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NEW TRANSFER FOCUS GROUP SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

The Office of Survey Research (OSR) randomly selected transfers entering Western in fall of 2004 to participate in a focus group study about students' expectations and experiences, both academic and social. The research was designed to explore transfer students' experiences as they transition into Western, and focused particularly on the challenges they face. Initially, the information was meant only to inform OSR's plans for the WELS transfer survey, a large-scale study of transfers entering in fall of 2005. Yet the session was revealing of so many important issues facing transfer students that researchers felt the findings worthy of wider distribution. This is a summary of that focus group discussion.

METHOD

Transfer students were contacted via telephone, and asked whether they would be willing to participate in a focus group concerning issues of importance to transfer students. They were told that they would be compensated for their time with a \$25 gift certificate (to either the campus bookstore or campus dining), and that they would be served dinner during the session. Nine attended.

The sample included seven females and two males. The majority transferred with AA degrees (three from Pierce, three from Whatcom, one from Spokane, one from Everett). One student entered with 115 credits from two private four-year institutions. Seven lived off campus and two on campus, eight maintained a part-time job, and two had children at home (one had four small children). Ages ranged from 19 to 24. Five of the nine participants were first generation. Two were students of color. The focus group lasted two hours, from 6:00 to 8:00 P.M.



Two researchers from the Office of Survey Research lead the group through discussions of various topics of importance to transfer students. Broadly these included expectations about attending Western; feeling connected (or not connected) to Western; access to classes and to the major; Western's Transitions program; resources and navigating the campus; how classes were going fall quarter; Winter registration coming up; and advice for incoming transfers.

FINDINGS

Expectations about attending Western

We asked our focus group to think about their weekly schedules and how much time they spent in class each week, as well as studying, working, sleeping, and relaxing/recreating. The purpose of this exercise was to get them thinking about their priorities and various time management issues they may have.

Juggling schedules

The majority of students were working at least 10 hours per week (one was working 22 hrs/wk and another 38 hrs/wk), and one has four small children at home. Students spent an average of 19 hours per week studying, 6.5-9 hours sleeping (average 7.67 hours), and 15-38 hours relaxing/recreating (average 27 hours).

We asked whether their expectations of Western differed significantly from their experiences, and in what ways? The group talked about the difficulties they had juggling work, school and family life.

- There is no possible way in the world you can account for all the time, when you have four small children. Also I assumed that I could take later classes and a lot of classes aren't offered past a certain time, so I found myself trying to find daycare for my kids.
- I'm lucky I actually have a job that pays the bills. I know people who sell plasma every week. They say, "How am I gonna pay rent?" I have made a lot of loans to friends just so they can pay for stuff, and they are really tight with the money.
- I expected more hours than they offer working on campus, and I've had a hard time finding classes that add up to enough credits for financial aid. It's 12 minimum, and most of the classes I need are four credits.
- The most difficult thing to juggle is my personal time. I thought I was going to a commuter school. I thought: there's going to be a lot of resources on campus, and I'm not going to have to go out for things. But I just don't have as much time as I used to. I pay a fee to the Rec Center but it seems like I never get a chance to use that resource. And there are just never enough hours for studying.

The workload is more challenging at Western

Students compared their previous college experiences to their experiences here at Western. Most discovered that the workload here is more demanding and more difficult to manage.

- For me it's definitely harder because even though I have several hours to study, that's still not enough for some of my classes...And working and going to school are really hard for me.
- In two out of three of my classes, I feel like we are rushed. There is a lot of cram, cram, cram—do three chapters and a test. And it's multiple choices. I would honestly feel better if I were getting essays, not multiple choices, because I think I'd understand what I was learning more.

- Western requires more consistent effort. Here you need to show up every day and you gotta keep up. Otherwise you get behind. If you miss two or three days in one week you're way behind 'cause they do rush through things here.
- Coming from Whatcom, my friends are, like: "Oh Western's so much harder you know. Whatcom is just this easy, stupid little school." And they kind of talk you down. And of course you get here and it's really not any more mentally challenging, its just more work and it's harder to manage. That's the one thing I wasn't really prepared for.

