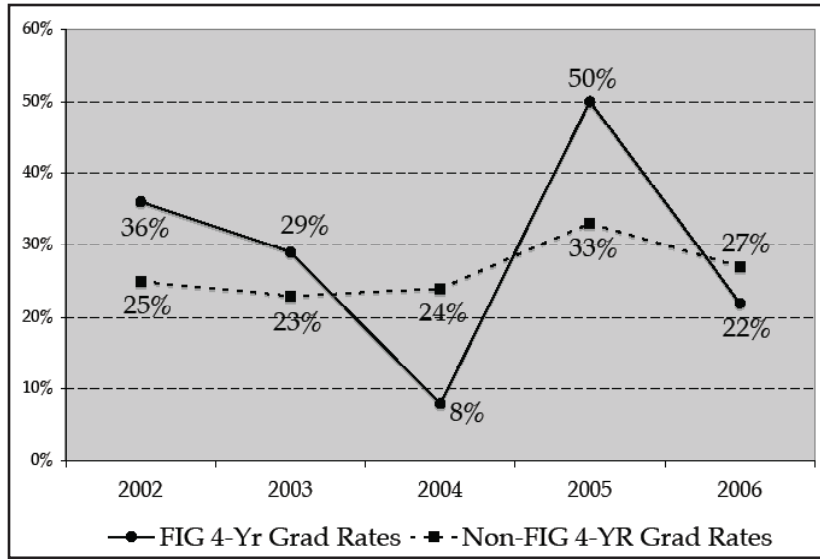


FIGURE 8:
4-Year Graduation Rates, AI score range 51-60 (average), by FIG versus non-FIG

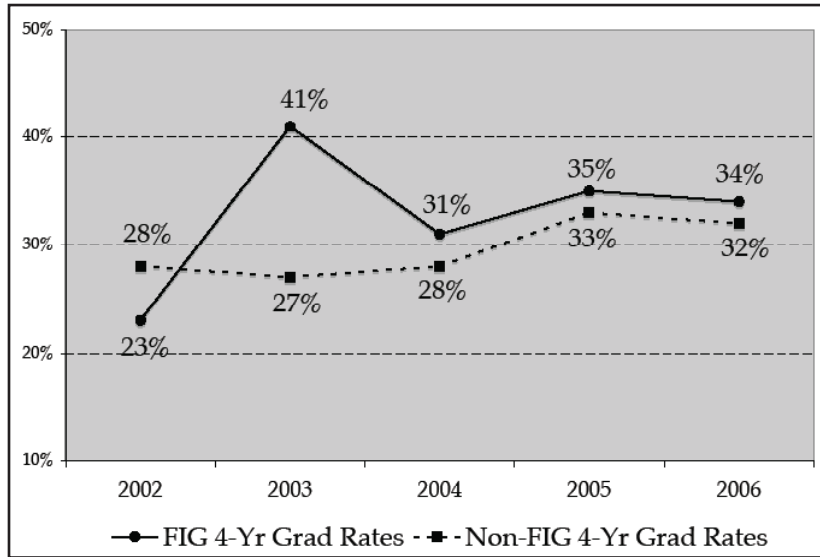
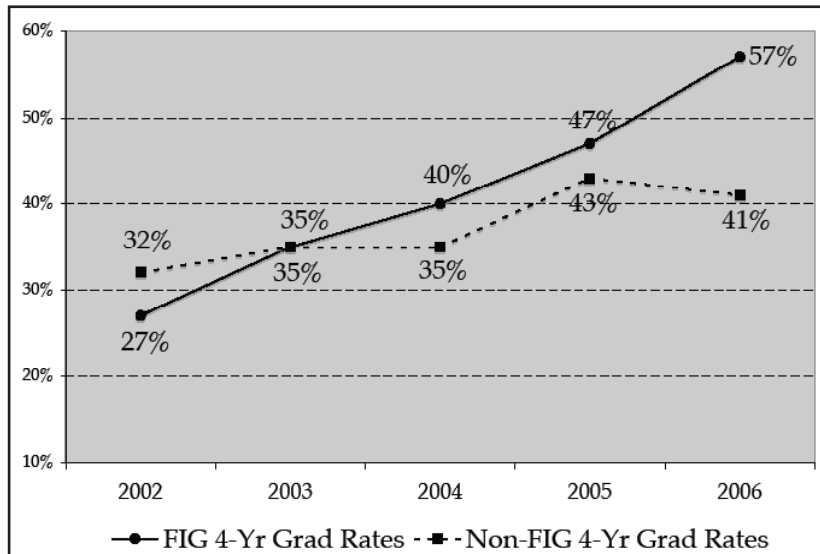


