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Profile of the 1997 Freshman Class at Western: Comparative Trends and Patterns with a National Sample

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Profile of the 1997 Freshman Class at Western: Comparative Trends and Patterns with a National Sample

Prepared by Gary R. McKinney and Joseph E. Trimble

Introduction

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Survey series is a continuing study of college freshmen. Nationally, this project was initiated in 1966, and enters its 32nd year. Sponsored by the American Council on Education, and the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, CIRP Survey data profile the characteristics, attitudes, values, educational achievements, and future goals of first-time, incoming freshmen. Western has administered the CIRP since 1971. Since 1991, the CIRP has been administered annually at Western; previously, the CIRP was administered in four- to five-year cycles.

For the 1997 administration at Western, 1153 completed questionnaires were received. Admission packets sent to incoming freshmen included a CIRP Survey form. Students were asked to fill it out and bring it with them to SummerStart, Western's freshman orientation program offered during August, or to regular freshmen orientation just before classes began in September. The majority of completed questionnaires were received from SummerStart participants. Females were more likely to have filled out questionnaires than males (64.9% females vs. 35.1% males). Males are underrepresented in this survey as the actual ratio of incoming freshmen males to females was 58.5% females vs. 41.5% males.

Nearly all CIRP Survey participants were 18 or 19 years old (98.2%). Most were "White/Caucasian" (92.2%).

The following pages describe a brief profile of 1997 Western freshmen, sometimes compared and contrasted to previous Western freshmen, and sometimes compared and contrasted to freshmen nationally.



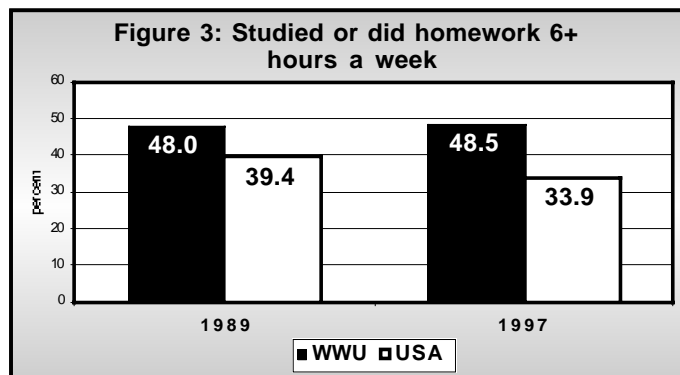
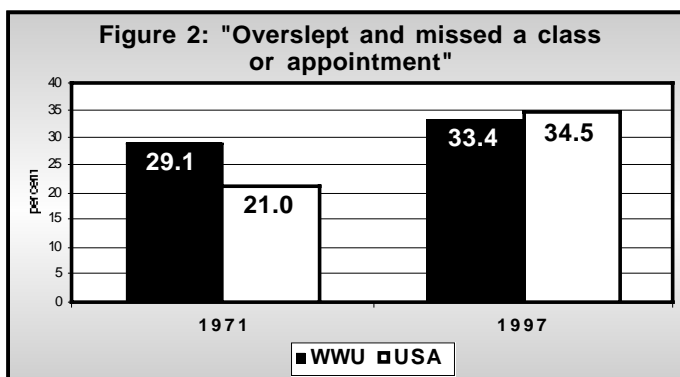
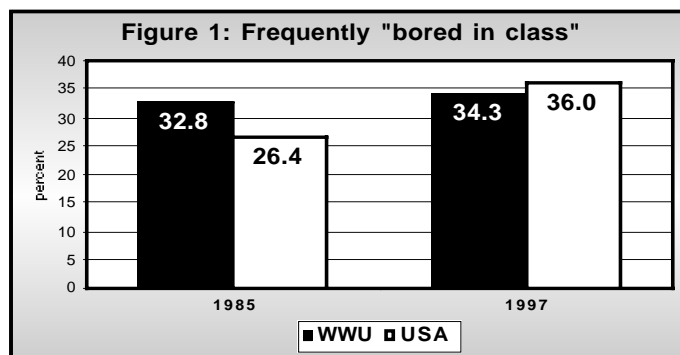
Record Levels of Academic Disengagement Nationally

National researchers noted higher levels of “academic disengagement,” by which they mean students do not appear as challenged academically as they have been in previous years—based on three criteria. First, the percentage of incoming freshmen indicating they had been “bored in class” was a record high, 36.0%, up from a low of 26.4% in 1985; and second, the percentage indicating they had “overslept and missed a class or appointment” was a record high, 34.5%, up from a low of 18.8% in 1968. Finally, incoming freshmen nationally appear to be studying less than ever, with 33.9% indicating they studied or did

homework six hours a week or more, compared to 43.7% in 1987. (Different survey years will be used in the comparisons to Western data, as not all the years used by national researchers coordinate with Western’s CIRP survey years.)

At Western the trends are not so pronounced. For instance, since 1992 the percentage of incoming freshmen indicating they had been “bored in class” has not changed significantly; for that matter, the percentage difference between 1985 and 1997 changed only a percent and a half. Similarly, the percentage indicating they had “overslept and missed a class or appointment” has not changed significantly in the last five years, and is down from the record high of 40.3% in 1985. And lastly, 48.5% of Western’s 1997 incoming freshmen reported studying or doing homework six hours a week or more, a record high that is also 14.6% higher than national figures.

