

Higher Education Accountability Plan
Western Washington University
August 14, 2003

Part I. Strategies Implemented in 2001-2003

Support for On-going Efforts

In our 1998, 1999, 2000, and 2001 reports, Western listed numerous specific initiatives that we planned to begin or had recently begun, in the attempt to improve students' experiences and thereby enhance our accountability performances. Western's highest priority in relation to accountability performance is continuing the accountability efforts we began between 1998 through 2003. Some of these efforts were quite demanding to implement; all require ongoing vigilance and effort, and all are long-term. Western's first and foremost strategy has been to maintain an enduring commitment of organizational resources to provide that ongoing support and oversight.

One strategy announced in 1999, requiring a third writing course as part of the General Education requirements, has been delayed pending Western's planned general education reform process, and pending plans to provide funding without undercutting other key academic offerings. All others have been implemented fully or are gradually being implemented. These include:

- Initiated first-year experience initiatives, including launching and gradually enlarging the Freshman Interest Group program (FIGS), providing instructional development for large freshman lecture classes, increasing access for students by reserving some seats in appropriate courses during all quarters of the first year, and planning for increased use of undergraduate teaching assistants to provide small discussion sections in large lecture courses. Demand for the FIGS program has exceeded our resources and expectations.
- Supported and enlarged the "departmental advising model" aimed at ensuring improved advising for sophomore through senior levels with special emphasis on transfer advising. These include departmental advising pages (e.g., <http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~socad/>), which won a national award for an "outstanding and creative" academic advising Web page model from the National Academic Advising Association in October 2000, the national association of university advisors.
- Enlarged university advising staff and strengthened advising/study skills programs for new freshmen identified through Admission Index scores and personal interviews of potentially at-risk students (disproportionately ethnic minority students).
- Worked with departments that offer the Bachelor of Science degree, to develop advising, enrollment management and curricular options that may improve time-to-degree and Graduation Efficiency Index for B.S. students.
- Expanded the General Studies degree, designed for students who want to focus their studies across departments in humanities or social sciences and introduced to increase efficiencies for those students and other who have difficulty entering restricted major fields. In 2003-04

extensive program assessment of General Studies will be conducted by the Academic Coordinating Committee, a standing committee of the Faculty Senate.

- Introduced a policy directing students to connect with a departmental advisor before earning 60 credits and receive personalized advice concerning a major. This also applies to transfer students, and helps direct them into majors more rapidly.
- Increased course access for incoming transfers by reserving seats, providing enhanced information about course requirements and access, and encouraging earlier contact with departmental advisors.
- Collaborated with CTCs to enlarge and support the Associate of Science degree and explore ways to smooth transitions for transfers.
- Piloted efforts to integrate residential and academic experiences by offering some Freshman Interest Group (FIGS) courses in university residence settings.
- Continued to expand the number of computer-mediated classrooms, and increased the number of computer labs capable of supporting instruction.
- Created a Central Data Warehouse, enabling faster analysis and identification of students at risk.
- Performed a “Close-in” analysis of retention and academic adjustment, to identify aspects of the Western experience that can be enhanced to improve retention.
- Supported and enlarged a university-wide advising web page that is proving very popular and useful to students and their advisers: the Classfinder, which rapidly locates available course sections by course, type of course, hour, etc. (see https://www.admin.wvu.edu/wwis_dcd/owa/wwsktime.SelClass). This service is reducing students’ frustration and improving course selection and access.
- Expanded the capacity of the Center for Instructional Innovation to support improved use of instructional technology and innovative teaching practices.
- Created and supported a web-based “showcase” portfolio featuring student learning outcomes. The site features the assessment of student learning outcomes at both the program and course level. See <http://pandora.cii.wvu.edu/showcase/> and <http://pandora.cii.wvu.edu/cii/resources/outcomes.asp>.
- Analyzed classroom utilization patterns, as part of an attempt to address problems students have gaining access to desired courses. We found a serious deficit of classroom space and instituted a new block schedule to increase course access by squeezing more courses into the same classrooms. Western also developed plans for future capital construction that emphasize the addition of classrooms including the new Communication Building scheduled to open in the summer 2004.
- Assessed and began planning for improved freshman orientation.