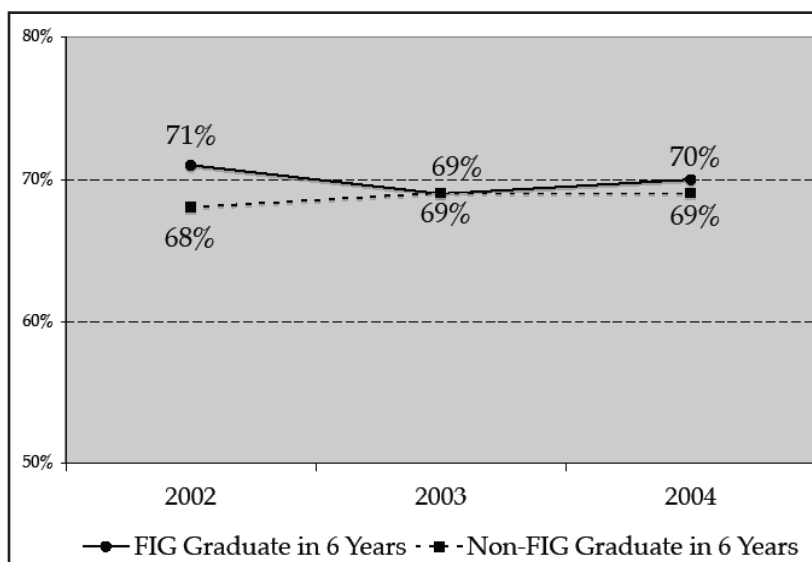
FIGURE 9:
4-Year Graduation Rates, AI score range 61-70 (above average), by FIG versus non-FIG



Six-year Graduation Rates

Using the same AI ranges, 6-year graduation rates were examined. When looking at overall FIGs/non-FIGs rates, the differences between FIGs and non-FIGs students were minimal: three percentage points difference for the 2002 entering class, no difference for the 2003 entering class, and a slight one percentage point difference for the 2004 entering class. It's very possible, however, that the higher 4-year graduation rates for FIGs students in 2003 (3% higher) and 2004 (4% higher) affected the differences in later 6-year graduation rates. Once more, please note that during these same years FIG students had slightly lower AI's than non-FIG students. (See Figure 10.)

FIGURE 10:
6-year Graduation Rates, Overall, by FIG versus non-FIG



Unlike findings for retention to the sophomore year or 4-year graduation rates, findings for 6-year graduation rates were harder to decipher. They may, as mentioned above, be affected by the 4-year graduation rates, or some other factor entirely. (Again, findings are displayed on the next page in Figures 11, 12, and 13.)

- FIG students with below average AIs (41-50) benefited from the program, especially the entering classes of 2002 and 2003, when rates were higher than non-FIGs students within the same range by 6% and 12%. Yet for the entering class of 2004, the 6-year graduation rate was 8% less than non-FIGs within the same range.
- FIG students with average AIs (51-60) benefited from the program less consistently than freshmen with below average AIs. For the class entering in 2003, FIGs students had a 6-year graduation rate 8% higher than non-FIGs students in the same range. For the entering classes of 2002 and 2004, 6-year graduation rates were about the same.
- FIG students with above average AIs (61-70) benefited from the program, too, but like those with average AIs, inconsistently. For the classes entering in 2002 and 2003, 6-year graduation rates were about the same as those for non-FIGs within the same range. FIG students in the class of 2004, however, had a 6-year graduation rate 5% higher than non-FIG students within the same range.

FIGURE 11:
6-Year Graduation
Rates, AI score
range 41-50 (below
average), by FIG
versus non-FIG

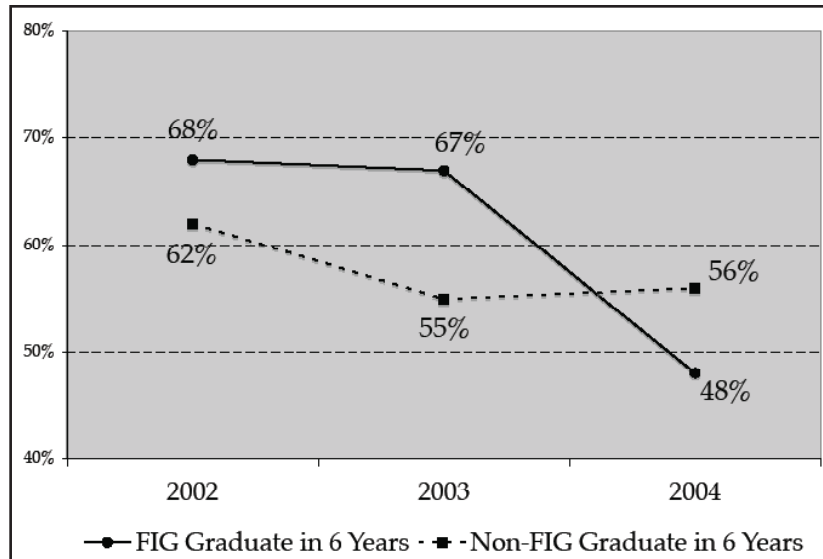


FIGURE 12:
6-Year Graduation
Rates, AI score
range 51-60
(average), by FIG
versus non-FIG