Unlike their national counterparts, Western’s incoming freshmen appear as academically engaged as they have ever been, if not slightly more so.



FINDINGS:

FRESHMEN SURVEY, 1998

Academic Aspirations at All-time Highs Nationally

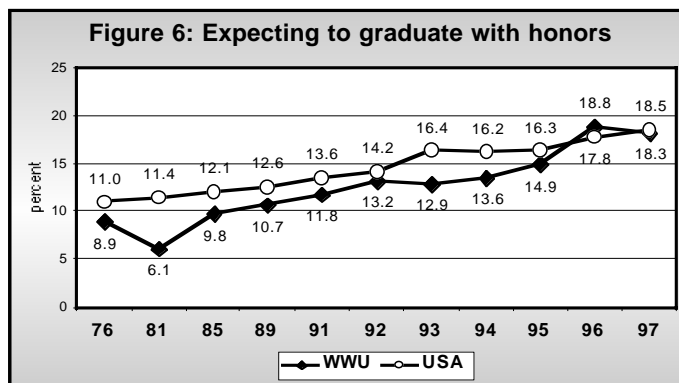
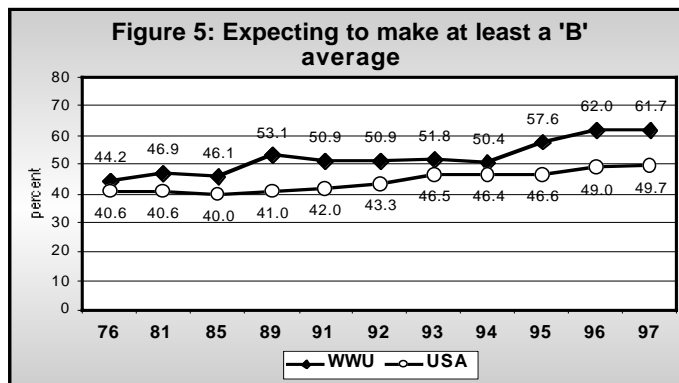
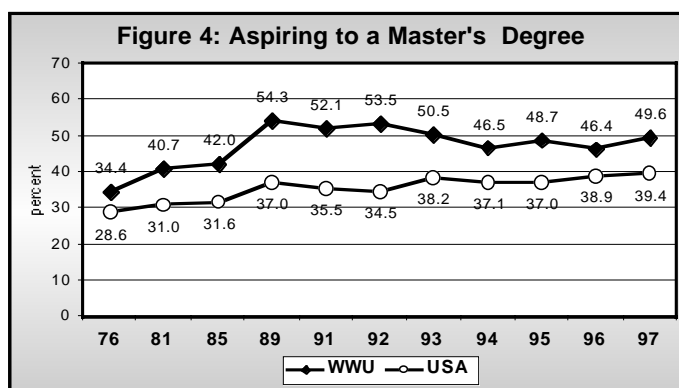
National researchers also noted record high levels of academic aspiration among survey participants—based again on three criteria. First, an all-time high 49.7% of incoming freshmen planned to “earn at least a ‘B’ average”; second, an all-time high 18.5% planned to “graduate with honors”; third, an all-time high 39.4% of incoming freshmen aspired to a Master’s degree, while an all-time high 15.3% aspired to a Ph.D.

When contrasted to the high levels of academic disengagement, national findings might suggest that incoming freshmen, while losing interest in academics at the high school level, recognize the need to perform well at college in order to remain competitive for graduate school.

At Western, the percentage of incoming freshmen aspiring to a Master’s degree has run 10-20% higher than national findings, and for a Ph.D. about 7% higher. Neither was 1997 a record-setting year, but rather 1989, at 54.3%. Probably not coincidentally, 1989 was a watermark year for freshmen admissions: new policies made way for better academically-prepared students.

