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First Year Experience Technical Report


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First Year Experience
Technical Report

(Report 1998-03)

Carl Simpson
Linda Clark

March, 1998

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------------|
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | iii |
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| FINDINGS | 2 |
| The transition | 2 |
| Course access | 8 |
| Choosing a major | 15 |
| Time use patterns during the first year at Western | 17 |
| Attachment to Western | 19 |
| Survey of students who left Western during or after their first year | 20 |

TABLE OF TABLES

| | |
|--|----|
| Table 1. Where do <i>natives</i> say they have gotten most of their advice and information about Western so far? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 7 |
| Table 2. Where do <i>transfers</i> say they have gotten most of their advice and information about Western so far? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 8 |
| Table 3. If first choice courses were unavailable, why? (Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 10 |
| Table 4. Were courses taken during Fall and Winter Quarters "a first choice that you wanted or needed, a second choice that was still useful or all you could get at the time"? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 11 |
| Table 5. If students used RSVP to drop and add courses, why? (Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 12 |
| Table 6. How many credits did students drop after the second week of Fall Quarter? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students) | 14 |
| Table 7. Why students decided to drop courses (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students) | 14 |
| Table 8. When do students think is the best time during college to choose a major? (Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 16 |
| Table 9. What kinds of things have students done to help decide on a major? (Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 17 |

TABLE OF FIGURES

| | | |
|------------|--|----|
| Figure 1. | How difficult was the transition to Western? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students) | 2 |
| Figure 2. | Compared to high school or a previous college, did students expect Western to be difficult, and how difficult did they actually find Western to be? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students) | 3 |
| Figure 3. | During Fall Quarter, did <i>natives</i> feel the need for advisement in any of the areas, and if so, did they receive the advising they needed? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students) | 4 |
| Figure 4. | During Spring Quarter, did <i>natives</i> feel the need for advisement in any of the areas, and if so, did they receive the advising they needed? (Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 5 |
| Figure 5. | During Fall Quarter, did <i>transfers</i> feel the need for advisement in any of the areas, and if so, did they receive the advising they needed? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students) | 6 |
| Figure 6. | During Spring Quarter, did <i>transfers</i> feel the need for advisement in any of the areas, and if so, did they receive the advising they needed? (Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 6 |
| Figure 7. | When students registered for Fall and Spring Quarters, were any of their first choice courses unavailable? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 9 |
| Figure 8. | How many courses did students get into by using RSVP to drop and add? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 12 |
| Figure 9. | How many courses did students get into by getting add codes from faculty or departments? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 13 |
| Figure 10. | Are students a declared major, do they have an intended major in mind, or are they undecided? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 15 |
| Figure 11. | For a period of two months during Spring Quarter, how often did students think about what to major in? (Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 16 |
| Figure 12. | How many hours per week do <i>natives</i> say they spent a) employed for pay, b) doing homework, and c) socializing with friends? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 18 |
| Figure 13. | How many hours per week do <i>transfers</i> say they spent a) employed for pay, b) doing homework, and c) socializing with friends? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 18 |
| Figure 14. | How likely is it that students will complete their bachelors degree at Western? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey) | 20 |
| Figure 15. | Among students who left WWU during or after their first year, percent who indicate whether each factor was a <u>major</u> reason, a <u>minor</u> reason, or <u>not</u> a reason why they left Western (1997 Survey of Former Students) | 21 |

Executive Summary

This report was prepared as background to ongoing discussions concerning the first year experience, in particular the study group by that name headed by Dean Marie Eaton. Data come from surveys of a cohort of new freshmen and new transfers, who entered Western in Fall, 1994. They were surveyed that Fall and in the Spring of that same academic year.

Only about one-third of new students, many of whom failed to attend Summer advising sessions, find the transition to Western "very" or "moderately" difficult. The great majority expected Western to be more difficult than their previous schools. Most found that to be true, but about one in five found it less true than they expected.

Just over half of freshmen felt a need for advice about GURs during Fall quarter, with about 40% wanting advisement concerning entry into a major. By Spring, all these had declined--GUR advising needs, precipitously--but need for career or life planning had risen from 21.8% to 31.5%. With the exception of GUR advising, where three-fourths of need was met, one-third or less of the desire for advising eventuated in advising. For transfers, well over half felt need for advisement concerning entry into a major. By Spring, need had declined significantly. For transfers, just over half of all felt need for advisement led to advising.

Students' sources of advice are largely informal, with other students and friends leading all sources, followed by orientation and university publications. Advising services and faculty are seldom listed as the main source of advice.

The report provides a series of findings relevant to course access during the first year. For freshmen, course access is very good Fall quarter among those who attend Summerstart. By Winter, access becomes less good, although 85.5% of all courses taken by freshmen were ones the students wanted. Among transfers, the pattern is reversed. During Fall, 1994, nearly 20% of courses were "all [students] could get at the time." By Winter, the corresponding figure was below 8%.

In addition, access pressures are illustrated by the remarkably high use of add codes to gain entry to courses. While modest during students' first quarter here, by Spring of their first year, fully 31.4% of freshmen and 39.9% of transfers say they got into at least one class using add codes.

Far from needing to be forced, most students feel an urgency about moving into a major more quickly than required. The methods they choose to explore majors almost entirely involve exploring subjects by taking classes and talking with students, friends and family.

A modest number of students during Fall, but more during Spring, do little homework. Attachment to graduating from Western also weakens somewhat between Fall and Spring of the first year.

Two-thirds of students who leave Western during or after the first year transfer to another college or university. The primary reasons they give for leaving or for dropping out are dissatisfaction with Western, financial problems, low GPA, difficulty getting access to programs, feeling a lack of "fit," lacking direction in life, and disappointment with large classes.

Introduction

This technical report was prepared primarily for the First Year Experience study group appointed by the Provost as part of Western's accountability effort. In addition, we hope that the findings reported here may be useful to others on campus concerned with making Western students' experience here the best we can offer. The report draws a partial picture of the first year at Western, including student perceptions of the transition, students' descriptions of the process of getting the classes they wanted, and students' process of deciding on a major.

While the First Year Experience study group may focus primarily on the freshman year, transfers also experience a first year at Western. This report therefore presents parallel findings for a sample of transfers and a set of native freshmen.

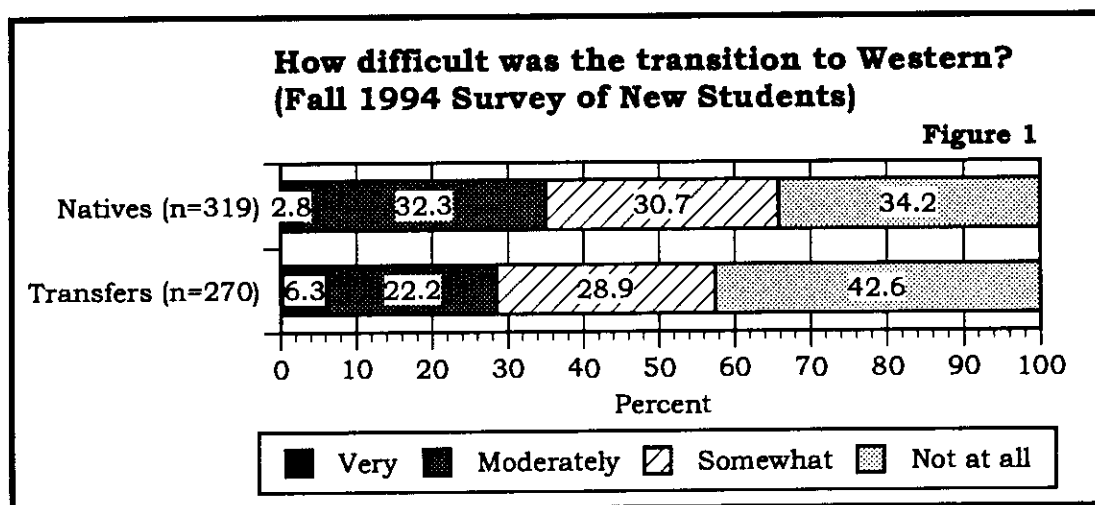
All the findings in this study are based on surveys conducted Fall, 1994 and Spring, 1995, during the second half of each quarter. The Office of Survey Research interviewed freshmen and transfers who entered Western Fall quarter and had been here for 5-9 weeks at the time of the interview. In all, 601 (327 native freshmen and 274 transfers) were included in the final sample. The refusal rate was 1.1%; the completion rate 58.7%. Others in the sample were not contacted, primarily because limited resources forced us to reduce the size of the completed sample. The approximate margins of error (the 95% confidence interval) for findings expressed as percentages are 3.5-4% for the entire sample and 4.5-6% for native freshmen or transfers, separately. The same sample was followed-up for a second survey during Spring, 1995--for most, their third quarter at Western. The number of interviews completed was 552, for a completion rate of 91.8%. The approximate margin of error is 3.5-4.5% and 4.5-6% for native freshmen or transfers, separately.