The attendance policy is a challenge for those who work

Several students were surprised by Western's attendance policy, saying the policy can be a challenge for those who are juggling work and class time. In fact, sometimes it's hard for them to prioritize which should come first.

- I have two classes that take attendance, and if you miss three times, you're out. If it's a choice between work and school, I need that college degree, but I need to pay rent, too. What do you do? The teachers say, "It's not my problem. This is your job, to be here every day." But I can't tell my boss I need time off because it's: "So what? You need to be here; we can find someone else, you know." So it's tough. There's not a lot of sympathy or compassion from either side.
- I have friends who have survey classes, and they say you don't need to show up for class—no attendance. I'm an English major, and there's a really strict attendance policy for English classes. And I don't really see, if it's all reading and essays anyways, why can't you just do the reading and turn in your essays? What's so big about in-class work? We're paying for it so it should be our choice.

Feeling connected to Western, academically and socially

We asked the group to tell us whether they felt connected to Western, academically and socially. That is, do they feel engaged in their classes? Are they involved in activities or utilizing Western's resources? Do they feel connected to students, faculty, staff?

- Not really. I show up, I go to class, and I leave. I don't live on campus, so maybe that's part of it. And I'm also a little older than most of the students here...So, I just go to class. I might go to the computer lab, but I'm not involved in any activities.
- I don't live on campus and I have four kids at home, so I have a hard time feeling connected at all for obvious reasons. But I'm connected enough, to where I'm getting the work done. I don't have some sort of relationship with my professors, or even friends. I'm also a lot older than most people, so it's been really hard for me to come back. I've never been to any of the events here like basketball games or football games, and I've been to the Rec Center once.
- Socially I feel really strange. I kind of thought I'd meet people who are new here. I do know people 'cause I've lived here for awhile, but I'm so busy I never see them because I'm always behind in class work or asleep or something. I want to get involved with plays, but I don't know how. What I've been finding is that I don't know how to hook in.

Getting hooked in

So how do transfer students get hooked in? While the group said it's challenging to get connected, three students said they have made a conscious effort by finding a job on campus so they could meet people. One has also been trying to make connections by talking with faculty outside of class.

- I was completely lost and I didn't know anything. It's been so long since I've been back to school I didn't even know where to start. I tried really hard to get a job on campus. That way I could meet other people who were working on campus and just try to get connected that way.

- I also work on campus, with classroom services. I try to meet new people who come in, and I try to strike up a conversation with them. So I meet a lot of people.
- I made a conscious effort to get a job on campus and I've met some people that way. But it's the teachers I really want to be connected with. I've been bugging everybody in the Journalism Department, going in, saying hi, tell me a little bit about the class, just trying to get them to recognize my face. But I feel like a dork. It was definitely easier at my other college because of the small classes. It's harder when you know you're just another face in a larger crowd.

Engaging with Faculty

For the most part, students say the opportunity to engage with faculty is not so much a matter of conscious effort and choice on the student's part—rather it depends on class size as well as the nature of the department or program.

- When I first came here I thought there would be two hundred kids in my classes, but there's 15. It's smaller than Whatcom! But I'm in the English department. So in that situation, all my teachers know my name, and they know what's up with me. They can immediately tell me what my reports have been on, the essays, and stuff I've been studying.
- I feel it's a very distanced relationship with faculty and students, but there are only 30 to 40 kids in each class. I thought it was very strange the first day that none of the faculty made an effort to have everyone say their names or what they were doing. Nothing. So throughout the whole quarter I don't know anyone's name in that class, except maybe five people around me that I talk to.
- I think we're really lucky at Fairhaven, because we have to take the transfer seminar, and in that we meet all the professors at Fairhaven. I've met professors I've really connected with and they've helped me already. Independent studies have offered that kind of connection. I get to design my own major, so it engages me more because I choose every single class I'm going to take. Academically I feel really engaged in my work.

