
APPENDIX 2.8

“Building on Our Successes” Dialogues

ASSESSMENT UPDATE: BUILDING ON OUR STRENGTHS

Steven VanderStaay, Ann Carlson, and Gary R. McKinney

This issue of Dialogue brings good news: Western is doing a terrific job of retaining and graduating students. In fact, we retain more of our freshman and graduate a higher percentage of our students than Eastern Washington University, Central Washington University, or The Evergreen State College; moreover, we run neck-and-neck with Washington State University in both measures. 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 in a publication such as Dialogue is one part of a larger university effort to both improve communication about and foster 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 continuous improvement requires. To these ends, in this Dialogue we'll recount some assessment resources, current and forthcoming assessment initiatives, plus share recent assessment findings that demonstrate the university's outstanding performance.

For instance, recent National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) findings demonstrate that Western 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 3 on the next page.)

Figure 1: Six-Year Graduation Rates within Washington State

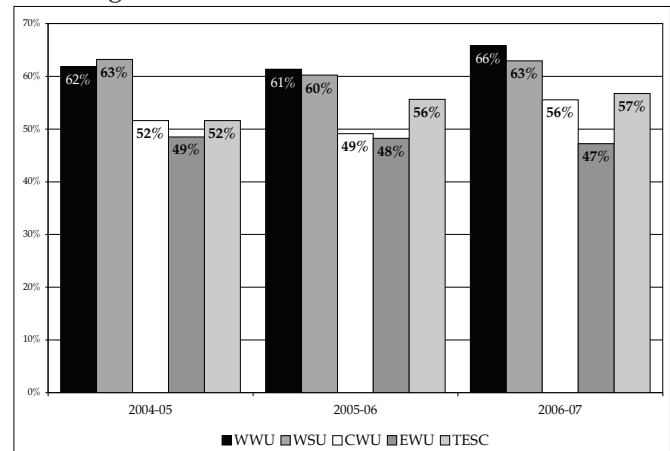


Figure 2: Six-Year Graduation Rates within Washington State

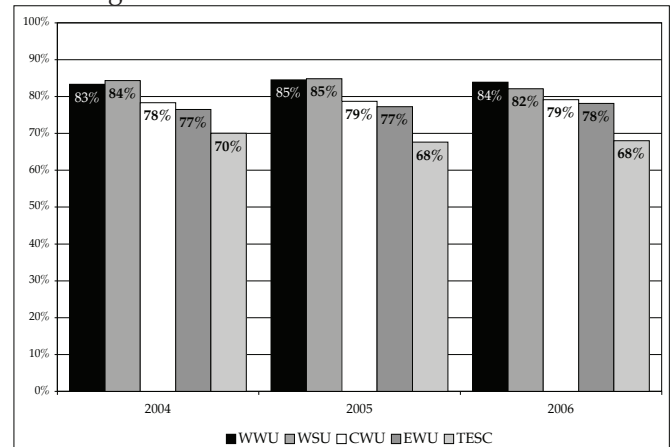
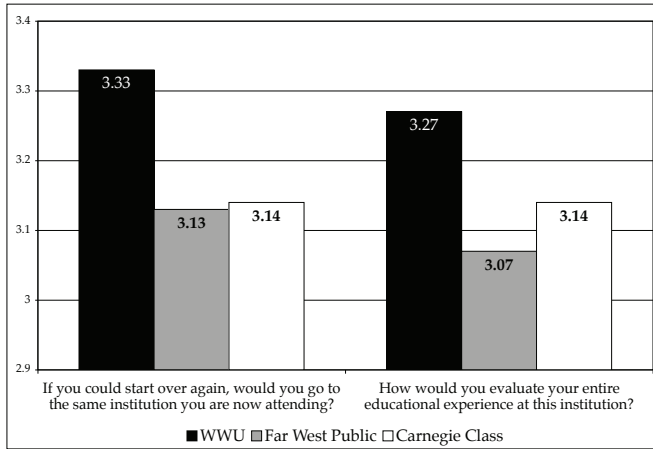
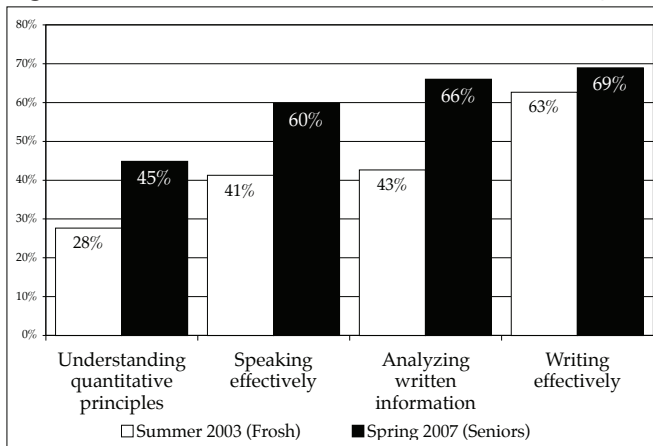