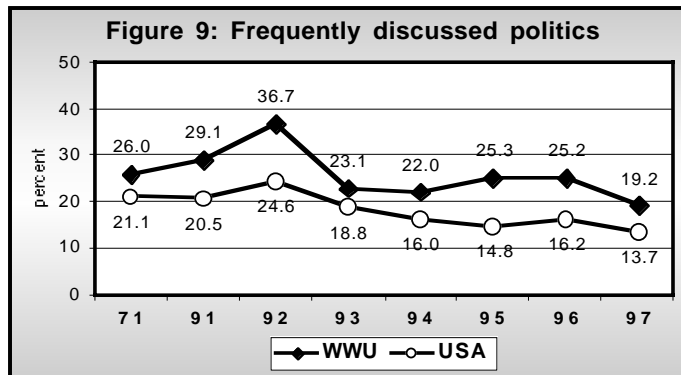
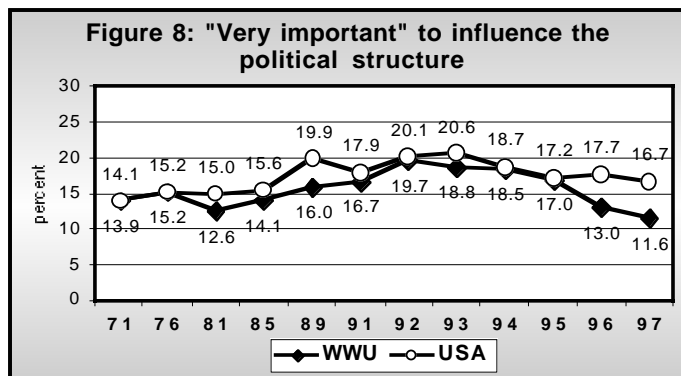
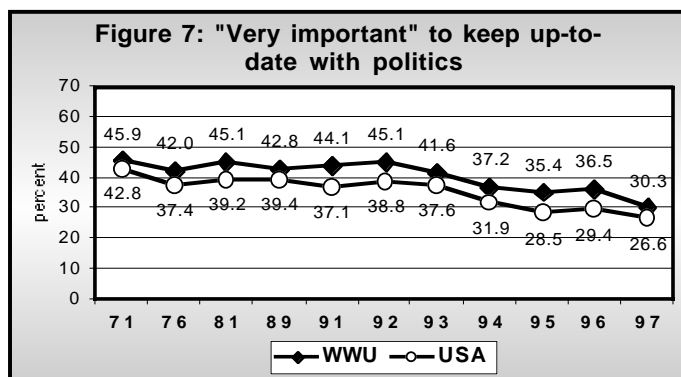
In addition, the percentage of Western freshmen planning on earning “at least a ‘B’ average” has run higher than national figures, by as much as 14%. And finally, while not a record, the percentage of Western freshmen planning on graduating with honors was high, and comparable to national findings.

Overall, Western’s incoming freshmen appear somewhat more ambitious than their national counterparts. Moreover, while they may also be aware that performing well at college is important in order to remain competitive for graduate school, they also appear to be more aware that performing well in high school is important in order to remain competitive as undergraduates.



Nationally, Political Interest Hits New Low

Based on five criteria, national researchers noted that 1997 incoming freshmen demonstrated record low levels of political interest. For instance, only 26.6% of freshmen believed it an essential or very important life goal to “keep up with political affairs,” compared with 29.4% last year and 57.8% in 1966; and only 16.7% of freshmen considered it essential or very important to “influence the political structure,” compared to 17.7% last year and 20.6% in 1993. Moreover, only 13.7% said they had frequently discussed politics, compared to 16.2% last year and 29.9% in 1968; and only 8.2% had worked on a political campaign in 1997, compared to 16.4% in 1969. Finally, the percentage of freshmen who frequently voted in student elections was only 21.3%, compared to 23.0% last year and 76.9% in 1968.



16.2% last year and 29.9% in 1968; and only 8.2% had worked on a political campaign in 1997, compared to 16.4% in 1969. Finally, the percentage of freshmen who frequently voted in student elections was only 21.3%, compared to 23.0% last year and 76.9% in 1968.

At Western, findings generally supported the national trend that students are losing interest in politics. For instance, the percentage of incoming freshmen noting it was essential or very important to “keep up with political affairs” was an all-time low (30.3%), as was the percentage noting it was essential or very important to “influence the political structure” (11.6%). Also at a record low was the percentage of Western freshmen who had frequently discussed politics (19.2%).

Relatively unchanged was the percentage of Western freshmen who had worked on a political campaign (about 9% going back to 1991). And while the percentage noting they had frequently voted in a student election was considerably higher than that found nationally (34.5% at Western compared to 21.3% nationally), it was also a near record low (down from 66.2% in 1971).

FINDINGS:

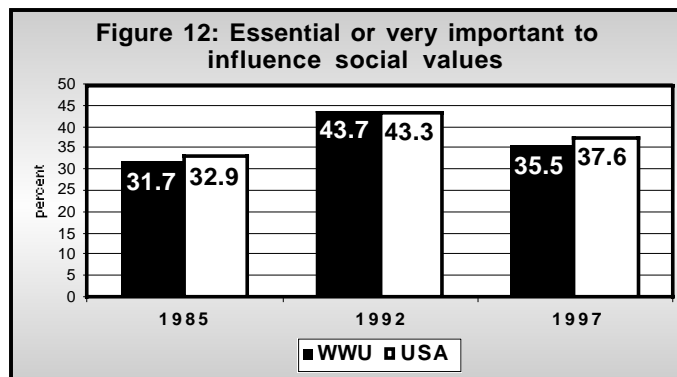
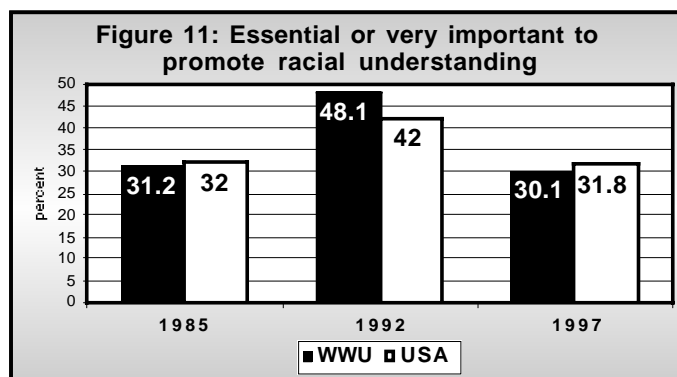
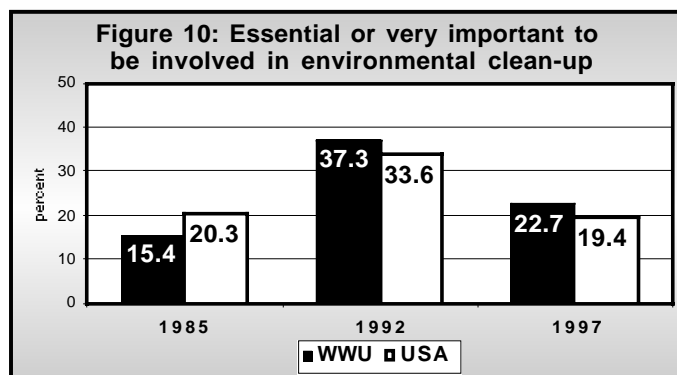
FRESHMEN SURVEY, 1998