The story told here is transmitted primarily through charts and tables, with minimal commentary. The report draws few conclusions and offers no recommendations. Its purpose is, instead, to make available some information on how one recent cohort of new students experienced Western.

Findings

The Transition

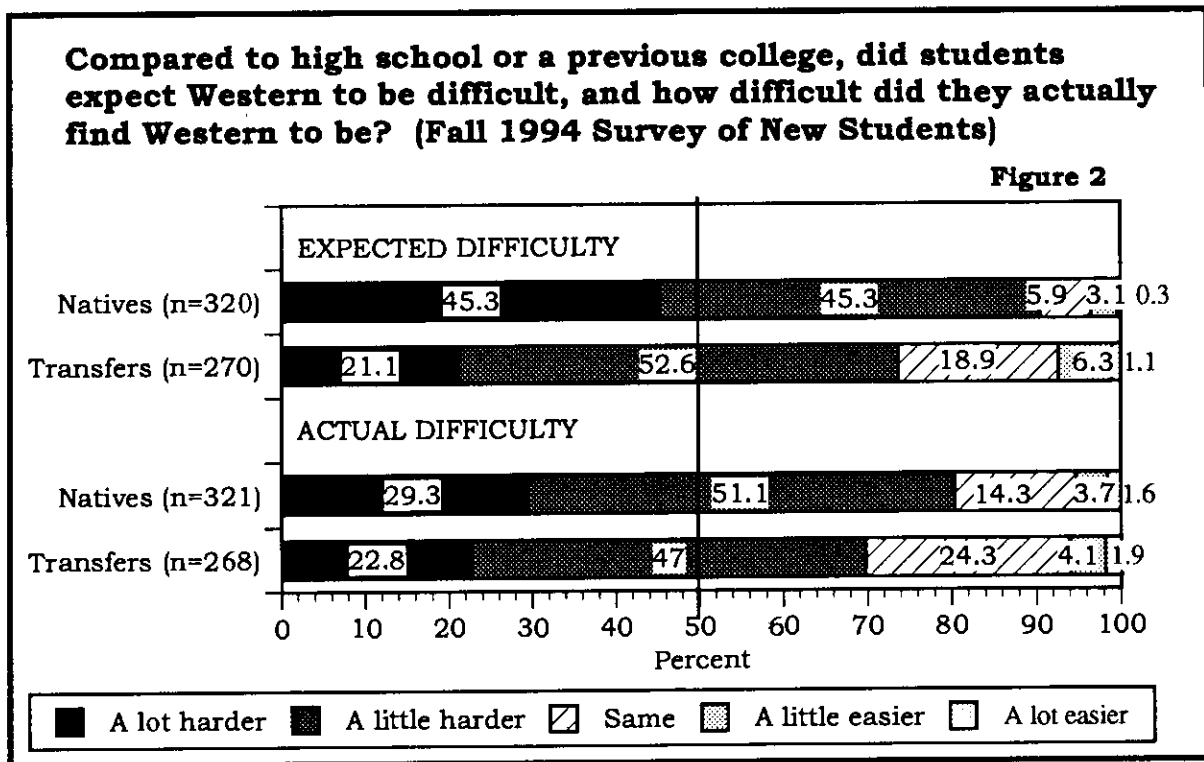
We asked these new students who had been at Western for 5-9 weeks how difficult or easy their transition to Western had been. Although very few report serious difficulty, the transition was at least “moderately difficult” for 35.1% of the freshmen. While only 28.5% of transfers report that level of difficulty, an important 6.3% said the transition was “very” difficult (see Figure 1).



Examining this small group gives us some insight into why they reported such a difficult transition, although the group is too small for most findings to be statistically reliable. They much more often found Western “much harder” than their previous school, seldom attended the Summer orientation, and somewhat more often felt the need for advisement of all types. They were also somewhat more often in the “other” category of ethnicity self-report and were somewhat more often returning students. On the other hand, they report having had less difficulty than others finding courses they wanted.

Perhaps the most important aspect of students’ transition is to the academic demands of university life. On the whole, students expected Western to be more difficult academically than they found it to be (see Figure 2). Although most found Western to be more difficult than their previous schools, a significant number found it easier than they had expected.

A large majority expected Western to be at least a little more difficult than their previous schools: 90.6% for freshmen, who were comparing to their high schools (or perhaps their running start community colleges for a few), and 73.7% among transfers. In fact, although the majority did in fact find Western harder than their previous schools, freshmen in particular tended to find the reality less difficult than expected. While 45.3% expected "a lot harder," only 29.3% found that to be the case. Similarly, while only 9.4% expected the same or less difficulty, 19.6% found that to be the case. Washington community college transfers were slightly more likely to report that Western was harder than their previous school (79.1%) than were transfers from out of state (69.9%).



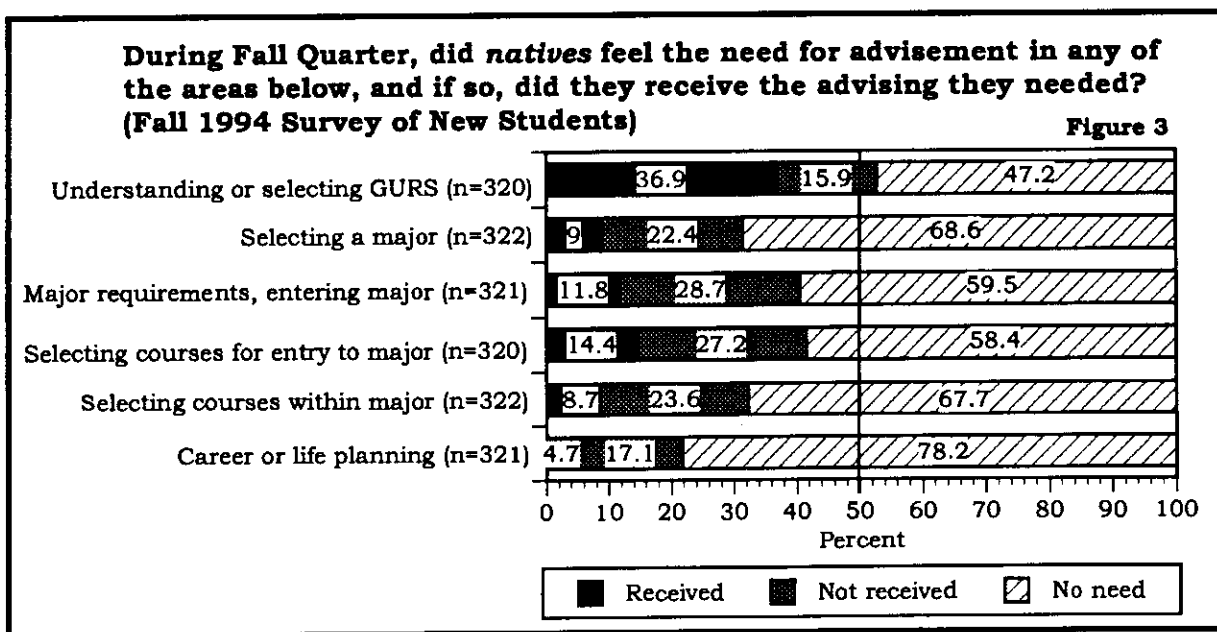
This finding is of particular interest because the dropout/transfer rate after two years is higher among native freshmen who say Western was easier than they had expected. Although the relationship is weak, freshmen who find Western to be most demanding are also most likely to remain enrolled. That association does not appear among transfers.