Figure 3: NSSE Satisfaction



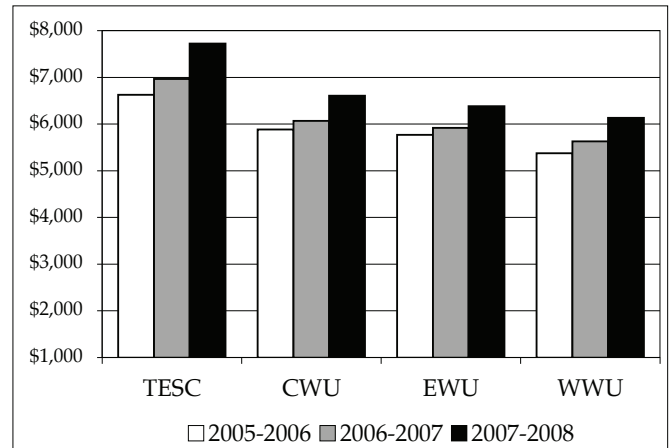
The satisfaction of our seniors as exhibited in NSSE findings is echoed strongly in findings from the Office of Survey Research’s (OSR) Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS) Alumni Surveys. In 2008, 62% of alumni reported that Western had prepared them “very” to “extremely” well for success in 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 4 at the bottom of this page.) 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: telephone = x3409; email = gary.mckinney@wwu.edu; MS = 9010.)

Figure 4: WELS Pre (Freshman)/Post (Senior) Findings



Western’s performance success extends to our processes as well as our results. Indeed, we are the most efficient public baccalaureate institution in the state, accomplishing much more than our competitors on fewer dollars than they receive. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5: Cost per Budgeted FTE Student Enrollment



Another area in which Western is showing excellent promise is that of student learning outcomes assessment. Yes, the most recent accreditation report 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*. Indeed, when it comes to assessing student learning outcomes, Western has written if not *the* book on the subject, then at least a very useful one.

The following “Assessment Matrix” is an example of the kind of strategies and resources to be found in these handbooks. While simple, these kinds of charts provide iron-clad evidence that a program or department has “closed the assessment loop” by using evidence to inform an improvement. The College of Humanities and Social Science (CHSS) used a similar matrix in their accreditation materials and received a commendation for demonstrating that they, indeed, “have closed the feedback loop.”

ASSESSMENT MATRIX				
Objective or outcomes	Method	Results	Analysis	Action to take

COMMUNICATION/TRANSPARENCY

Western already uses data for continuous program improvement. But whether existing data or data that may need to be gathered in the future, we also need a more systematic approach to that use, whether we're talking about simple retention and graduation rates, or how student learning outcomes are measured in general education courses. Data *availability*, of course, is not the issue. Among other sources of data, the OIART and the OSR have published reports, Focus Summaries, Dialogues, and other titles numbering into the hundreds—all available on-line or in hard copy. The cornerstones of the Western's research and data efforts include:

The Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS). Instituted in 2000, the WELS is Western's signature internal survey findings instrument.