Interest in Activism Decreases

As with interest in politics, national researchers noted a decrease in student activism. For instance, the percentage of incoming freshmen indicating that “becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment” was an essential or very important life goal fell from 33.6% in 1992 to 19.4% in 1997, as did “helping to promote racial understanding,” which fell from 42.0% to 31.8%. Moreover, only 22.8% of freshmen indicated that “participating in a community action program” was essential or very important, an all-time low, down from 30.4% in 1975. Finally, the percentage of freshmen indicating that “influencing social values” was essential or very important fell to 37.6%, compared to 43.3% in 1992.

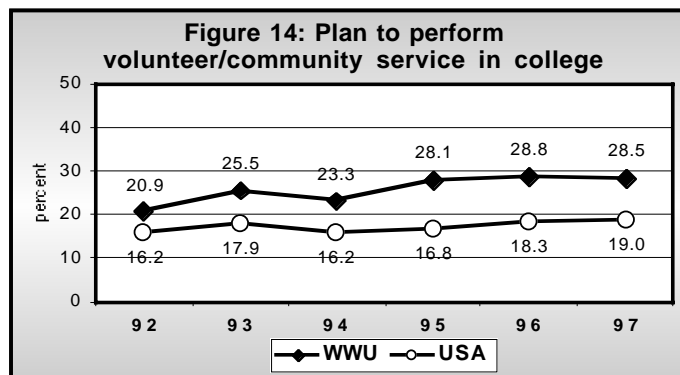
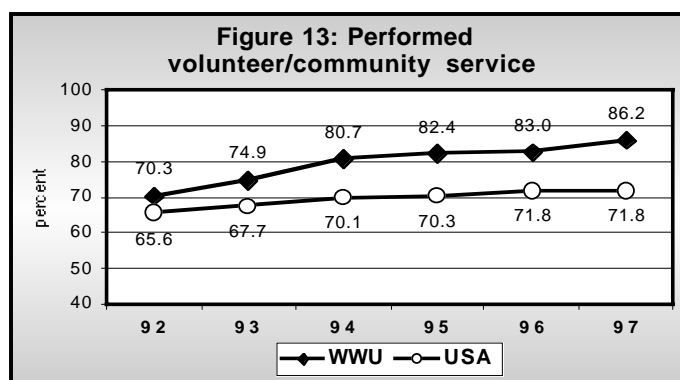
As with disinterest in politics, the figures for Western freshmen were very similar to those found nationally. Regarding the life goals of “becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment” and “helping to promote racial understanding,” percentages for Western freshmen were at record, or near-record levels (environment, 22.7% in 1997, down from 37.3% in 1992, though up from all-time low of 15.4% in 1985; and racial understanding, 30.1% in 1997, down from 48.1% in 1992, and the lowest all-time). The percentage of Western freshmen indicating it essential or very important to “participate in a community action program” fell slightly, from 31.1% in 1994 to 24.7% in 1997, while the percentage indicating it essential or very important to “influence social values” fell more dramatically, from 46.6% in 1994 to 35.5% in 1997.

Regarding the issue of “promoting racial understanding,” it might be enlightening to point out that the record high percentages found at Western and nationally followed the summer of the Rodney King incident in Los Angeles. At Western, incoming freshmen were filling out CIRP surveys not six weeks after the mayhem that followed the verdict. Since then, no national news event with so blatant a racial component has been aired—including the OJ Simpson issue, which did not lead to riots nor significant demonstrations.



Volunteerism on the Rise

While interest in political and social activism has waned, volunteerism reached an all-time high in 1997, among incoming freshmen nationally and at Western. The percentage of freshmen who performed volunteer / community service was 71.8% nationally and 86.2% at Western, all-time highs in both instances and up from 1992 figures of 65.6% nationally and 70.3% at Western. As indicated by the 14.4% gap between national and local findings in



1997, Western's incoming freshmen were even more committed to volunteer activities than their national counterparts; moreover, that gap has steadily widened since 1992.