One central element of students' transition is the need for and receipt of advising on a number of academic issues. Four charts (Figures 3 through 6) show student reports of their felt need and receipt of advising on six academic issues. The charts represent reports by freshmen and transfers in the second half of their first quarter at Western (Fall) and in the second half of the following Spring quarters.

The six advising areas are sorted roughly according to the likely sequence in which concerns might arise—from concern with GURs to advice concerning career or life planning.

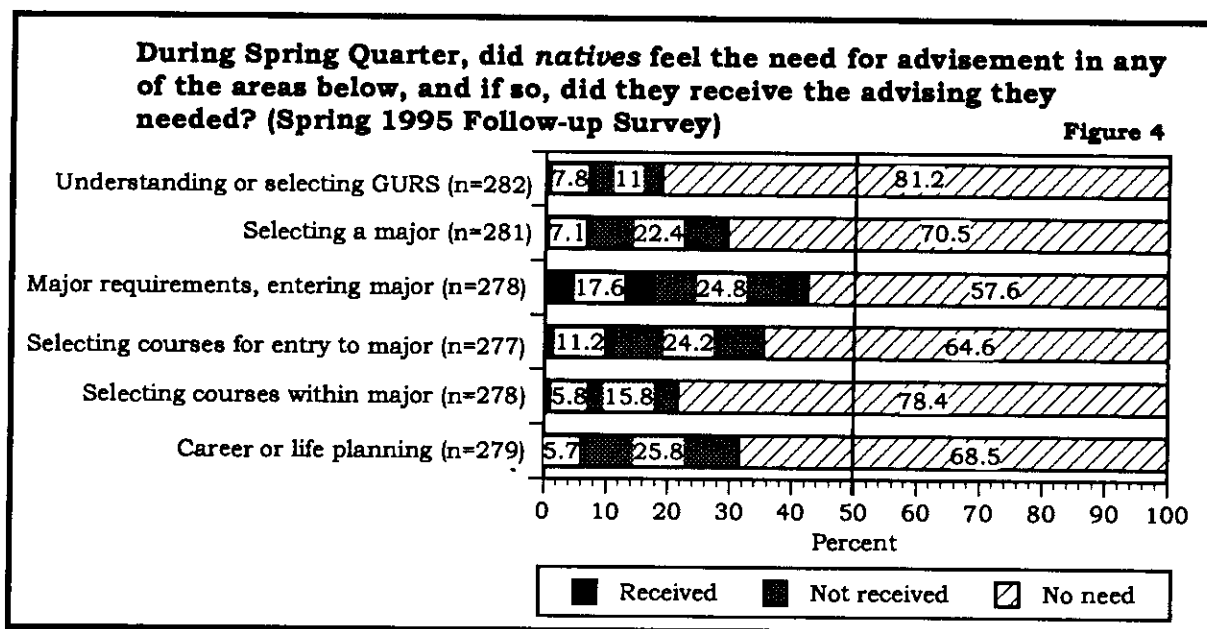
Figures 3 and 4 show freshmen’s responses during Fall and Spring. Frequency of felt need for advising follows the expected sequence quite closely during Fall quarter. Over half (52.8%) said they needed advisement concerning GURs, with over two-thirds of those receiving it.

Advising related to selecting and beginning a major was needed somewhat less often. The major finding in this case is that fewer than one-third receive the advisement they needed. A few also wanted career planning at the outset of freshman year, but only about one-fourth of them received it. We did not ask whether or not students had sought advising, but we know from other surveys that about two-thirds or three-fourths of those who received no advising did not seek it out or did not know where to seek it.



By Spring, 81.2% of freshmen no longer felt any need for advice concerning GURs, but about two-in-five wanted advice concerning how to position themselves to enter a major. Further, career planning was on the minds of nearly one-third of Spring quarter freshmen, although only one-in-six received any. Interestingly, less advice was desired for *selecting* a major than for learning how to get ready to enter one. Finally, fewer freshmen reported needing advisement of any sort in

Spring than in Fall. Perhaps the reason that a smaller proportion of Spring quarter than of Fall quarter freshmen received advising they wanted was that their felt need was less intense in Spring.



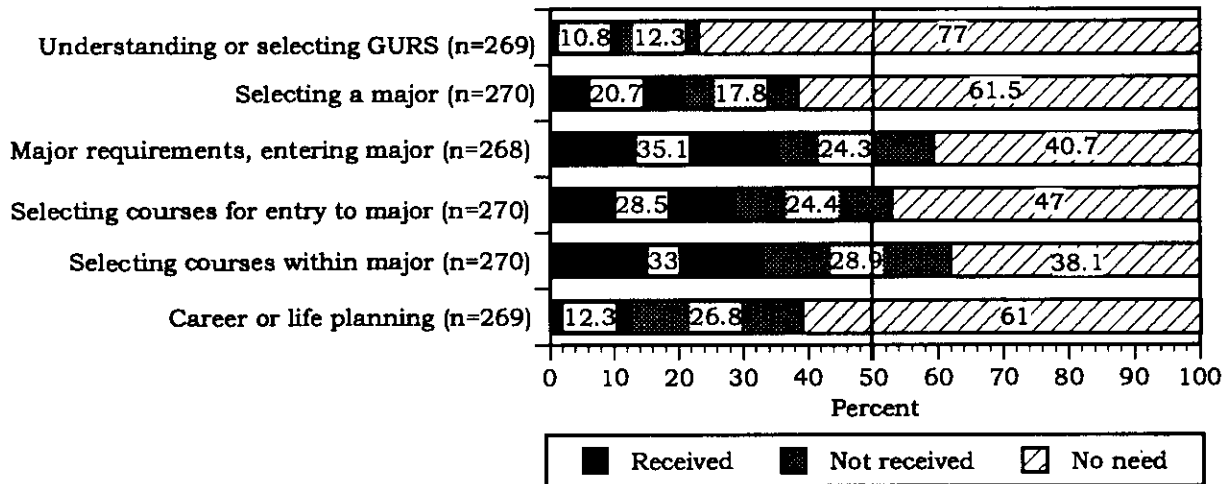
A check of whether or not freshmen had a declared or intended major by Spring produces the expected result: fewer of those with a major in mind felt need for advisement concerning choice of majors or preparation for the major. The differences were substantial, although some of those who were declared majors still felt need for further advisement on major choice (15.1% of “declared,” 25.9% of those “intending” a major, and 37.2% of those who were “undecided”).

For transfers, GURs cause little need for advisement, as would be expected given that 59.5% of all transfers arrived with 90 transfer credits or more. Instead, selecting courses within the major and questions about major requirements each provide an advising focus for about three-in-five transfers. Over half of those saying they wanted advisement on these topics during Spring quarter have received by the time of the survey, during the second half of the quarter. By Spring, somewhat fewer transfers need any advising than needed it in Fall. Of those who do feel a need, the majority are concerned with entering a major, with only about one-third getting the advising they wanted. (See Figures 5 and 6.)

Throughout all these figures concerning advising, we see a considerable proportion of unmet need—perhaps because students had not sought advisement, did not know where to look, or looked and failed to find it.