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.).

So clearly the quandary for Western is not the availability of quality data, but rather 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 has joined more than 300 universities and colleges nationwide in the VSA, which is a voluntary initiative for 4-year public colleges and universities. Developed in partnership with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) 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.

The VSA provides a consistent platform for the publication and reporting of key outcome data on retention, graduation, enrollment, student satisfaction, and other variables. 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 via a link from the WWU home page.

The GUR Assessment Initiative. Western's accrediting body, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NCC&U), 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. Some 100 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 the budget crisis, chairs and deans have asked that such measures be temporarily postponed. Consequently, an achievement exam is seen as a temporary best option. Discussion of a qualitative GUR data source will begin anew later next year.

Faculty who wish to comment on these proposals, or to assist with Western’s GUR assessment efforts, are always welcome to participate. For instance, currently an ad hoc committee is being planned to help select the achievement exam to pilot. Interested faculty can call Steven Vanderstaay at x3004 or e-mail at Steven.VanderStaay@wwu.edu.

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Dr. Joseph E. Trimble, Director

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STILL BUILDING ON OUR STRENGTHS, LOCALLY AND STATEWIDE

Steven VanderStaay and Gary R. McKinney

A recent Dialogue (Issue No. 10, April, 2009) brought good news: Western is doing a terrific job of retaining and graduating students. Retention of freshmen into their sophomore year is high (84% in 2006). Six-year graduation rates are also high (66% in 2006-07). Among Washington State schools, only the University of Washington does better.

This issue of Dialogue brings more good news. For instance, findings from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS),¹ averaged from 1998 to 2002, show that Western is graduating more students of color than our comparison group.² (The findings noted in this report come from the National Center for Education Statistics publication: *IPEDS Data Feedback Report, 2009*.) This same data set also indicates that Western is doing a particularly good job of graduating Hispanic/Latinos (10% more than our peers), and American Indian/Alaskan Natives (8% more than our peers). (See Figures 1 and 2 below.)

Figure 1: IPEDS Average Six-Year Graduation Rates 1998-2002 Cohorts: White and Students of Color

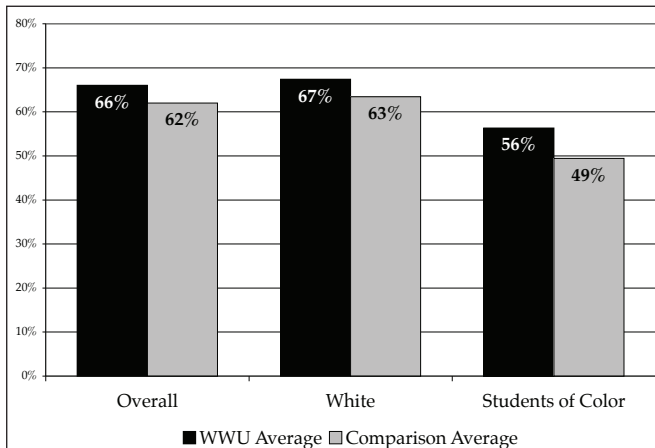


Figure 2: IPEDS Average Six-Year Graduation Rates 1998-2002 Cohorts: by Ethnicity