National researchers note that given the students' disengagement from politics and activism, the increase in volunteerism "may simply reflect the fact that more high schools are promoting students volunteerism or even requiring it as a condition for graduation," and cite U.S. Department of Education statistics for 1997 as their source of information. They further note that "such a conclusion is consistent with the finding that only 19.0% of the freshmen say that there is a 'very good chance' that they will perform volunteer or community service *during* college."

Similarly at Western, far fewer incoming freshmen indicate they plan to perform volunteer / community service (28.5%), though the figure is higher than for national responses, and has been since 1992. Yet both nationally and at Western, the percentage of freshmen planning to volunteer reached record or near-record highs (at least among public colleges), suggesting the possibility that programs and / or requirements promoting volunteerism in the high schools may be having a positive residual effect.

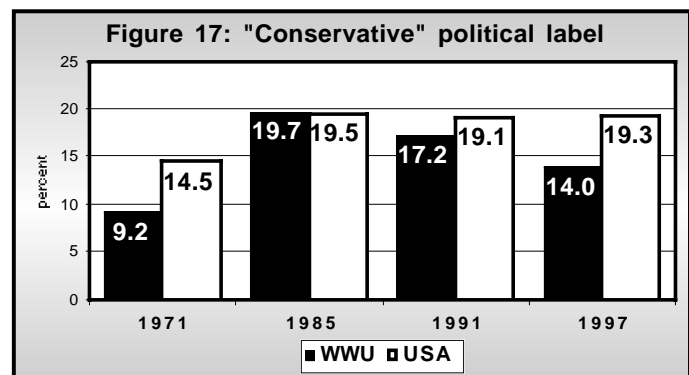
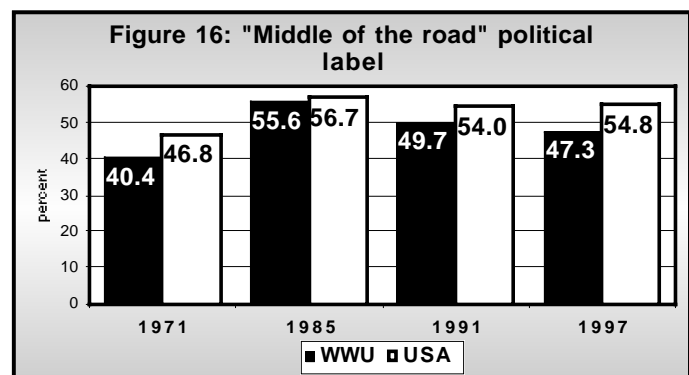
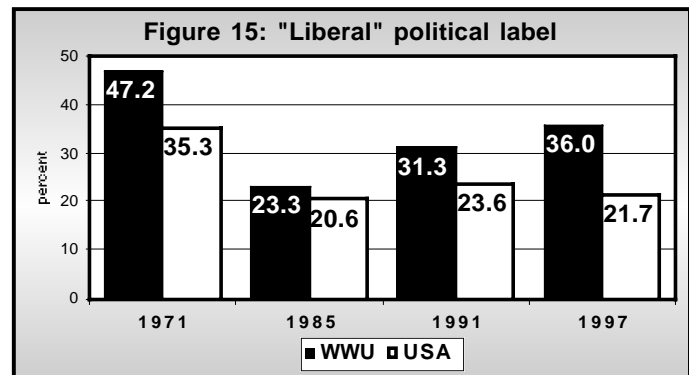
Politically, National Freshmen Move to the Middle

Nationally, the percentage of incoming freshmen indicating their present political label as “middle of the road” was its highest since 1987 (54.8%), though figures during the past decade have remained fairly consistent at just above half. (The exception being 1993, when the percentage fell to 49.9%.) The 1980’s saw the highest percentages of “middle of the road” freshmen, and the early seventies the lowest.

Similarly, the percentages of freshmen labeling themselves “conservative” and “liberal” have seen slow change, usually over the course of decades. The percentages of “conservative” freshmen were lowest during the seventies, but since 1981 have remained remarkably consistent at between 18-20%—with the exception of 1983, when the percentage fell to 17.5%. The percentages of “liberal” freshmen were highest during the seventies, fell to their lowest during the early 1980’s, rose slightly during the early nineties, and have since tapered off slightly, to a little above 20% over the last four years.

At Western somewhat similar trends can be noted, with the exception that Western freshmen are consistently more “liberal” and less “middle of the road” or “conservative” than their national counterparts. The highest percentage of Western freshmen labeling themselves “middle of the road” was in 1981