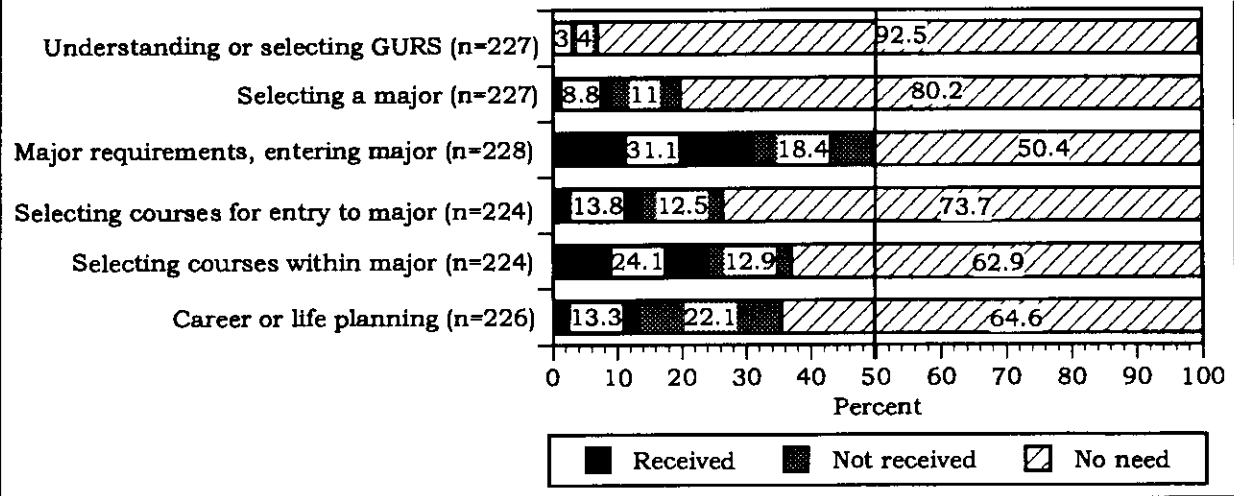
During Fall Quarter, did transfers feel the need for advisement in any of the areas below, and if so, did they receive the advising they needed? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students)

Figure 5



During Spring Quarter, did transfers feel the need for advisement in any of the areas below, and if so, did they receive the advising they needed? (Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey)

Figure 6



Looking for patterns to alert us to which students are experiencing the need for advising, we find little to guide us. The one factor that explains a great deal of the difference in advising needs is whether or not one has a declared major: if so, GURs take a back seat and all the categories of advising having to do with the major or career show increased felt need. The same pattern is true for transfers vs. freshmen and older vs. younger students, but the reason is that transfers and older students have more often identified a major.

We can also ask where students received the “advice and information” they had gathered about Western, by Fall and by Spring. Table 1 displays that information for freshmen. In Fall, 45.5% say students for former student friends provided the most information. By Spring, these sources have expanded to 71.5%! Formal WWU offerings during admission—orientation and publications also account for a significant portion of information. Academic Advising and departments/faculty are listed as the major source by only about one-tenth.

Table 1. Where do *natives* say they have gotten most of their advice and information about Western so far? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students, n=321; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey, n=281)

| Source | Fall Quarter | Spring Quarter |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Students | 21.8 | 61.9 |
| Former students/friends | 23.7 | 9.6 |
| Orientation | 18.4 | 2.8 |
| Publications | 12.5 | 18.4 |
| Advising Center | 5.0 | 3.6 |
| Faculty | 3.7 | 2.8 |
| Department Staff | 3.1 | 1.1 |
| Parents | 2.5 | 3.2 |
| Other | <u>3.4</u> | <u>2.5</u> |
| | 100.0% | 100.0% |

For transfers, the pattern is remarkably different. The proportion referencing students and former students is high, but much lower than for freshmen (32.5% in Fall and 45.6% in Spring). Publications rank first in Fall, with 30.7%, but orientation is listed by virtually no transfers in Fall, 1994—a finding likely to change with improved transfer orientation. Also, many more transfers than freshmen are in majors, with the result that 23.3% in Fall and 27.2% in Spring say faculty and departmental staff were their major sources of advice and information. (See Table 2.)

Table 2. Where do *transfers* say they have gotten most of their advice and information about Western so far? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students, n=321; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey, n=281)

| Source | Fall Quarter | Spring Quarter |
|-------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Publications | 30.7 | 18.9 |
| Students | 14.4 | 34.6 |
| Former students/friends | 18.1 | 11.0 |
| Faculty | 10.0 | 20.6 |
| Department Staff | 13.3 | 6.6 |
| Advising Center | 3.0 | 3.5 |
| Orientation | .7 | .9 |
| Parents | .7 | .9 |
| Other | <u>8.9</u> | <u>3.1</u> |
| | 100.0% | 100.0% |

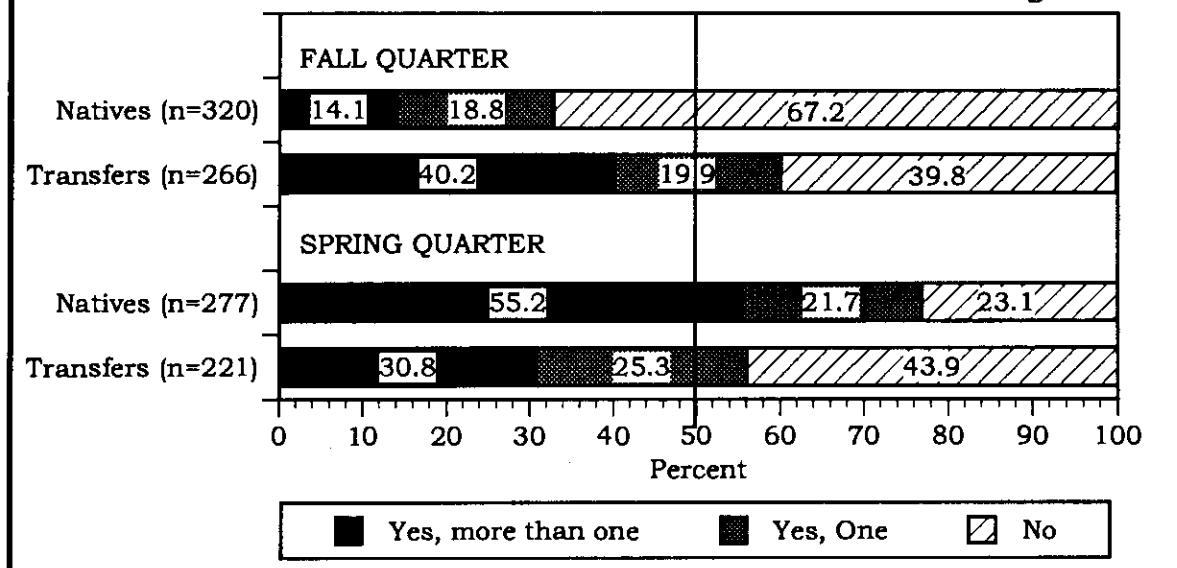
Course Access

Among the most critical aspects of the first year transition is enrollment in courses of choice. While choice is not the only quality of importance (e.g., course quality and logical required sequences may be of greater ultimate educational value), it certainly feels paramount to students and it is one of the cornerstones of American education, as in the rest of American culture. As a matter of policy, Western has as a goal that as many students as possible be able to register for the courses they need and want. As a matter of realism, 100% access is impossible to achieve. The question is how close Western is able to come during students' first year.

We approached this question from two angles: first, how many, if any, first choice courses were unavailable to students and second, of the courses actually taken, how many were students' first choice? Responses to the first question, whether one or more desired courses were unavailable during Fall and Spring quarters, are displayed in Figure 7. The effects of freshman Summerstart orientation are clear in figure 7, which shows access much greater for Fall than for Spring. Two-thirds of first quarter freshmen were able to enroll for all their first choice courses. Approximately one-sixth (18.8%) found one first choice course unavailable and another sixth (14.1%) found more than one unavailable. Among freshmen who attended Summerstart, however, only 7.2% found one first choice course unavailable and virtually none (0.8%) found more than one unavailable.

When students registered for Fall and Spring Quarters, were any of their first choice courses unavailable? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey)

Figure 7



By Spring, fewer than one-fourth of freshmen (23.1%) could say that they enrolled in all their first choice classes. Indeed, 55.2% say more than one of their first choice courses were unavailable. No doubt part of change is the result of students learning to identify the most popular courses and developing a longer list of first choice courses. In addition, this finding also no doubt reflects the low registration priority of students with few credits completed, plus the fact that no Summerstart priority was available in Spring quarter.

For transfers, whose orientation in Summer/Fall 1994 provided limited course access, the first quarter was more problematic than the third. In Fall, 40.2% missed more than one desired course; in Spring, the figure was 30.8%. This pattern is even more pronounced in our second analysis on this topic.