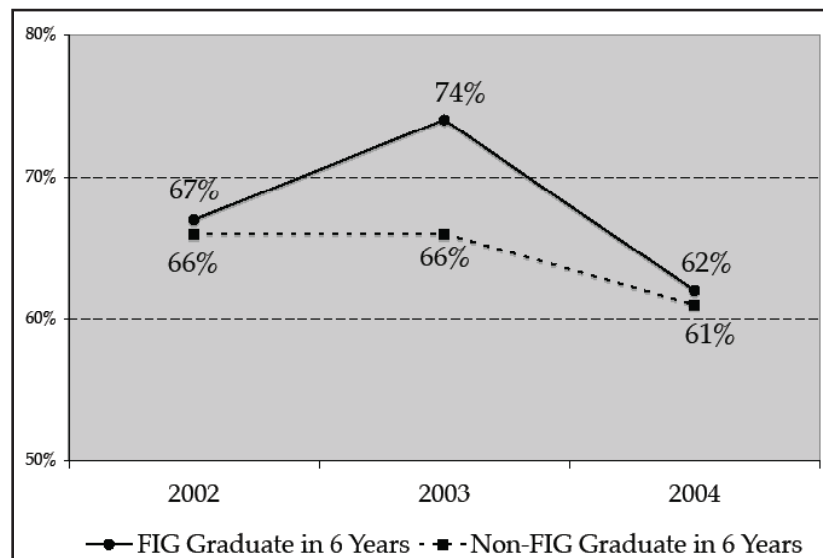
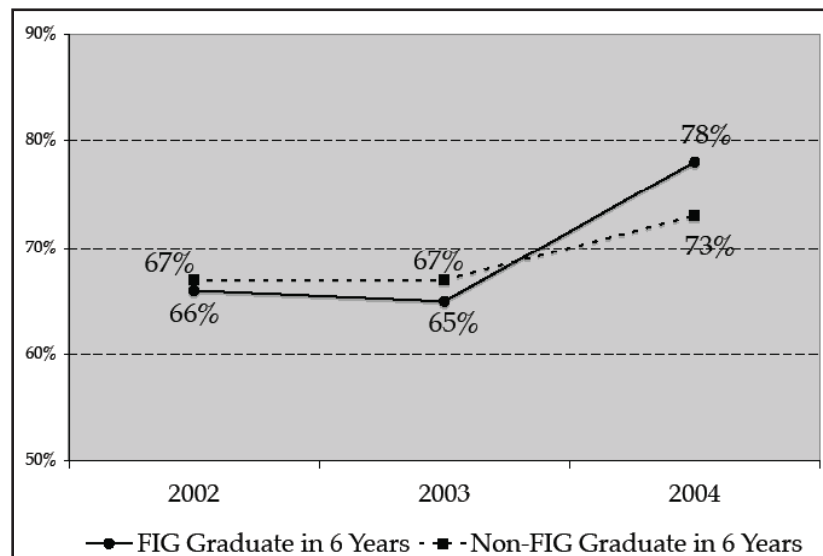


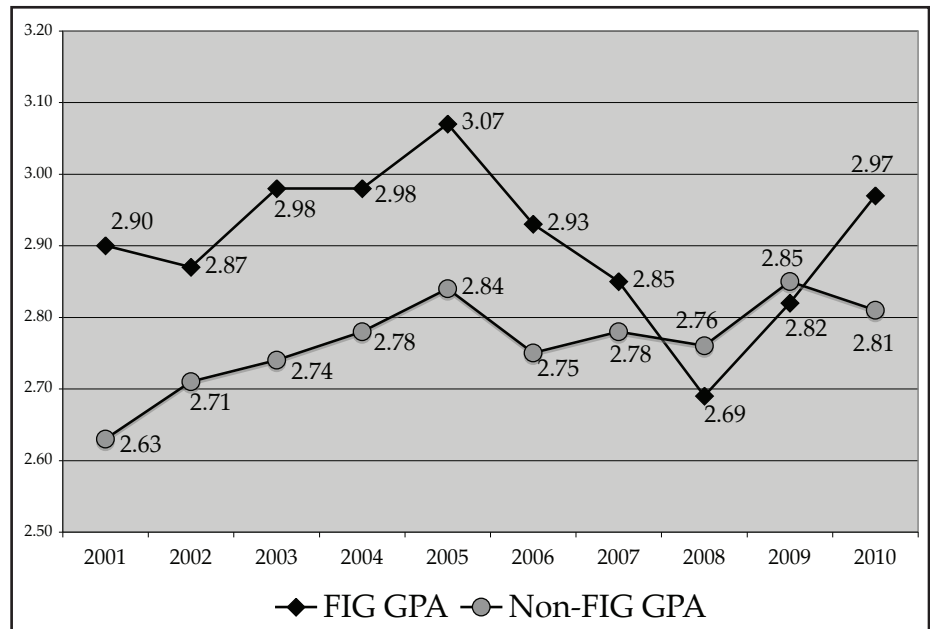
FIGURE 13:
6-Year Graduation
Rates, AI score
range 61-70 (above
average), by FIG
versus non-FIG