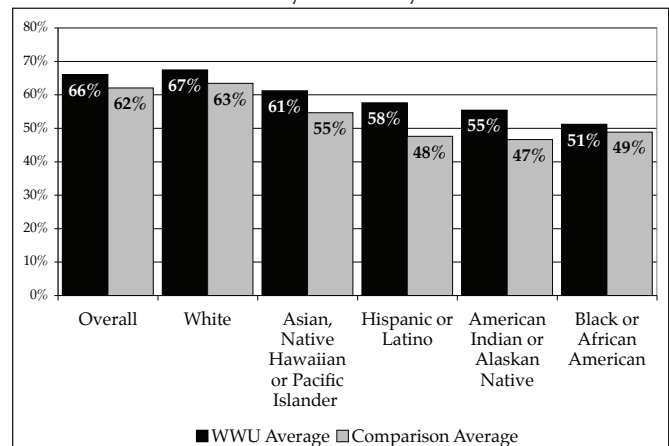
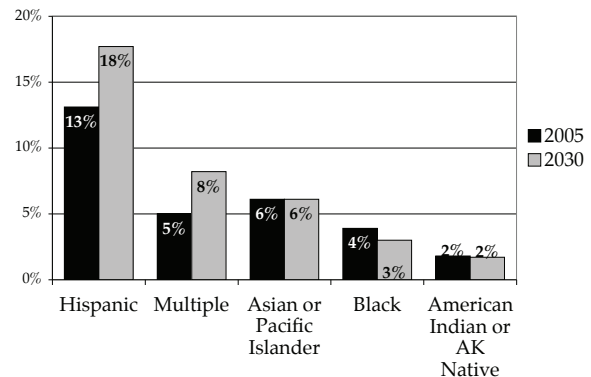


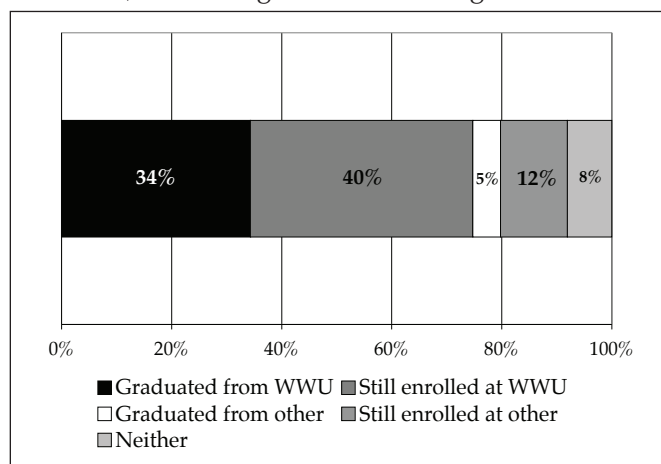
Figure 3: Washington State K-12 Population Students of Color

Western's good work graduating students of color—especially Hispanics and Latinos—is positive for more than just its surface appearance. A recent Higher Education Coordinating Board report shows that by the year 2030 37% of Washington State's K-12 students will be students of color,³ and of that 37%, Hispanics will make up the majority. Past success shows that Western is well positioned to serve this growing population.



Another indicator of Western’s ability to provide a high-quality education and exceptional services can be found in our College Portrait of Undergraduate Education web site.⁴ College Portrait data reveal that four years after entering Western as freshmen, 91% of those students have either graduated from Western or another institution, or are still enrolled at Western or another institution. In other words, most students who enter Western as freshmen are persevering. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4: Graduation and Continuation Rates for First-time, In-coming Western Undergraduates*



*Data provided by College Portrait/Voluntary System of Accountability

Not only do Western students persevere, they are generally quite satisfied with their Western experience. Recent NSSE findings, for instance, indicate that Western seniors are more satisfied with their educational experience than peers at other Far West Public Universities and universities in our Carnegie classification. Moreover, Western seniors also report more faculty-student interaction, more academic challenge, and more engaged learning than their peers.

NSSE findings are echoed in findings from the Office of Survey Research’s (OSR) Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS) Alumni Surveys. For instance, in 2008, 62% of alumni reported that Western had prepared them “very” to “extremely” well for success in the job market. This figure is up from 53% in 2006.

In addition to seniors, findings from the OSR’s just completed *Exit Survey of Undergraduate Students Completing Degrees in the Spring of 2009* indicate that recent graduates are also quite satisfied with their Western experience: 84% say they would start their

higher education here again, and 88% say they were either satisfied or very satisfied with their Western experience. (See break-out box.)