Access to classes and to the major

Access to classes

Students talked about the difficulties they've experienced with registration, figuring out which classes to take and how to get into classes with override restrictions. Access to classes is also related to major status. Frustration was the consensus.

- I wanted to take a certain class, but then you have to take the intro class. Well, I've already taken it. It wasn't called it, but I have taken (the equivalent)—several times in some cases, because I've switched colleges so much. Should I bring something in, a writing portfolio? There are so many people that I don't really end up trying, like calling around to eight different people before I talk to one person who just says no. It's just really frustrating.
- The one thing I've had trouble with is the lack of structure here. My college was smaller and a lot more structured. You have your advisor and there weren't as many options and you're very much on track. It's been hard because I didn't have any clue about which classes I should be taking, and I didn't know what the GUR concept was. When I applied (to Woodring) my communication class that I took didn't qualify for the public speaking requirement, so now I don't have an advisor. So registering for next quarter is kind of tough.
- The whole concept of pre-majoring is really overwhelming to me. I went to the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, and we didn't have pre-major stuff. You took classes and they all added up to what you needed. Now I'm registering and it's a major restriction, and I'm like, what? It's a 200 level class! Who do I talk to? Do talk to an advisor, or a professor, or the head of the department?

Access to the major

Eight of the nine students have decided on a major, but they have not yet declared. Most can't get access to the major, for various reasons. One student is on a waiting list for a major; and others can't declare because course equivalents didn't transfer and/or they need to fulfill certain prerequisites.

- I graduated from Whatcom with 129 credits, so I thought I had my major pretty well set. But the waiting list for the English major is 50 people, and you need English 202, 203. Now I'm told to go back and take these classes specifically. I've already read 60% of the material. I've read two of the four books assigned in another class, and it's like I'm repeating a lot of the same work. So this whole quarter is like playing catch up. My advisor at Whatcom had told me I was set, and everything was taken care of.
- I came up to Western twice during the summer to speak with an advisor, who was great. She said I was all set, so when I applied my application was ready to be reviewed. And then, my application wasn't forwarded because my speech didn't meet the public speaking requirements. So this next quarter I can't get into any more education classes, and I don't have any more GUR's to complete. All I really have to take this next quarter is communication 101. So I'm going to be taking a whole bunch of credits that I don't necessarily need.

Another issue that can delay access to a major is scheduling conflicts. For example, one student explains that she must first take a required theory course, yet the department changed the class schedule to an evening time, which doesn't work for her.

- The theory class was gonna fit perfectly with my schedule, and when I went to register for it...It's now an evening class instead of a morning class. And it is this next quarter also. And in order for me to go beyond to the upper levels, I have to take that theory class. The head of the department said, "Can you take it at Whatcom?" But I just came from Whatcom, and I'm not gonna go back to take it. It was just a source of major frustration. I don't know how I'm gonna take that class.

Undecided

One student is undecided about what his major will be, yet he doesn't feel pressured to decide. He finished an AAS, then took two years off before entering Western. He hasn't sought any resources to help direct him. For now he wants to explore his own options.

- I just figured I'd look through the bulletin at majors, and maybe I'll do philosophy, political science, or economics. I think I'll take one from each of those disciplines next quarter; then if that goes well, maybe I'll declare that. But if not, then I'll take something else and try again. Eventually I'll come to a point to where my financial aid won't cover it because I haven't declared and that's gonna be interesting. I'll take the smallest major at that point.

Getting the right information

Students say they have often experienced difficulty in getting the right information. This adds to the frustration of being a new student, trying to figure out policies and procedures, and attempting to register for classes. "It's a game of bouncing around until you find someone who sounds like they might be able to help you out." Do students actually experience this kind of thing? Yes, according to several students.