The Spring quarter survey also asked students who reported that any first choice course was unavailable why that was so. Responses help clarify whether the reason has to do with limited supply, blockages in the curricular structure, or conflicts in the student's lives. In over half of all cases, students say the course was filled (see Table 3). For about thirty percent, the issue was organizational structure. For one-fifth, the desired course conflicted with another desired course; for about one-tenth of cases, the course was restricted to majors only. Finally, for about one-in-seven, the issue was not one the institution would be able to change: lacking prerequisites to take the course or having life activities that conflicted with the course.

**Table 3. If first choice courses were unavailable, why?
(Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey)**

| Why first choice courses unavailable | Natives (n=378) | Transfers (n=194) |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Filled | 55.6 | 54.1 |
| Schedule conflict | 20.4 | 20.1 |
| Restricted to majors | 9.0 | 11.9 |
| Lacked pre-requisites | 9.0 | 6.2 |
| Conflicted with work, activities | <u>6.1</u> | <u>7.7</u> |
| | 100.0% | 100.0% |

It is entirely possible for students to find that several first choice courses are unavailable and nonetheless enroll in all first choice courses. If my list of first choices includes ten courses, missing some does not hurt if I can take the others. For this reason, our second analysis is more powerful than the first. Our "close-in" survey, asking about one particular quarter, was able to pose a series of questions concerning each specific course taken by each respondent. One of these questions was whether each course: "...was one of your first choices, a second choice that was still useful for your program of study, or all you could get at the time" (repeated for each separate course). The Spring survey asked about the Winter Quarter courses students had just completed.

By combining responses for all courses, we can calculate the percentage of courses taken by Fall quarter native freshmen, Fall quarter transfers, Winter quarter natives and Winter quarter transfers that were first choice courses, desirable second choices, or taken simply from availability. In particular, we can examine how many courses were taken simply to fill one's card, rather than from a sense that the course would be a valuable part of one's program. Findings are displayed in Table 4.

Here, we see the same pattern of increasing difficulty for freshmen and decreasing difficulty for transfers, but the pattern becomes more extreme for the transfers. The percent of courses taken by all Fall freshmen that were "all I could get at the time" increased from 9.6% in Fall to 14.5% in Winter.

On average, students took three or four courses, giving each student three or four chances to encounter the need to take a class they did not want. During Fall, 19.6% of freshmen enrolled in one class that was "all I could get at the time," and another 5.0% enrolled in two such classes. Only one freshman in the sample (0.3%) found this true for more than two courses. During Winter quarter, however, the figures were 26.7%, 7.1%, and 1.8%, respectively.

Table 4. Were courses taken during Fall and Winter Quarters “a first choice that you wanted or needed, a second choice that was still useful, or all you could get at the time”? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey)

| Natives | Fall Quarter | Winter Quarter |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Courses Taken | (n=322) | (n=284) |
| First choice | 81.9 | 71.3 |
| Second choice, still useful | 8.5 | 14.2 |
| All I could get at the time | <u>9.6</u> | <u>14.5</u> |
| | 100.0% | 100.0% |
| | | |
| Transfers | Fall Quarter | Winter Quarter |
| Courses Taken | (n=267) | (n=227) |
| First choice | 68.9 | 82.2 |
| Second choice, still useful | 11.5 | 10.0 |
| All I could get at the time | <u>19.6</u> | <u>7.8</u> |
| | 100.0% | 100.0% |

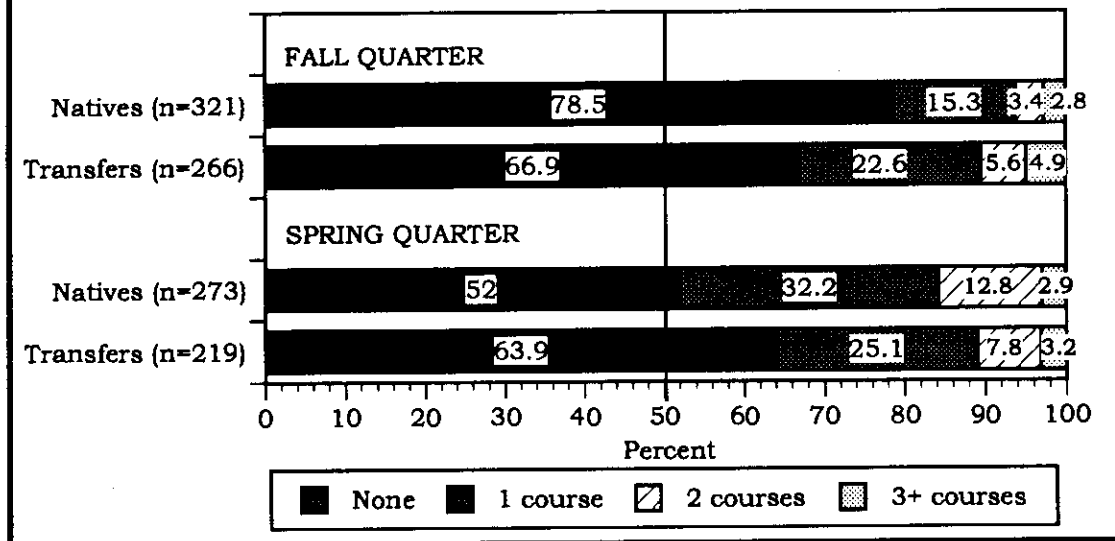
Among transfers, registration priority became effective enough by Winter quarter to ensure that only 7.8% of all courses were taken only for availability. During their first quarter, however, fully 19.6% of courses were “all I could get at the time,” a situation particularly to be lamented among students whose vision was typically to move directly into the excitement of beginning a major.

When we change the question to how many transfer students took at least one Fall quarter course from availability, we find 23.0% took one such course, 4.4% took two, and 2.3% took three or four. By Spring, the figures had fallen to 16.7%, 5.9%, and 0.4%, respectively.

A less dramatic and less clear reflection of the course access issue for first year students is the proportion of students who gained access to one or more of their courses using RSVP to drop a previous course and add the new one (at any time during the registration process). Figure 8 shows that a large proportion took this route, especially Spring quarter freshmen. A sizable minority gained at least one course in this way: from a low of 21.5% for Fall freshmen to a high of 48.0% for Spring freshmen. These figures show both the effectiveness of the RSVP system in allowing students to adjust and reconfigure their courses and also the pressure on them to do so because of course access limitations. A handful of students say they entered three or more (i.e., essentially all) courses in this way. Over fifteen percent of Spring quarter freshmen entered two or more courses using this technique.

How many courses did students get into by using RSVP to drop and add? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey)