Laying the groundwork for Large Scale Developments

During the 1999-2001 and 2001-2003 biennium, Western also took the first steps in what will become significant and far-reaching curricular reform and advising enhancement. Both projects are aimed in particular at lower division students, with an emphasis on the first year experience and freshman retention.

- *General Education Curricular Assessment and Reform.* During spring, 2000, Western began laying the foundation for extensive curricular reform by establishing a special taskforce to examine what Western wants its graduates to have achieved. This report, named the Quality Undergraduate Education report, has been adopted and provides the foundation for a major reform of the General Education program. This effort was especially important to our accountability efforts. Our analysis has shown weak academic engagement with the first-year curriculum to be an important stumbling block to retention and eventual graduation. More about this effort is included below, under Strategies for the 2003-2005 biennium.
- *General University Advising Reform.* Western's assessment and accountability research has identified lower division advising as a significant weakness, which negatively impacts retention. A new Assistant Vice President for Academic Support Staff is leading a strategic planning effort which constantly reviews alternative advising delivery models and identify specific areas for improvement of our advising of students who have not declared a major. Ongoing enhancement of current advising programs to better serve our current students is also a priority. In addition, new elements of advising may arise in coordination with the revision of the General Education program.
- *Assessing and Revising Strategies.* Western is also laying the groundwork for assessing the strategies we have instituted over the past six years. During the 2003-2005 biennium, Western will continue to assess the success of each of these strategies, in terms of both implementation and effectiveness. We will seek to determine which strategies should be retained and expanded, and which have proven ineffective. Assessment and institutional research initiatives and activities will be coordinated with recent research to more fully understand what influences students' retention/non-retention at Western.

Part II. Baselines, measures, targets and strategies.

1-5. (baseline, measures, goals and targets)

Western's measures, revised baselines and targets are displayed below, in a table built on the template provided by the HECB. Western does not propose to change any of its measures. Below, we offer explanations for our selection of targets.

- As we have reported previously, a twelve-year assessment of the Graduation Efficiency Index (GEI), now extended to 17 years, shows almost no change despite significant relevant policy changes. Although the measure for freshmen has been particularly steady and traditionally shows little variation due to changes in policy or procedures, we have seen a slight increase over the past few years. Although last year saw a slight dip, we have succeeded in reaching our goal, and we raise our target for freshman GEI by one full point. Our special efforts to improve the transition from CTCs to Western begun in the last biennium resulted in the setting of extremely aggressive transfer GEI targets. As we

continue to work to reduce the gap between GEI scores of freshmen and transfers, we will retain the targets set in the last accountability plan.