- You call or you e-mail them. They give you information. You go based on that information, until you hit another person who tells you they are wrong. And then you have to change your information.
- I just call the department and say, "I want to do this," and let them try and hook me up with someone, which doesn't always work.

- I went to every class that I was interested in until I could actually slip in with overrides. So I had five classes I was taking the first week of school. I ended up being in a class I needed to drop, because I didn't really have the foundations, which I could have found out by just talking to the department advisor, who dumped me off on someone else. That was frustrating.

Registration for winter quarter

The majority of students were not aware that it was time for Winter registration. They didn't realize that the registration schedule was laid out for the whole year, and they were confused about whether My Western or Web4U would provide prompts about registration.

- Do they tell us that we are supposed to register, and when we are supposed to register? Is that published anywhere?
- I guess I should have known, but all of a sudden some of my classmates were saying, "Well, did you register?"
- It would just be nice to get a little card in the mail saying you need to register. Or maybe a little screen or something, so you don't have to go searching through Web4U.
- I use My Western all the time and I don't see anything in there that says I need to register. My Western has Blackboard so I figured it would be in Blackboard, 'cause it shows all my classes.
- Why do they have two (My Western and web4U)? It's confusing.

Transitions and advising

The majority of the group had attended Western's Transitions program. Overall, the group felt Transitions could be a good tool for students, yet changes could be made to better meet their needs. Primarily what they wanted was guidance with their class scheduling, and how to get started toward the major. They wanted help with figuring out the registration system—how to use Web4U, and how to deal with overrides since every department handles overrides differently. They wanted personal advising rather than group advising. They weren't interested in a campus tour or certain workshops, especially if the information was already available in written materials.

- I think Transitions could be a really good tool for people. But Transitions basically felt like a half-assed freshman orientation. One, I don't really need a campus tour. They had what was called advising sessions but it didn't tell me about overrides, or that departments were different and I'm gonna have to get special permission, or that it's important for me to talk to my department head. None of the little things that we're all finding out now, things that aren't working out. Just the stuff that was in the bulletin or the course guide that I could have read on my own.
- I left Transitions feeling frustrated because it didn't give me guidelines. What I should be doing, what classes. That was my main thing. This is what I want to do, just show me how to get there. I was almost in tears on the way home, I was so frustrated.
- I had different expectations. Like the lecture/workshops they had, one was about getting around in transportation. And just stuff that was really dry, and then break. Everybody would leave and you didn't come back. I actually learned more about the transportation situation by sitting down in my bed and reading.

Suggestions for improving Transitions

We asked whether the group had suggestions for improving the Transitions program. They said they would be interested in something like Transitions, scheduled a couple weeks or so

into the quarter when registration is over and classes are under way. Students said this would give them a chance to get a feel for Western and develop questions. They said they didn't have questions during Transitions, because they had not had any experience with Western's system from which to base them. Here are other ideas.

- My friend and I tried really hard to get to know people, introduce ourselves. But it wasn't a very friendly environment, like that wasn't really the emphasis. I don't know if there could be more done as far as getting to know people.
- I would like a little check list, a sheet that says, "These are some of the things you have to do. One, go get your student ID card." Check. "Go talk to your advisor." Check. You are in six months and they're like, "You didn't do that?" Well no one told me, and you feel like you're stupid, but you just don't know. They say, "You should take more responsibility... You should be actively pursuing this." Well I would if I knew I had to do it.
- Fairhaven had a new student retreat. We got introduced to all the professors and then, even though we got more in depth when they visited us in the transfer class, we also got little sheets of paper that said, "This is your advisor." Then we all went to lunch with our advisors. That helped a lot because I know who my advisor is, whereas most people I think don't.

