

# Western Education Longitudinal Study (WELS)

## INTRODUCTION

Currently the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing (OIAT) administers two major surveys whose instruments are generated by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). These include the CIRP (Freshmen) and CSS (Senior) surveys, which offer valuable overall data tied into national norms. At present, the CSS is administered every quarter and the CIRP every summer. Additionally, the Office of Survey Research (OSR) administers an Alumni survey every even-numbered year, and the Close-in survey of first-time freshmen and transfers every odd-numbered year. Moreover, both offices respond to additional survey research projects fielded from colleges, departments, and offices on an ad-hoc basis.

While acknowledging that Western's current survey methodology has its strengths,<sup>1</sup> personnel in the three offices most directly connected to survey research<sup>2</sup> have had numerous roundtable discussions about the direction of survey research at Western, and have developed a survey methodology (WELS) that would offer more in-depth and far-ranging survey data to the University community than is currently available. Importantly, the methodology would remain within current budgetary allotments.

While sturdy, the current survey methodology is limited, with some colleges, departments, and offices feeling their data needs are unmet. Moreover, in the current system, only in-coming freshmen and outgoing seniors are polled regularly – and even then response rates are low. Low rates, in turn, have a tendency to skew samples and create unrepresentative cohorts: mostly females, those students who respond well to authority and/or are prone to following through with responsibilities – what some might term the “cream of the crop”. And mid-point data currently goes completely uncollected, yet might be very informative and enriching to many university units.

A response to these concerns is WELS: a longitudinal survey program that would take a step in the direction of more fully responding to Western's data needs. Without overburdening respondents with repeated surveys from a variety of sources, WELS would aid departments, offices, colleges and organizations in exploring issues that are particularly timely and relevant. WELS would enable issues of retention and graduation efficiency to be more carefully explored; WELS would provide data that would be more relevant to program evaluation and improvement, and student outcomes assessment. WELS would introduce an energizing flexibility into Western's data collection process; moreover, departments and units feeling a need for data more specific to their needs would have easier access to the data loop. We believe that WELS would not only be a more efficient use of staff time and financial resources, but would also provide more useful, higher quality data than in the past.

## WELS: PURPOSE AND METHOD

THE PURPOSE OF THE WELS SURVEY PROGRAM is to more efficiently serve the Western community and the organizations it supplies with information (the Washington State Legislature, the Higher Education Coordinating Board, the Office of Presidents, etc.).

THE METHOD FOR ACCOMPLISHING THIS GOAL is to stream-line current survey methodology, and at the same time expand the kinds of surveys being administered, thus increasing the variety and usefulness of data that are being collected.

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<sup>1</sup> HERI surveys link Western findings to national norms, and the data is robust enough to fulfill the needs of many departments and to inform most outside agencies.

<sup>2</sup> OIAT, OSR, and the Office of Institutional Research and Resource Planning, or OIRRP.

## WELS: HOW IT WOULD WORK

To effectively fulfill its potential, what WELS would need first is a far ranging discussion about the usefulness and applicability of current surveys. Topics of utmost importance include: Are we getting what we need from national surveys? Might we be better served by developing our own survey? Secondly, WELS would then need a parallel discussion about the survey data needs of the university. For the project to have its best chance at success, this discussion should generate input from any and all campus offices and departments that feel a need for survey data.<sup>3</sup>

Once a survey instrument is chosen from those available nationally and/or developed locally, the accompanying chart delineates how the stream-lining and expanding of Western's survey research would be accomplished. Crucial to the WELS design is the freshmen survey, which would be administered to most in-coming freshmen during their Summerstart visit.<sup>4</sup> In order to support the University's survey needs over time, this survey needs to be administered to as many in-coming freshmen as possible, with a target of 90% or better. There are a number of reasons why.

For one thing, in the WELS approach yearly survey administrations would be replaced by a six-year survey cycle, *with a new cycle beginning every three years*. The freshmen survey, for example, would be administered beginning in the fall of 2003 and then again to a different cohort of in-coming freshmen in the fall of 2006. Each survey cycle would run for six years, thus an overlapping of cycles would begin at the half-way point of the initial survey cycle. Since not every entering class would be surveyed, participation in the in-coming freshmen survey years is vital.