Figure 8



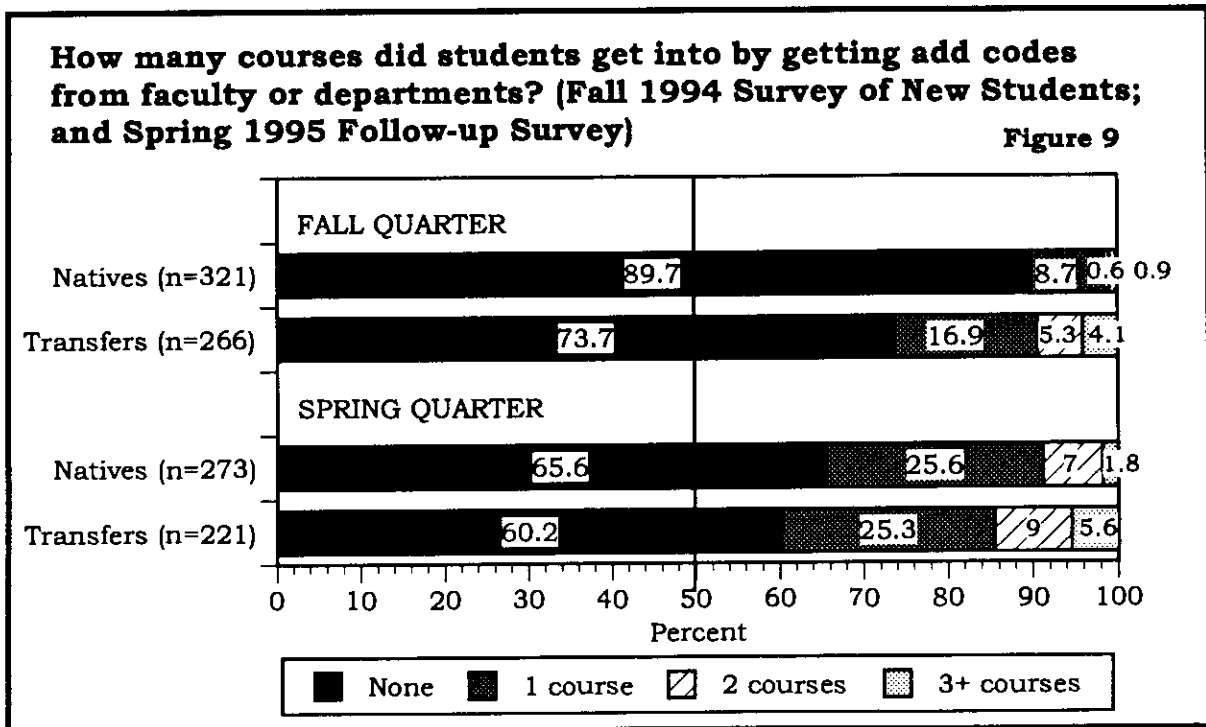
Only a minority of this use of RSVP reflects directly on access problems, however. Asked why they used RSVP to add/drop during registration for Spring quarter, about thirty percent say they were waiting for the course they wanted (see Table 5). Another twenty-one percent were initially satisfied and then found a new course they liked better. Others felt they needed to change schedule for reasons we did not capture. Finally, just under one-third changed late in order to leave a course they found they did not want, because they wanted to reduce or increase credit load, or for various other reasons not on our list.

Table 5. If students used RSVP to drop and add courses, why? (Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey)

| Why used RSVP to drop/add courses | Natives (n=187) | Transfers (n=100) |
|------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Waited for preferred course | 33.2 | 27.0 |
| Found new course liked better | 21.4 | 21.0 |
| Needed schedule change | 16.0 | 21.0 |
| Didn't like course/course too hard | 10.2 | 13.0 |
| Wanted more/fewer credits | 11.8 | 8.0 |
| Other | 7.5 | 10.0 |
| | 100.0% | 100.0% |

Yet another reflection of the course access difficulty experienced by first year students is the remarkably large proportion who eventually got into courses by receiving add codes from instructors. During their first quarter, only 10.3% of freshmen used add codes to gain entry to courses, nearly all of these (8.7%) for only one course (see Figure 9). First quarter transfers' course access difficulties are reflected in the fact that 16.9% used add codes to gain access to one course and another 9.4% entered more than one course using add codes.

By Spring quarter, the situation has deteriorated even further. An amazing 34.4% of freshmen and 39.8% of transfers say they gained admittance to at least one class via add codes (see Figure 9). While most students used add codes for only one course, 8.8% of freshmen and 14.6% of transfers did so for more than one class, with 5.6% of transfers doing so for three or more classes. While this sample is small enough for estimates to experience some error, these estimates remain worthy of serious conversation. With 95% assurance, we can say that at least 33.0% of transfers and 28.3% used add slips to gain admission to at least one class during Spring quarter of their first year at Western. On the other hand, it appears that Winter and Spring of the first year may be the most problematic quarters of all.



As a final observation concerning course access, Table 6 shows the number of credits students dropped after the second week of Fall quarter (and before their surveys were completed during the second half of the quarter). While dropping no credits was the norm, especially among freshmen, enough students drop one course after the second week to somewhat affect course access for other students. Dropping courses also affects one accountability measure, the Graduation Efficiency Index.

Table 6. How many credits did students drop after the second week of Fall Quarter? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students)

| Number Credits Dropped | Natives (n=320) | Transfers (n=267) |
|------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| None | 92.5 | 82.0 |
| 1 | 4.4 | 4.1 |
| 2 | .3 | .4 |
| 3 | .9 | 3.7 |
| 4 | .6 | 4.1 |
| 5 | 1.3 | 4.5 |
| 6+ | <u>0.0</u> | <u>1.2</u> |
| | 100.0% | 100.0% |

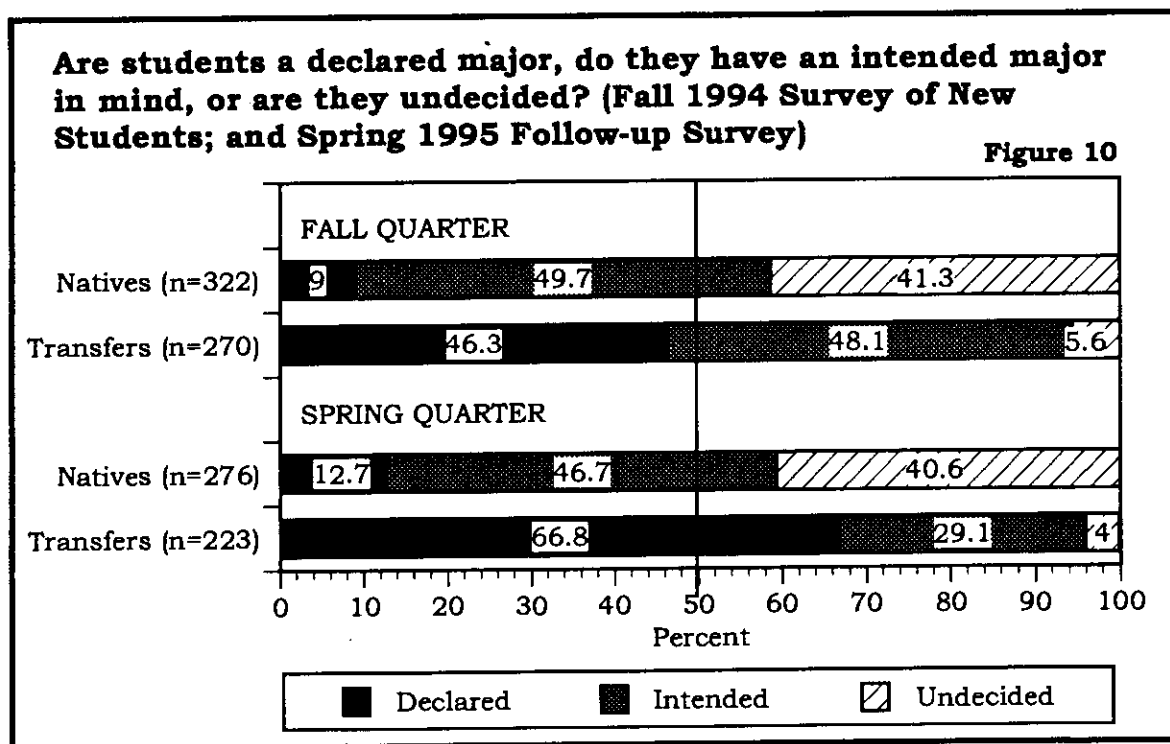
Asked why they dropped the courses they dropped, most students indicated a desire to reduce their credit load or work load (26.7%) or gave a variety of "other" reasons too specific to code into a category (30.2%) (see Table 7). Another 17.4% said they disliked the course or professor, 15.1% reported poor performance in the course, and a few referred to a late add or a change in schedule.

Table 7. Why students decided to drop courses (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students)

| Why decided to drop courses | Percent (n=86) |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Too much work/wanted fewer credits | 26.7 |
| Did not like the course or instructor | 17.4 |
| Doing poorly in that class | 15.1 |
| To add a preferred course | 5.8 |
| Change in work or activity schedule | 4.7 |
| Other | <u>30.2</u> |
| | 100.0% |

Choosing a Major

The large proportion of Community College transfers entering Western create the ironic situation that half of our entering students are far from the stage of choosing a major while the other half have largely completed their decisions. As Figure 10 shows, in Fall quarter, 41.3% of freshmen, but only 5.6% of transfers felt themselves “undecided” about a major. Only 9.3% of freshmen felt “declared,” as opposed to 46.3% of transfers. By Spring, fully two-thirds of transfers but only 12.7% of freshmen were declared. We know from other analysis that a considerable proportion of those who feel declared at any one point will in fact change majors. Indeed, by Spring quarter, 14.2% of transfers and 11.8% of freshmen in our sample say they “have changed majors since coming to Western.” Nonetheless, these figures provide some context for the differential advising needs and decision needs faced by students entering Western.