84 PERCENT

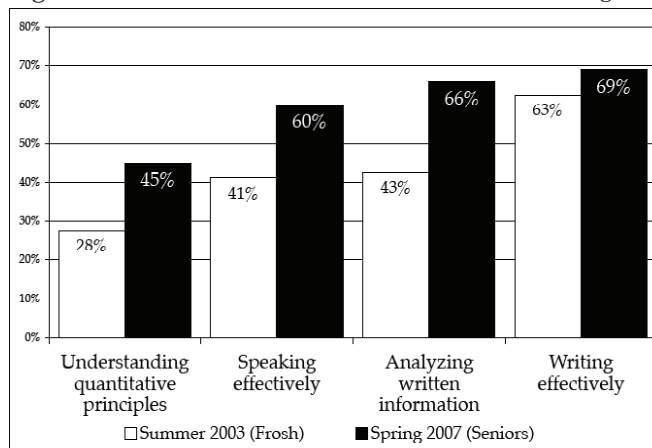
OF WESTERN GRADUATES INDICATE THAT IF THEY WERE TO START THEIR HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE AGAIN, THEY WOULD STILL ATTEND WESTERN.

88 PERCENT

OF WESTERN GRADUATES INDICATE THEY WERE EITHER SATISFIED OR VERY SATISFIED WITH THEIR EXPERIENCE AT WESTERN.

Very importantly, Western students reported gains in key academic competencies, including understanding quantitative and scientific principles, critically analyzing written information, and writing effectively. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5: WELS Pre (Freshman)/Post (Senior) Findings



Perseverance and satisfaction are two bellwethers of success, and over the past two decades, Western has had many successes, including, but hardly limited to, high rankings in national news magazines, and awards for its technology and academic programs. But Western’s successes are only part of the story. As one institution among six in the Washington State Higher Education system, Western has helped the state’s overall success story.

A recent report from the Council of Presidents (COP),⁵ a voluntary association of the presidents of Washington State’s six public baccalaureate degree-granting institutions, described noteworthy developments over the past two decades. Simply put: the Washington State Higher Education system is one of the most productive and efficient in the nation. We graduate a higher percentage of our students than any other state university system and we do so on fewer dollars per degree than all but two states. The cost of producing a degree or certificate in Washington is the third lowest in the nation, nearly \$13,000.00 below the national average. Indeed, the COP report indicates

that “Washington’s public baccalaureate institutions have demonstrated continual improvements in degree completion and productivity.” (See Figures 6 and 7 below.)

Within Washington State, Western’s success and efficiency standing is similarly outstanding, relative to Eastern, Central and The Evergreen State College. We graduate a higher percentage of our students than these institutions and we do so with the lowest Cost per Budgeted FTE Student Enrollment. In the 2007-2008 biennium, Western received \$6,130.00 per FTE student compared to \$6,379.00 at Eastern, \$6,660.00 at Central and \$7,721 at TESC.

Figure 6: Bachelor’s Degree, 2005-06, per 100 undergraduate students, fall 2005, public baccalaureate institutions.