Academic Advising

About half the group doesn't have an academic advisor yet. One student said she doesn't have an advisor because she's waiting for admittance to the major. Another says she has "no idea how to get an advisor", and another said he was clicking around on Web4U and found a little line for an advisor, but it didn't have anyone's name. Others in the group explained: "You can go to the major department and just ask them, who is my advisor?" Also stated: "They have basic advisors that advise you before you declare."

Resources and navigating the campus

We asked the group to tell us whether they had used the various resources available on campus. One student used the Career Center, one has used the Library once and another has used it several times; one has used the Health Center (for the sun lamp), and one checks out a laptop regularly, "because the computer lab is always full." Another suggested using the computers in the Writing Center because they're free. One student uses the Recreation Center regularly, while others haven't had the time. Several expressed annoyance with having to pay a fee for the Recreation Center. "People complain about that so much. It's a lot of money." One student didn't realize she was paying for it. "I thought that was an extra thing if you wanted to do it."

The group also listed Web4U as a resource, as well as My Western and Blackboard. Everyone uses blackboard, and they say they love it. Students say they get confused about all the passwords for each program, however, and they wish this weren't the case. They feel it is too complicated. Campus access was another issue addressed by the students.

- I wish they would have told you how much you need a car here. I know that parking is hell and I know the school probably advocates a lot about not bringing one. But you really need a car here. Much more than at my old school, because everybody lives so far away. There is no bus late at night, and I'm walking home by myself.

- I had no idea that parking was such an issue here. I drive from Seattle every day, and it would be nice if I could just park on campus. But it's a waiting list. I just thought that was ridiculous. Part of the problem is that sometimes I get stuck here late and I walk the trail over in the dark (through the arboretum).

Here the group intervened, saying: "Do not walk through the arboretum! It's not safe." One student explained that Western does have shuttles that run until midnight, and you can get the Green Coats to escort you too. Most were not aware of the Green Coats, so the student told the group about this resource.

- Green coats are guys with Campus Security that volunteer, two- to four-hour periods through all hours of the night. So if you feel unsafe walking home or to your car, or if you get into an unsafe situation you can give them a call, and they will come get you. I've had to call them quite a bit 'cause I do radio shows at different hours and they'll be there within five or ten minutes, so it's been excellent.

We asked the group whether there was any other information they wished Western's PR had provided them before they got here. The group discussed bus schedules at length. Since many students don't park on campus, they wish Western had provided information on bus passes and schedules, including which buses to take in order to get to various locations off campus.

How classes were going fall quarter

We asked the group to tell us how things were going fall quarter. About half of the group said they felt overwhelmed. They had a lot of things to do in the next couple of weeks, and certain courses were challenging.

- The last time I tried college was five years ago. It's really hard because I don't how to juggle, and it's also finding all of these places, like the Writing Center. Just all these things I'm not used to. I'm having a lot of problems structuring time.
- If I don't show up for tutoring tomorrow, I'm screwed. It's for my intermediate logic class. It's my first class of the day and to be honest, I like to sleep. I knew that there was tutoring available, but being a procrastinator I put it off until now.

Others in the group were enjoying their classes and doing well fall quarter.

- I find it's actually a lot easier this year than it was at community college. I was shocked. I was ready for intensive academic work. I feel like I am ahead in some classes, and I had one very challenging class.
- I feel like I'm doing okay. I feel like maybe just by a fluke I got a good combination of classes, but I think that I am doing okay.
- One of my professors is really good. He's everything that I think a Western professor should be. He's accessible, and very open to questions, and he's very good at explaining himself. He makes things logical.

Winter registration coming up

Two of the nine students had registered for Winter classes. One said, "I just got a whole list and plugged them in and whatever I got into, I got into." Others said they were stressed out about registration coming up. Besides dealing with the override system, there were various other reasons.

- Essentially I don't want to get stuck with a class that's gonna give me nothing for my degree. I have nine elective credits to play with for the next two years, that's three maybe two classes. Everything else I have to get.