- Western's freshman retention has varied slightly each year over the past seven years. We have conducted extensive analyses to identify factors that contribute to improved retention rates at WWU. While the primary reasons are beyond our ability to affect directly—declining selectivity over that period, rapid enrollment growth that changes the nature and underpinnings of most aspects of the university, and course access problems stemming from a severe classroom space deficit—Western is actively engaged in addressing the freshman retention issue. The most fundamental changes we can make to improve retention are in the first year curriculum and its impact on academic engagement. Some of our programs are working well. For example, students enrolled in the FIGS program have higher fall-to-fall retention rates compared to freshman students overall (for 2001-2002, 86% for 253 FIGS students and 81% for 2217 non-FIGS students). Also, we believe our recent focus on freshman advising will improve retention. We have seen retention increase in the past two years, but because general education curriculum reform is still on the horizon and we are experiencing a slight decline in selectivity, we retain the targets set in the last biennium.
- Overall retention is at the realistic maximum for Western, as our past analyses have shown. We have seen an increase in the past two years, primarily because of increased freshman retention. However, we recognize that our retention rate is approaching a ceiling set by the number of students who take temporary leaves of absence (desirable), who enter pre-professional curricula with the intention of transferring into professional programs not offered at Western (desirable), and who leave Western because their grades are insufficient to continue pursuing the degree (some of this is desirable in that it maintains standards, while some is problematic in that it indicates weak academic attachment). The Board of Trustees at Western has set a policy to aim for a long-term goal of 85% retention rate which seems to be a realistic target for WWU based on past performance indicators.
- Western's five-year graduation rate of native freshmen has increased very slightly in the past two years but will almost inevitably fluctuate this biennium. The reason is that freshman year retention has fluctuated up until two or three years ago. With fewer students retained in the graduation pipeline, fewer will graduate. This will continue to strain our graduation rate for another two or three years. However, because of slight increases in the graduation rate even as freshman retention 5 years prior has fluctuated, we set an extremely aggressive target that is equal to the HECB stated long-term performance goal for Western.
- Our individualized credit per FTE student measure remains important, but it is very expensive in terms of faculty time and will be difficult to improve due to shrinking fiscal resources. Thus, we anticipate that the number of individual internships, independent study options, and student-faculty research projects will decline as undergraduate enrollments increase and resources shrink, thus necessitating greater need for large lecture sections to accommodate access at a lower cost.
- Our goal to increase the SCH devoted to specialized writing courses has been partially achieved, but far from the level we envisioned. Western's plan to implement an additional writing requirement is part of the recommendations under consideration regarding comprehensive general education reform. Implementation of the proposed recommendation to increase the required number of lower division writing credits cannot be implemented until

fall 2005 at the earliest. Thus, we do not expect an appreciable increase in this measure in the next few years. However, since our 2001-02 performance was above target, and we are expecting a larger-than-average junior class, we will increase the goal for this biennium.

- The hours Western students are instructed in computer labs has far exceeded our original targets. We are now probably at or close to the most desirable level, because over the last four years we have added computer mediation to about 45 new classrooms, allowing some of the instruction previously requiring a computer lab to take place in regular classrooms; 14 new classrooms will be added in the new Communications Building scheduled to open in the summer 2004. This in turn means that much of the new instruction in computer labs can be accommodated during the hours vacated by others who were able to use mediated classrooms instead of labs. Our target, while an increase over present levels, is therefore more an estimate than a policy directive at this point. We will move to a more ideal level of this measure during 2003-2005.
- Our newest measure, the proportion of departments adopting our “departmental advising model,” was base-lined at zero because no department had incorporated all the elements we defined as necessary to high quality advising. Our goal is extremely aggressive in that we believe all departmental advising should incorporate all these elements, and we are committed to making that happen. As of the end of the 2001-2003 biennium close to 98% of Western’s programs and departments adopted the advising Web-based model. In the summer of 2003 Western’s Academic Advising Office developed and launched a new Web page that should help undergraduate students find information about a department’s major quickly and easily (see <http://www.acadweb.wvu.edu/advising/advising.html>). Western’s target stops short of 100% because some elements are not appropriate for the very smallest departments and there is a lag in the implementation of any program that is demanding enough to make a difference.

Western Washington University		
<i>Common Measures</i>	1999-02 Baseline Performance	2003-05 Plan Target
Graduation Efficiency Index		
a. Freshman	87.2	88.0
b. Transfers	80.3	82.0
c. Transfers graduating with B.S. in science	71.7	74.0
Undergraduate retention (overall)	86.6	86.0
Undergraduate retention (frosh to soph.)	79.6	82.0
5-Year Freshman Graduation Rate	53.9	55.0
5-Year Frosh Grad. Rate Among Minorities	41.4	42.0
<i>Institution-Specific Measures</i>		
Faculty productivity		
a. Individualized Credit/FTE student	1.65	1.52
b. SCH/Undergrad FTE in Writing Courses	2.20	2.30
Hours Scheduled in Computer Labs	23.3	25.0
Departments Adopting Advising Model	55%	98%

What the Measures Mean

Individualized Credit/FTE Student: Measures number of credits generated per FTE student through individual instructional activities, including internships, work on faculty research projects, and other one-on-one activities.