Sources: U.S. National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

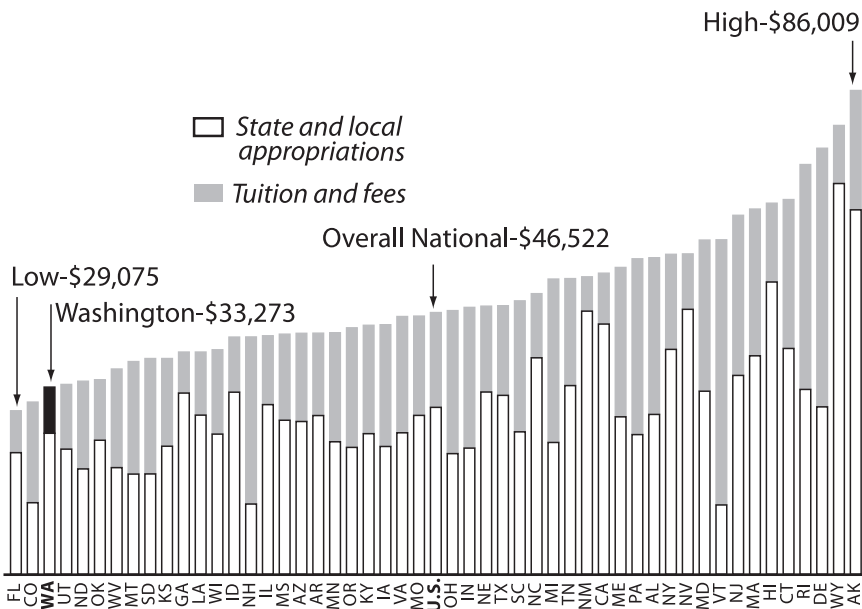
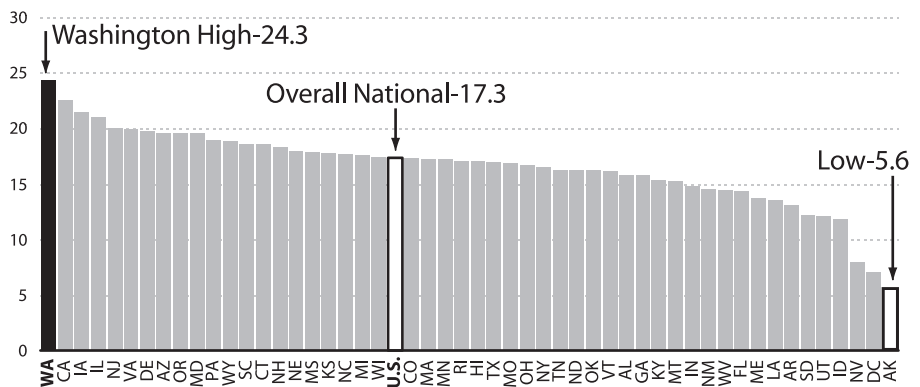


Figure 7: Total funding per degree or certificate (weighted, 2006-07).

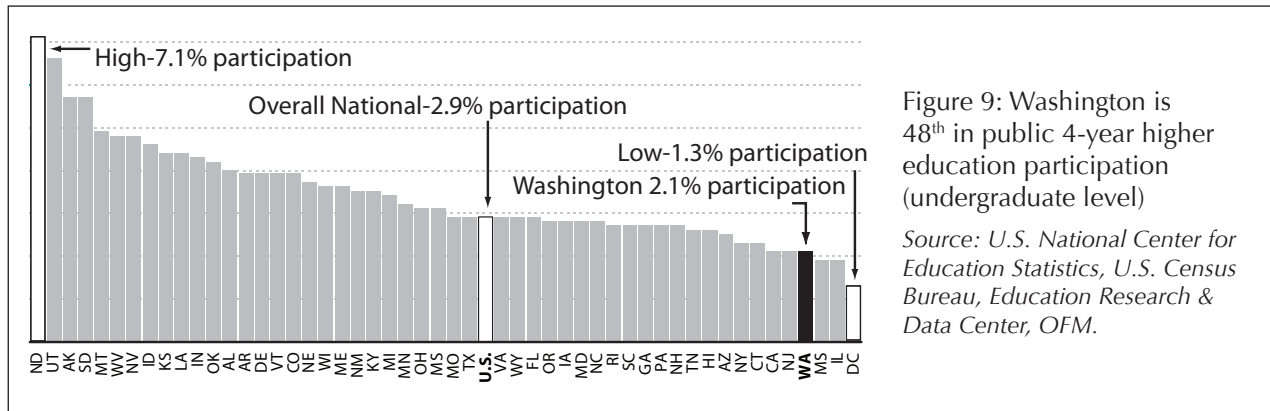
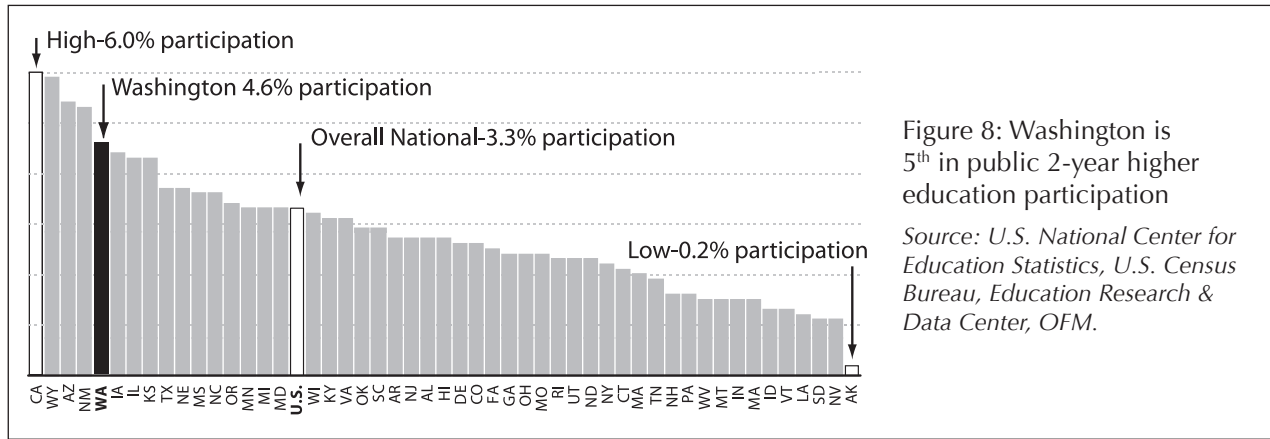
NOTE: Data adjusted for value of degrees and certificates in the state employment market (median earnings by award type and level).