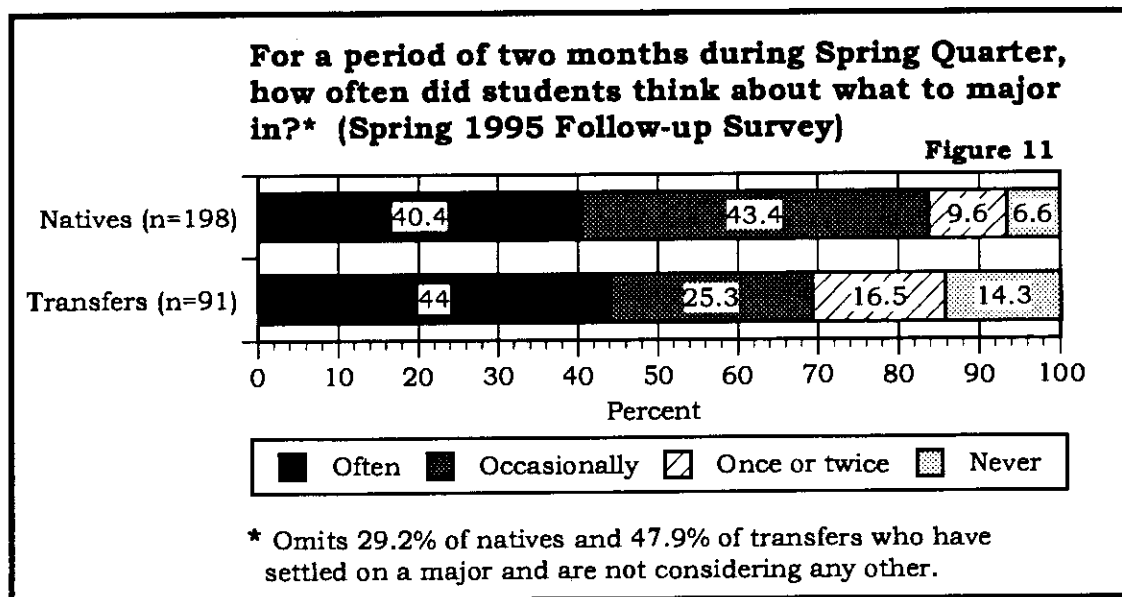


We asked some questions exploring the level and timing of attention students give to the question of choosing a major. Briefly, Table 8 makes clear that most students feel sophomore year is the best time to decide on a major. Experience does make a difference, however; transfers are more likely to identify late in sophomore year as ideal, while freshmen are more likely to say freshman year or early sophomore year. When we survey seniors or graduates, we find early junior year to be the modal time when final majors were chosen. What the findings from new students show is that students enter feeling they should make that decision earlier.

Table 8. When do students think is the best time during college to choose a major? (Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey)

| The best time to choose a major | Natives (n=277) | Transfers (n=214) |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| Freshman year | 21.3 | 13.1 |
| Early sophomore year | 43.0 | 27.6 |
| Late sophomore year | 29.8 | 40.7 |
| Beginning of junior year | 4.8 | 12.1 |
| During junior year | 1.1 | 4.2 |
| End of junior year or later | — | 2.3 |
| | 100.0% | 100.0% |

Indeed, when we ask how often students think about what to major in, we find considerable attention being paid to the topic. By Spring quarter, 47.9% of transfers and 29.2% of freshmen in the sample had settled on a major and were doing no exploration of alternatives. We asked the others how often they had thought about the issue during the preceding two months (for most, the first two-thirds of Spring quarter). More than two-fifths responded “often,” with about 79% of transfers and 84% of natives saying at least “occasionally.” (See Figure 11)



Asked what they have been doing to help them decide on a major field, the most common approach proved to be taking courses in subjects being explored (especially common for freshmen who are taking GURs in any event), followed by talking to other students and talking to friends and family. More formal approaches, such as talking with professors or advisors were used by only a small minority. (See Table 9.)

Table 9. What kinds of things have students done to help decide on a major? (Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey)

| Things done to help decide on a major | Natives (n=173) | Transfers (n=89) |
|--|--------------------|---------------------|
| Took variety of classes, explored subjects | 37.9 | 28.9 |
| Talked with other students | 25.9 | 25.2 |
| Talked with friends, alumni, family | 17.8 | 18.9 |
| Talked with professors, department advisors | 4.2 | 8.2 |
| Talked with Advising Center, Career Center | 1.6 | 4.4 |
| Looked through catalogs, books | 2.3 | .6 |
| Talked with employers/employees in the field | 1.0 | - |
| Attended seminars, majors fair | .3 | 2.5 |
| Nothing/Other | <u>9.1</u> | <u>3.1</u> |
| | 100.0% | 100.0% |

Time Use Patterns during the First Year at Western

To provide some sense of students' priorities, felt needs, and schedule flexibility, we asked new students "So far this quarter, how many hours per week have you spent.... a) employed for pay?... b) doing homework for your courses?... c) socializing with friends." Results for freshmen are displayed in Figure 12, and for transfers in Figure 13.

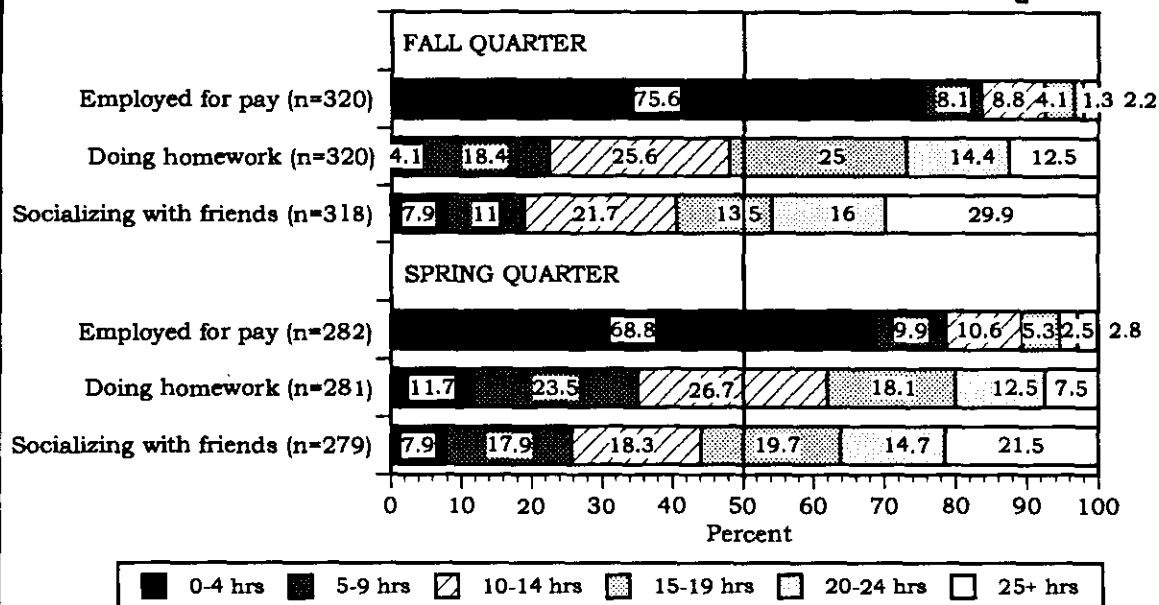
Bearing in mind that these responses come before the academic crunch of deadweek and finals week, it is nonetheless clear that except for Spring quarter transfers who are well into the major, the relative order of time commitments places social life well ahead of study time, and that the great majority of these new students were not employed for pay. We know from alumni surveys that about half of all Western students work at least sometimes during school. The data reported here represent the first time we have been able to report work patterns for first quarter and first year students.