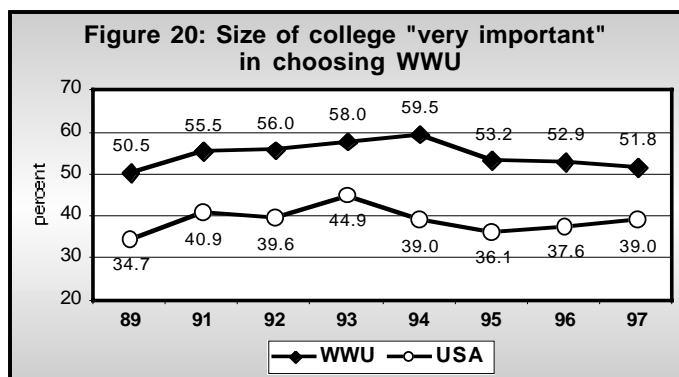
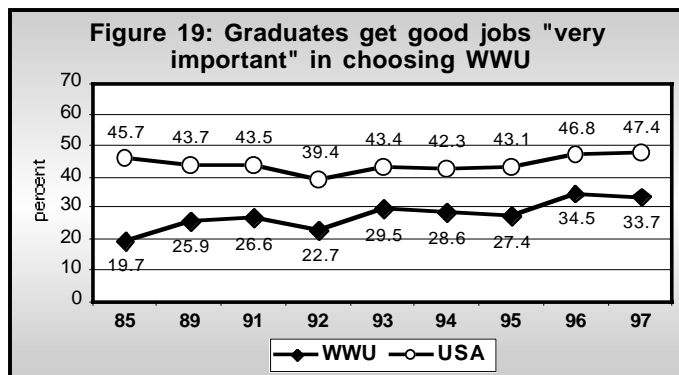
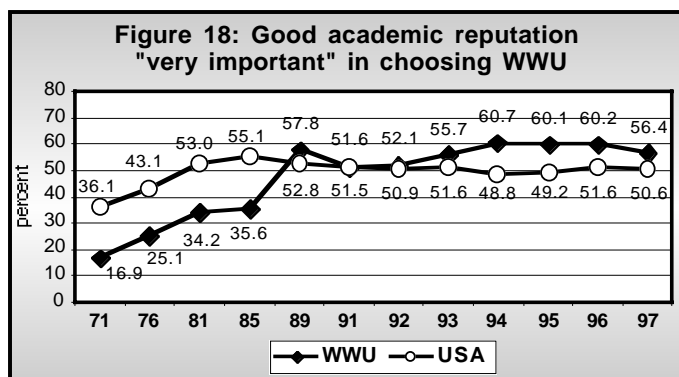
(57.5%), the highest percentage labeling themselves “conservative” was in 1985 (19.7%), and the highest percentage labeling themselves “liberal” was in 1971 (47.2%). The highest percentage labeling themselves “liberal” since 1971 was in 1997, and at 36.0% was 14.3% higher than national findings.



Incoming Frosh Like Western's Academic Reputation

Western's academic reputation among incoming freshmen has improved considerably since 1971, when only 16.9% noted academic reputation as a "very important" reason for selecting Western. By 1989, that percent had risen to 57.8%; since then, academic reputation has

been noted as the first or second most important reason students choose Western. Indeed, findings at Western have exceeded national findings in every year since 1993. The reason for attending Western that runs neck-and-neck with academic reputation is the school's size. Unlike academic reputation, the percentage of students noting size of college has remained relatively stable since the inception of the question in the 1989 survey. The third most often noted reason for attending Western is that "graduates get good jobs." This question was first asked in 1985 and has shown a slow but steady rise in importance for Western students, though it has never exceeded the importance freshmen nationally have given it.

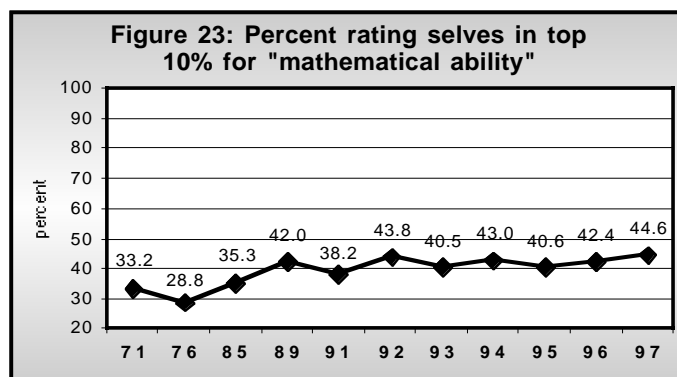
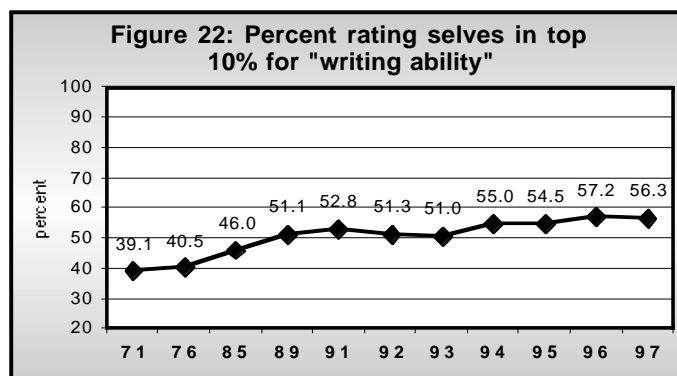
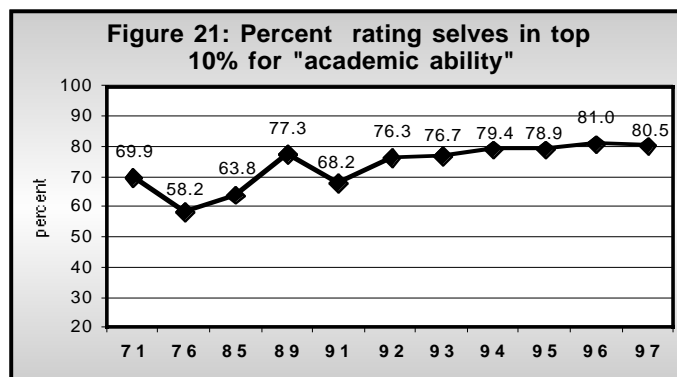