- I feel like I am going to be going to school for the next five years, trying to get classes that I am allowed to take because I'm not a major yet.
- One thing that would be helpful, if I had a major, would be a specific track that says you have to take these classes in this order (a plan of study).
- Unfortunately you might fall into a situation like my roommate who thinks she may not pass this class with a grade she needs. She needs a C minus in order to get into the next class in her track. And then you are set back a whole quarter.

Projected time to graduation

Surprisingly, the majority of this group said they plan to graduate in three or more years. That is, they plan to take five or more years to finish a B.A. degree.

- I'm allotting three years here and then after three years, if I'm not graduating soon, I am going to reevaluate what's going on.
- I'm always surprised at how many people are planning on graduating in five years, like my roommate. She'll be a seven-years senior.

Super seniors

According to the group, the term Super Senior applies to: "everyone I have met up here. They are planning five years." Why, we asked? The group explained that it's all about schedules—coordinating jobs and family obligations, getting access to classes and to the major (as discussed earlier), dealing with schedule conflicts, and taking required coursework which may be sequenced.

- I have to take the core curriculum, my writing conference, my concentration seminar, and then my senior seminar. And you have to do the senior project. There is a track to that too. A process.

Advice for incoming transfer students

What advice would the group give to incoming transfer students?

- Find a student already going to school here and hang out with them for the day.
- Get a buddy. Find someone who knows what's going on.
- If you know somebody here don't be afraid to ask them.
- I think the buddy system is a good idea, because sometimes you don't remember the questions you are going to ask. And I have written down questions before seeing an advisor personally about different things.
- Don't wait until last minute to meet with an advisor. Figure it all out way before hand.
- And don't walk into your advisor meeting without everything you need. I went in without my transcript and had to go back later.
- Make sure you sit down, tie them up if you have to (an advisor) and get like a twelve-step program. Make sure you are on track, because right now I still have to go back and do another meeting just to start my major.
- I would say be persistent. About everything. If you don't get the answer you want, find somebody else who will give it to you.

AFTERWORD

We learned some surprising things from this group which we could explore further in the WELS survey of transfers entering Fall 2005.

Scheduling issues

Most students in the focus group were working at least ten hours per week. They say it is a challenge juggling family, work, and school. Is this the case for native students as well?

Getting connected issues

The group said it is challenging for transfer students to get connected at Western, especially when they live off campus and they're older than most students. Three have made a conscious effort to get connected by finding a job on campus so they could meet people. Others say the opportunity to engage with faculty is not so much a matter of conscious effort and choice on the student's part—rather it depends on class size as well as the nature of the department or program. In a class of 30-40 students, the student-instructor relationship may be distanced. In a class of 15, the instructor knows each student's name as well as the particular work they have completed. Fairhaven offers the ideal situation for engagement with faculty and coursework. First students are required to take a transfer seminar in which they meet all the professors at Fairhaven. Students take Independent Study courses which offers connection with the faculty, and students are involved in designing their own majors which engages them even more academically. Is student retention higher when students are engaged with faculty to this greater degree?

Graduation efficiency issues

Most students in this group plan to graduate in three years, taking five years to complete a B.A. degree. The group believes this is a common phenomenon which they call super seniors. How common is the super senior phenomenon at Western? Is this true primarily for transfer students, or is this the case for native students as well? The group explained that the five-year graduation track is all about schedules—coordinating jobs and family obligations, dealing with schedule conflicts, and taking required coursework which may be sequenced. Another complication is the inability to gain access to the major. For example, course equivalents may not have transferred and/or students need to fulfill certain prerequisites.

A related issue is difficulty getting access to classes. Graduation efficiency, therefore, may not be a matter of choice for many students, considering the number of barriers they face while navigating through the system, along with juggling family, work, and school. These are all issues which could be explored further in the WELS transfer survey. Various administrative units could also look at the course access issue and evaluate the override and registration process. Are there ways we can make the process more user-friendly and less frustrating for students?

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