With a large pool of "baseline" survey participants, there would be a dramatic change in the way subsequent surveys could be administered. By crafting representative random samples of students from that large "baseline" pool and using efficient, contemporary survey methodology,<sup>5</sup> researchers could gather accurate survey findings, yet have to contact far fewer students to do so. Surveys could be conducted more often, and yield more detailed, specific, and useful findings.

The strength of this design is that a wider variety of surveys would be included in each cycle. To illustrate, let's consider only the first survey cycle, which would begin in the fall of 2003. A freshmen survey ("baseline") would be administered in the late summer/early fall, depending on the Summerstart schedule. In the spring quarter of that academic year (spring, 2004), a follow-up survey of fall freshmen would be administered. In the fall of 2004, a survey of Non-returning students (NRS) would be administered to those students who, at the end of their first academic year, did not return to Western. In the spring of 2005, a survey of second-year students (a sample taken from the fall 2003 cohort) would be administered. As the chart illustrates, subsequent surveys would be conducted at the end of the third and fourth year, and would be supplemented past graduation by alumni surveys.

In the WELS concept, more utile surveys could be administered to fewer students yet gather better information for more offices than the current system. Flexibility would increase as surveys are developed locally (or purchased nationally, if appropriate) that gather findings addressing issues of particular importance to Western's mission, whether at the overall level, or at the department or office level. Moreover, the combined survey findings could create a synergy of information that would greatly increase Western's efficiency and effectiveness.

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<sup>3</sup> While no guarantee can be made that *all* survey data needs would be met, many more than are currently being met could potentially be, if for no other reason than knowing what those needs are and where they might fit into Western's overall survey data schematic.

<sup>4</sup> Or, should Summerstart be replaced by a different program, coordinated with that new program.

<sup>5</sup> Telephone/computer-based and/or web-based surveys, for instance.

## WELS: GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Leaders in Western's administration have identified key institutional goals tied to the WELS. They include adherence to Western's Strategic Action Plan (<http://www.wvu.edu/depts/president/strategicguide.html>) and a connection to the four state mandated accountability measures: Quantitative and Symbolic Reasoning, Information Technology Literacy, Critical Thinking, and Writing. OIAT/OSR staff will meet with each of the committees addressing the accountability issues and develop items to include that will tap student exposure to and opportunities to do each of these. In addition, OIAT/OSR staff will meet with people in each unit that deals directly with students' experiences to determine their information and evaluation needs, and solicit their feedback on the research design and drafts of survey instruments.

In addition, the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing and the Office of Institutional Research have articulated a detailed set of goals and objectives that tie directly to the assessment work required on campus.

### Assessment Goals

The purpose of the Office of Assessment and Testing (which includes the Office of Survey Research) and the Office of Institutional Research is to provide good, relevant data that is valid and reliable with a practical focus. It must address the needs of the university community and departments and lead to change.

Participation in national survey research such as the CIRP survey of incoming freshmen and the CSS survey of exiting seniors has proven to have relatively low response rates and items that do not speak directly to the university's information needs. The WELS is expected to supplant the routine administration of the CIRP and CSS, with administrations of the two surveys occurring periodically, but not annually.

The core of the WELS is to assess student learning expectations, experiences and outcomes. Questions will be directed appropriately to students at different stages of their academic careers, from entry, progressing through their course work and finally to graduation and beyond. Key questions for entering students include assessing whether expectations for college life and learning are realistic and the extent to which their expectations are met. The practical application of this information is to develop materials and programs that frame student expectations to be more accurate and realistic in order to better prepare them for success in their college experience (ie. In web pages, admissions materials, bulletin).

Identifying institutional barriers to student engagement and progress is also key to the WELS. Examining advising, admission to the major, course access, course pedagogy and more will enable the assessment offices to recommend changes to policy, programs and organizational structure. As students progress through their degree program, departments and other academic units will engage in discussions of student learning, including faculty expectations and experiences. Examination of the effects of different pedagogy, the use of writing, speaking, critical thinking, technology and quantitative and symbolic reasoning in the classroom will feed into a greater understanding of student engagement and satisfaction.

The WELS will also fill a much needed void in the information we have about students: their preceding behavior and experiences. Information on their high school and junior college experience will help in exploring the options they had for college, and the reasons they chose WWU beyond social and environmental characteristics of the university. This information should also help explain student success and engagement at the university level.

Finally, the WELS will focus on learning how young adults experience the process of deciding on a major and evaluating the roles university programs and policy can play in facilitating that process.