Expected versus Actual Western GPA

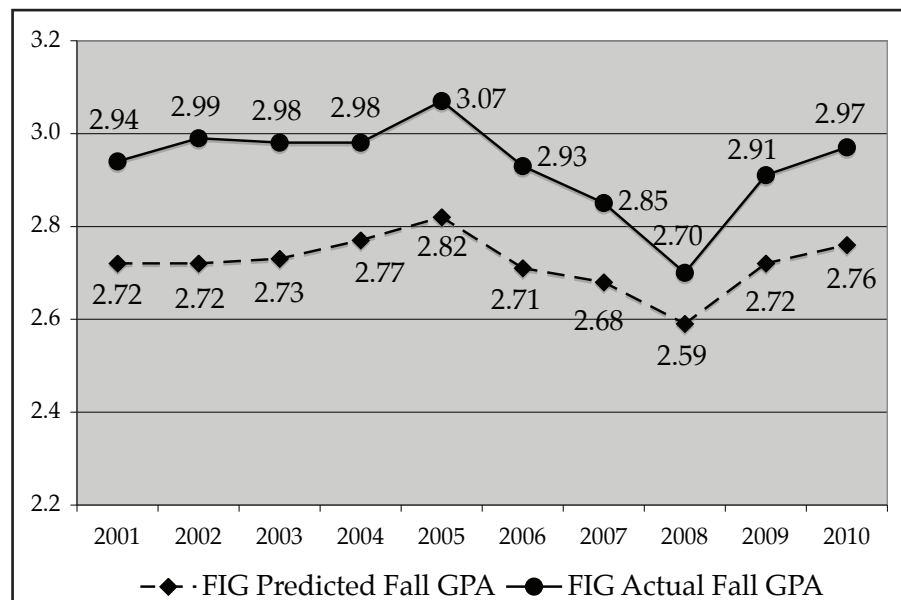
One common method of measuring the effectiveness of the FIG program is to compare the fall quarter grade point averages (gpa) of FIG and non-FIG freshmen. In nearly all years, the Western gpa for FIG freshmen has been higher than that of non-FIG freshmen. The exceptions have been in 2008 and 2009, when the AI's of FIG freshmen fell considerably under those for non-FIG freshmen. (See Figure 14.)

FIGURE 14:
Fall Quarter WWU
gpa's: by FIG
versus non-FIG



The fact that FIG freshmen have more often than not earned higher fall quarter gpa's than non-FIG freshmen is praise-worthy simply by itself. But it is even more meaningful given that FIG freshmen have lower AIs than non-FIG freshmen, and are therefore expected to receive lower grades. Since 2001, using AI scores as the metric, FIG freshmen earned higher fall quarter gpa's than they were expected to earn. (See Figure 15.)

FIGURE 15:
Fall Quarter WWU
gpa's, FIGs only:
expected versus
actual



The FIG Triple Halo Effect

It has been noted in previous FIG reports that the program has a first quarter halo effect. In other words, there is an immediate positive impact—fall gpa's for FIG freshmen are usually higher than fall gpa's of non-FIG freshmen—but the effect wears off. For example, Western gpa's at the end of the first academic year are equal for FIG and non-FIG freshmen.

Yet the FIG program may actually have a two additional positive effects (halos, if you will) that occur later in a student's academic career, bringing the total effect to three:

- Fall gpa's, as mentioned, are higher for FIG freshmen than non-FIG freshmen—and are not expected to be.
- Retention to the sophomore year for FIG freshmen is equal to (or nearly so) or higher than for non-FIG freshmen—and is not expected to be.
- 4-year graduation rates for FIG freshmen are higher than those for non-FIG freshmen—and, again, are not expected to be.

All these positive effects have been noted earlier in this report. What these data points do is reinforce the basic premise of the FIG program—indeed, for any first-term freshman program—that the first term of a freshmen's academic career is, for many students, the most crucial. Indeed, this was the considered determination by the First Year Experience Task Force back in the fall, 1998, when they made the firm recommendation that a program like Western's FIG be implemented. Such programs were, and continue to be, one the best practices of the first-year experience canon.