Sources: SHEEO State Higher Education Finance Survey 2008; NCES, IPEDS Completions Survey; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Samples

Students that persist are good for Western, as are students satisfied with their Western experience. But so, too, are persistence and satisfaction good for the Washington State Higher Education System. A built-in competition between state schools exists, of course, but it is a competition based on collegiality and mutual good will. No one at Western wants to see any of our “competitors” fail, anymore than they want to see Western fail. Ultimately, a student’s success should be judged a system success, not just the success of a sole college or university. All Washington State institutions

of higher learning want their students to succeed, at whichever school they may start, at whichever school they may finish.

System wide, however, there are some concerns. Not in the delivery of services, but rather to how many citizens can those services be delivered. While Washington ranks 5th in public two-year education participation, it ranks 48th in public four-year education participation. (Based on the percentage of the population demographic aged 17-64 enrolled in a college or university. See Figures 8 and 9 below.)



Citations

¹More information at: nces.ed.gov.

²Western’s most recent comparison group (2009) includes: Appalachian State (NC), Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo (CA), CSU, Chico (CA), College of Charleston (SC), Eastern Illinois (IL), CSU, Humboldt (CA), James Madison (VA), Millersville (PA), Rowan (NJ), Salisbury (MD), CSU, Sonoma (CA), SUNY, Geneseo (NY), College of NJ (NJ), Towson (MD), Truman St. (MO), Colorado (CO), UNC, Charlotte (NC), UNC, Wilmington (NC), Northern Iowa (IA), Wisconsin, Eau Claire (WI), Wisconsin, Stevens Pt. (WI), Washburn of Topeka (KS), and Winthrop (SC)

³Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board (December, 2007). *Moving the Blue Arrow*. 2008 Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education in Washington. Olympia, WA.

⁴A component of the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA), an initiative by public 4-year universities to supply basic, comparable information on the undergraduate student experience through a common web report: the College Portrait. <http://www.voluntarysystem.org/index.cfm>

⁵Council of Presidents (2009). *Washington’s 4-Year Public College & Universities: Leading the Nation. Investment Report: Degree Productivity, Participation, & Funding*. Olympia, WA.

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