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), averaged from 1998 to 2002, show that Western is graduating more students of color than our comparison group. (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.)

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; 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 website. 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*](image)

*Data provided by College Portrait/Voluntary System of Accountability

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](image)

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.

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), 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.)

Figure 8: Washington is 5th in public 2-year higher education participation

Source: U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau, Education Research & Data Center, OFM.

Figure 9: Washington is 48th in public 4-year higher education participation (undergraduate level)

Source: U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau, Education Research & Data Center, OFM.

Citations

1 More information at nces.ed.gov.

2 Western’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)


4 A 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