One finding for both freshmen and seniors is particularly worth note: time spent on homework per week is markedly lower in Spring quarter than in Fall. Several possible interpretations come to mind, some of which we can test.

- Students may take fewer courses or fewer credits in Spring. That proves not to be the case. Freshmen completed an average of 14.9 credits in Fall, 15.0 in Winter, and 14.4 in Spring, also enrolling in a slightly larger number of courses in Spring. For transfers, the credit figures are 12.7, 13.1, and 12.9, respectively.

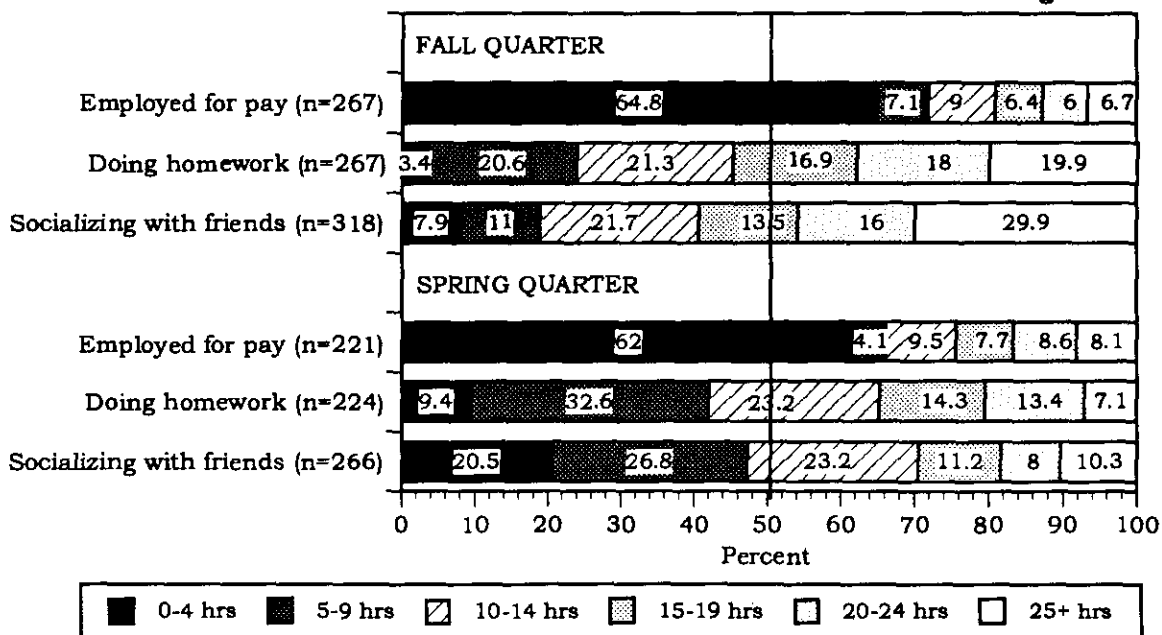
How many hours per week do natives say they spent a) employed for pay, b) doing homework, and c) socializing with friends? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey)

Figure 12



How many hours per week do transfers say they spent a) employed for pay, b) doing homework, and c) socializing with friends? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey)

Figure 13



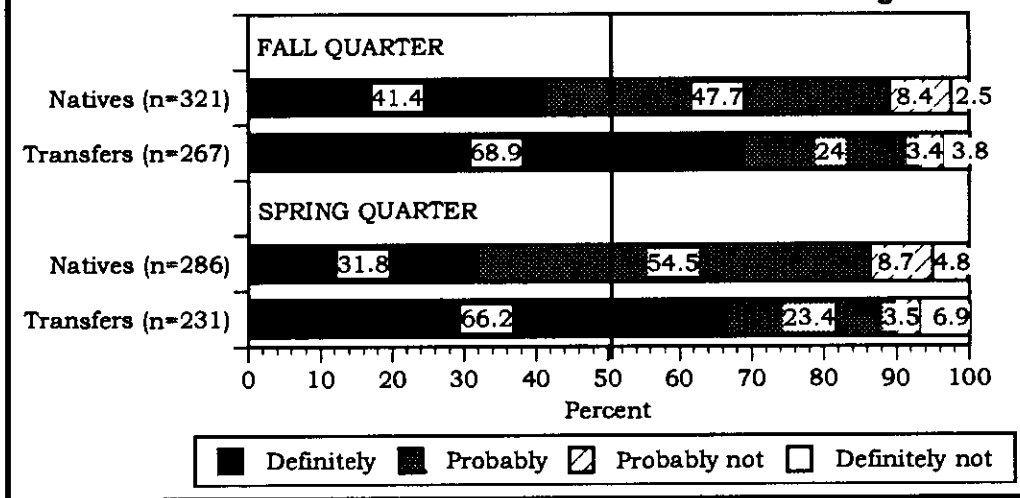
- Course demands could be more spread out in Spring, but we know that Spring quarter is slightly shorter than Fall, and therefore more compact.
- Students could be working more in Spring. This is in fact the case, but the difference is small and does not come close to explaining the difference in homework effort.
- The least capable students in the sample may have excluded themselves from the sample, making the Fall-Spring comparison invalid. In fact, students who left Western did receive lower grades, on average. However, when we perform the analysis including only those students completing courses during both Fall and Spring quarters (275 freshmen and 213 transfers), the findings displayed in Figures 12 and 13 remain virtually unchanged.
- Students may tire by Spring and exert less effort. The only evidence we can bring to bear on this possibility is that students' grades, presumably a reflection of engagement, do not fall between Fall and Spring. In fact, comparing only students enrolled in both Fall and Spring, grade point averages rise, improving from 2.82 in Fall to 2.99 in Spring for the freshman sample and from 2.80 to 2.90 among transfers.
- Spring courses may demand less work than Fall courses. We have no direct evidence to test this possibility. However, we do know from the faculty library survey conducted in Fall, 1996, that Spring courses require term student papers significantly less often than Fall courses. The library also confirms lower student use of the library during Spring.

Attachment to Western

Both the Fall and Spring surveys asked students "How likely is it that you will complete your bachelors degree at Western?" as one indicator of the overall value students ascribe to the experience. Findings, displayed in Figure 14, show about ninety percent of students "definitely" or "probably" planning to complete and to do it at Western. The degree of certainty expressed by transfers is much greater, reflecting the fact that they have already passed through the time when most students drop out or transfer—the end of the freshman year.

How likely is it that students will complete their bachelors degree at Western? (Fall 1994 Survey of New Students; and Spring 1995 Follow-up Survey)

Figure 14



A somewhat disturbing pattern emerges from a comparison of freshman responses in Fall and Spring: the degree of certainty about finishing at Western declines markedly (from 41.4% to 31.8% “definitely”), while the number who say “probably not” increases slightly. The same trend is evident among transfers, but only to a slight degree. Presumably part of this change reflects the sometimes unrealistically high hopes of new entrants. In addition, however, it may be that Western could do more to encourage and support our new students. On the other hand, among the 498 of the 601 in the original sample whom we were able to contact in Spring, 1996, one year and nine months after their entry into Western, only 3.8% had left Western and were planning no return. Another 3.8% were not enrolled at Western at that time, but were planning to return. The only reason offered by more than one or two of the non-enrolled students was a lack of funds.

Survey of Students who Left Western During or After their First Year

Figure 15 shows a number of reasons why students left Western during or after their first year. Data are obtained from results of a 1997 Survey of Former Students (students who left Western without a degree). Primarily, students decided to transfer to another college (65.2%). Factors contributing to the decision to leave include: 1) personal issues (financial problems, not performing well in school, feeling that the student did not fit in at Western, lack of friends or good social life, lack of direction in life, family obligations or medical reasons); and 2) reasons related to Western (dissatisfaction with professors or courses, programs too hard to enter, little concern from faculty, disappointment in large classes, and courses/programs wanted not available at Western). While these factors explain a minority of withdrawal from Western, they do point to the possibility of reducing such withdrawal, at least marginally.

Among students who left WWU during or after their first year, percent who indicate whether each factor below was a **major** reason, a **minor** reason, or **not** a reason why they left Western: 1997 Survey of Former Students (n=400)

Figure 15