Other reasons incoming freshmen give for choosing Western included its "low tuition" (24.6% in 1997, up from 23.3% in 1996, but down from the high of 27.5% in 1992), "good social reputation" (21.2%, up from 17.9% in 1996, but down from the high of 27.1% in 1995), and that "graduates go to top grad schools" (15.2% in 1997, down from 16.1% in 1996, but well up from the all-time low of 7.3% in 1985).

Academic Self-Ratings High Among Incoming Freshmen

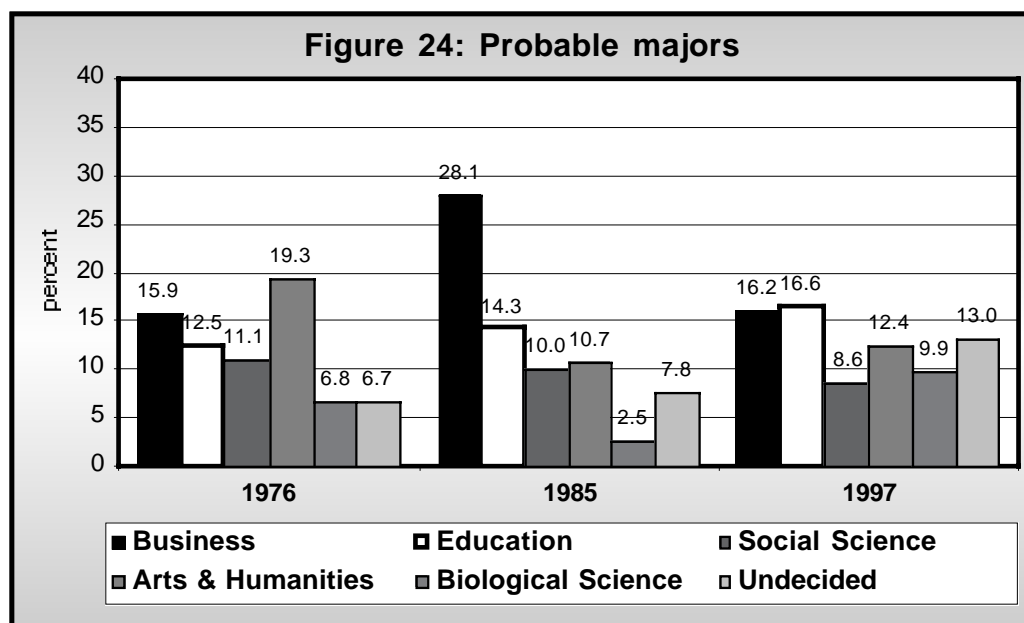
The CIRP survey asked incoming freshmen to rate themselves across a list of eighteen traits “as compared with the average person your age,” including areas related to academic concerns. For Western’s incoming freshmen, ratings were at record or near-record highs for all eighteen traits. Figures as reported by national researchers are for those freshmen rating themselves above average or in the top ten percent (combined). Figures for Western’s incoming freshmen were influenced by the fact that a higher ratio of females to males exists between survey participants and the overall incoming freshmen classes. For instance, the ratio of females to males in the 1997 survey was approximately 65:35, while the ratio of females to males in the incoming class was approximately 55:45. (This 55:45 ratio has remained fairly stable over the last ten to twelve years.) On the other hand, this ratio imbalance has held true for all CIRP survey administrations at Western: females are more likely to fill out the survey forms than males. Thus the findings across time at least have an internal consistency.

This caveat notwithstanding, Western’s incoming freshmen appear to have an increasing sense of self worth. In the three areas highlighted here—academic ability (overall), writing ability, and mathematical ability—figures are all at record, or near-record highs. In the 1997 survey, the percentage of freshmen rating themselves above average or in the top 10% for academic ability was 80.5%, only slightly below the all-time high of 81.0% last year; for writing ability was 56.3%; again, only slightly below the all-time high of 57.2% last year; and for mathematical ability was 44.6%, the highest ever.



Majors See Swings in Popularity

Over the past 21 years the CIRP survey has been administered, incoming freshmen have been asked in what they intend to major, with fully 83 majors listed in the survey form. These disaggregated figures are, for an individual institution, too small to generate much meaning, so are aggregated into disciplinary areas for institutional studies. Keeping this distinction in mind, some majors have seen wide swings in popularity, none more dramatic than business. In the 1976 survey, 15.9% of incoming freshmen noted business as their probable major. In the 1985 survey that percentage rose to 28.1%, then fell again to 16.2% by 1997, though overall, business as a major is on the rebound after reaching a low of 11.4% in 1994. Currently it is the second-most popular major, just slightly less popular than education, which at 16.6% has posted fairly consistent numbers: approximately 15-16% per year.