SCH/Undergrad FTE in Writing Courses: Student credit hours per undergraduate FTE in courses designated as principally or specifically writing based.

Hours Scheduled in Computer Labs: Measures the number of student hours scheduled in university or departmental computer labs per FTE undergraduate.

6. Strategies for the 2003-2005 biennium.

While a number of modest initiatives may arise during the biennium, Western will focus on significant large-scale changes that are partly stimulated by assessment and accountability findings that are core to the way the university does business, and that will significantly impact our performance on accountability measures. The largest of these change efforts targets the General Education program and first-year experience. The second focuses on advising of lower division students who have not yet declared a major.

The Academic Coordinating Committee will make final considerations on the proposed model in AY 2003-04. If the Task Force recommendations are accepted, the revised general education program will reduce the number of required credits from 87 (on average) to 60. Furthermore, a detailed synopsis of expected student learning outcomes will be part of the new curriculum and subsequent efforts to work with faculty in mapping and assessing student learning that results in general education courses will ensue. During summer 2003 a pilot effort called the Teaching and Learning Fellows Project paired faculty with students to redesign syllabi to better articulate the learning outcomes in general education offerings, develop strategies for student learning assessment, and consider ways to infuse outcomes assessment in all or most general education courses.

While still pending, if the revised general education program is adopted it is anticipated that it will enhance the graduation efficiency index, the undergraduate retention rate (most specifically freshmen to sophomore rate), and the five-year graduation rate.

In addition to making revisions in the general education offerings, a number of other campus-wide initiatives are directed toward enhancing the educational quality at WWU. To name a few of these institutional level change initiatives, the Teaching and Learning Academy consisting of a broad spectrum of faculty, students, administrators, and student support professionals continues to dialogue and work on educating the campus-community about the learning experiences of students at Western. Some of the initiatives they will foster during the 2003-04 academic year include professional development in cooperative learning strategies, effective learning in large lecture courses, and facilitating workplace climate for organizational change. Continuing to build on the partnership between Academic and Student Affairs, several new initiatives to enhance the first-year experience at WWU are underway. These include revisions in the orientation program for freshmen and transfer students, expanded offerings in honors, and recognition of excellence in meeting institutional goals.

Advising constitutes a second area that assessment research has demonstrated to be weaker than desired and to have significant impact on retention and graduation. Western is now completing a cycle of significantly upgrading advising by major departments. Since students are required to declare the major by no later than mid-junior year, these changes have enhanced the advising received by upperclassmen and many sophomores. Freshmen and sophomores who have not yet declared a major are not, however, affected by these changes. Western is now moving into a planning phase to overhaul lower division advising. The changes proposed will be articulated with the effort to reform the General Education program, to create an integrated and more effective first-year experience.

Western has a new Assistant Vice President of Academic Support Services, whose charge includes developing a strategic plan for lower division advising. That planning process has begun

this fall and will continue throughout the year and perhaps into next year. That process will focus heavily on freshman retention and academic engagement, as well as the efficiencies involved in providing good advising into a wise major choice, made early enough to allow graduation with few credits beyond the minimum required. Given our assessment research demonstrating the centrality of advising for student engagement, academic performance, retention, time to degree and graduation, we expect this process to enhance Western's performance on nearly all accountability measures.

In addition to these two major reform efforts, Western expects to undertake smaller initiatives arising from ongoing efforts to facilitate efficient transfer to Western and to retain and graduate students of minority background. However, for the upcoming biennium, Western will focus on these two large-scale reform efforts, especially General Education program revisions. These efforts will engage significant attention and scarce resources, meaning that fewer other initiatives will be undertaken. However, these two efforts are very likely to have lasting impact on both the quality of students' experiences at Western and the accountability measures that result from that quality.