Like education, the percentage of incoming freshmen anticipating they will major in the social sciences has also been consistent. Though the 1997 figure, at 8.6%, is the second lowest ever, the percentage has never dropped under 8% nor risen higher than 13%. Two majors that, like business, have seen swings in popularity are arts & humanities, and biological science. In 1976, 19.3% of incoming freshmen noted arts & humanities as a probable major. In the 1985 survey that figure had fallen to 10.7%. Since 1985, the percentage has stabilized at about 12-14%. Biological science, too, saw a nadir of interest as a major around 1985 (2.5%), but then interest rose through the next ten years, peaking at 13.9% in 1995.

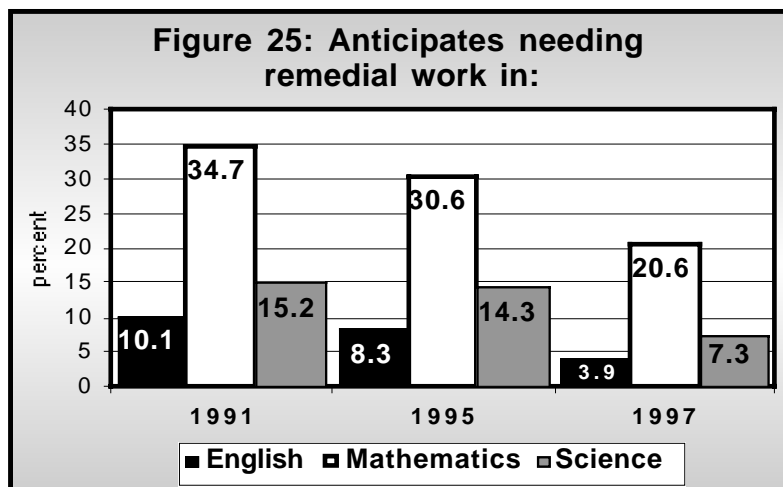
The percentage of students indicating they were undecided as to their major rose steadily from 1971 (2.4%) to 1989 (12.0%), then reached another peak in 1994 (15.2%), fell for two years, then rose again in 1997 (13.0%).

FINDINGS:

FRESHMEN SURVEY, 1998

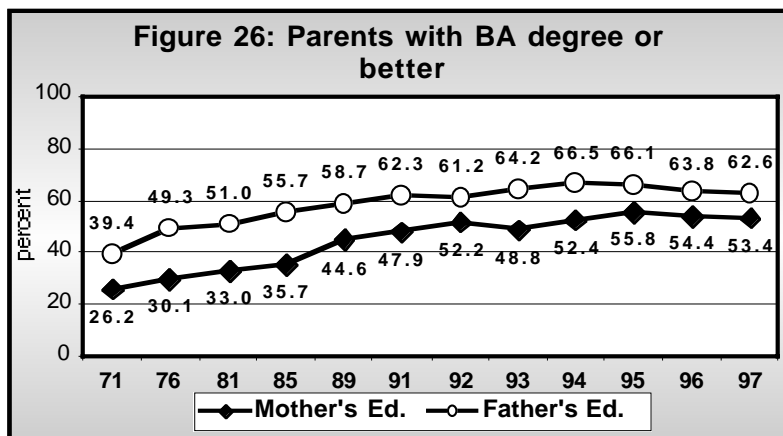
Incoming Freshmen Appear More Prepared for College

Western's incoming freshmen feel they have less likely to need remedial instruction when they arrive at college. The percentage of freshmen anticipating they will need remedial instruction in English fell from 10.1% in 1991 to 3.9% in 1997; in mathematics from 34.7% in 1991 to 20.6% in 1997; and in science from 15.2% in 1991 to 7.3% in 1997. Similar trends were found for reading (from 4.6% in 1991 to 1.2% in 1997); social studies (from 1.6% to 1.0%); and foreign language (8.9% to 4.7%).



Most Parents of Incoming Freshmen College-Educated Themselves

The parents of Western's incoming freshmen are far better educated themselves than they were twenty-six years ago, when the CIRP survey was first administered. In the 1971 survey, 39.4% of the fathers and 26.2% of the mothers of incoming freshmen had earned a BA degree or better. By 1997, 62.6% of the fathers and 53.4% of the mothers of incoming freshmen had earned a BA degree or better. Moreover, the percentage gap between parents has closed. In 1976, for instance, the gap between fathers and mothers with BA degrees favored fathers by 19.2%. That gap had decreased to 9.2% by 1997.



LAST WORDS:

FRESHMEN SURVEY, 1998

The 1997 CIRP Survey had 348,465 participants from 665 two- and four-year colleges and universities. Of these, 252,082 survey forms from 464 institutions were judged the most representative samples, and were used to compute the national norms, statistically adjusted to represent the nation's total population of approximately 1.61 million first-time, incoming freshmen.

The Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing maintains complete records of CIRP surveys administered at Western since 1971. These records are available to any and all legitimate users: administrators, staff, students, and/or community researchers included.



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