

THE TRANSITION OF RUNNING START PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS INTO WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

Since Fall 1993, Western Washington University has been admitting freshman students who bring with them anywhere from 3 to 90 college quarter credits gained concurrently with high school credits in their Junior and Senior years. The students earn these credits—usually at community colleges—through the state-sponsored “Running Start” program, and often arrive at Western with an educational background different from that of regular freshmen. Some Running Start students actually complete an Associate of Arts (AA) transfer degree and graduate at the end of their senior year from high school and community college simultaneously.

The arrival of such students led the University’s Faculty Assessment Committee to request, early in 1997, that the Division of Student Affairs/Academic Support Services examine whether the programs and services then in place to support the transition of freshman students into the University were also adequate to serve the needs of Running Start students.

Although a number of studies of other forms of academic “acceleration” have been undertaken, notably into the achievement levels of talented and gifted students, little information is available about the academic or psycho-social experiences of other early college entrants. In particular, at the time of writing, no other study exists of the perceptions of Running Start students regarding their experience during, and subsequent to, their admission to a university.

BACKGROUND

Though no longer unusual, the idea of skipping high school, whether in whole or part, to enter college early is not without controversy. Indeed, standard wisdom suggests that the years spent in junior high or middle school, and then in high school, are important for the social development of adolescents (Reisberg, 1998b). Separating students from their “age-mates,” even if they are intellectually advanced and lacking academic challenge in the high school setting, is viewed by some as psychologically harmful, possibly seriously harmful. (for example, see Montour, 1977).

Yet in spite of these misgivings, many colleges have a long-standing policy of admitting students from one to several years prior to completion of the twelfth grade. Notable among these is the University of Washington, where the Early Entrance Program, operating since 1977, enables highly gifted students to bypass high school completely and enter university at fourteen years of age or less. In addition, some states have, or are preparing, legislation to allow high school students who meet certain minimum academic qualifications to enroll simultaneously in college (Education Commission of the States, August 1997). Typically, these state-sponsored “concurrent” or “dual” enrollment programs are limited in availability to students in their junior or senior year of high school. The Running Start Program in Washington state is an example of this approach.

Running Start was created by the 1990 Washington State Legislature to allow qualified eleventh and twelfth grade students at public high schools to take college level classes at community and technical colleges. The State Board for Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) conducted a two-year pilot program involving five community colleges and thirty-six high schools from 1990-92 (SBCTC, 1991), following which Running Start began operating statewide in the 1992-93 school year with 3,350 students enrolled. In 1994 the Legislature expanded the program to allow high school students to enroll at Eastern Washington, Central Washington, and Washington State Universities so that students in the communities served by those institutions, where no two-year college has its main campus, could also participate.

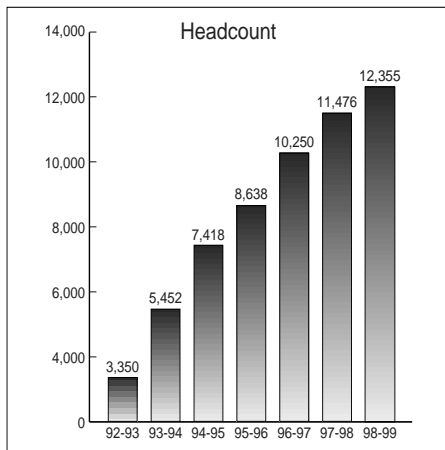


Figure 1. *Statewide Running Start Enrollments: 1992-1998*
 Source: SBCTC Annual Reports for 1995-96, 1996-1997, and 1997-1998, and data supplied by R. Crossland, Associate Director, SBCTC

Running Start students take college classes free of tuition charges (though monies are diverted from the high schools to the colleges, another controversial aspect of the Running Start program), and the credits they earn apply to both their high school and college diplomas, with five college quarter credits equal to one high school credit. Admission qualifications vary among the colleges, but typically, students must successfully complete a standardized reading, writing, and/or math skills test in order to enroll. Some colleges also require students to have a minimum high school GPA.

Since its inception, Running Start has attracted strong participation. In 1996-97, 10,250 high-school students (5,827 Full Time Equivalent) were enrolled in the program statewide. This represented a 19% increase in headcount and a 23% increase in FTEs over 1995-96. Enrollment continued to grow the following year,

albeit at a lower rate. Data for 1997-98 showed a further increase of 12% in statewide headcount to 11,476, and an increase of 13% in FTEs to 6,585.

Though research on accelerative programs involving early college entrance is yet limited, that which exists has demonstrated that the majority of student participants receive sound educational benefits unhindered by personal adjustment difficulties, particularly if they are located in a supportive program. Conclusions from the few studies that have been made of Running Start and other concurrent enrollment programs are consistent with those reached for early college entrance programs in general: participants tend to do well academically at both the two- and four-year level, any problems of psychological adjustment which might occur tend to be minor and transient, and students generally perceive their experience in the programs to have been satisfying and of sound educational benefit. (For a copy of a review of literature on this topic, contact the Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing.)

LOGISTICAL IMPACT ON WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

As far as the *logistical impact* of the Running Start program on Western, 45 Running Start students were admitted in the fall of 1993, and the numbers grew rapidly in subsequent years. As of Spring Quarter 1997, 383 students at Western had RST credits on their academic records, ranging in number from 3 through 90. Table 1 below shows broadly the distribution of RST credits across these 383 students.

It seems likely that Western will experience continuing growth in the number of students entering with RST credits for the next several years. The three primary Running Start feeder schools—Everett, Skagit, and Whatcom Community Colleges have experienced strong growth in Running Start enrollments. Not all of these students will go on to four-year colleges, and not all of those who do will enroll at Western. But there is

Running Start Credits	No. of Students	% of Total
1-44	301	78.6
45-74	39	10.2
75-89	8	2.1
90	35	9.1
Total 383		

Table 1. *Western Students in Spring 1997 with RS Credits*

clearly a large number of high school students in the region served by Western obtaining college credits through the program, and it would seem prudent at this early stage in Running Start's history to surmise that the University has not yet seen an end to the growth in the number of such students entering.

SOCIOLOGICAL IMPACT ON WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

As far as the sociological impact of Running Start students on Western, the issue is complicated. Pascarella & Terenzini's synthesis (1991) of more than 2,600 research studies concluded that attendance at college impacts a wide range of cognitive and affective outcomes. Students who attend college experience "an expansion and extension of interpersonal horizons, intellectual interests, individual autonomy, and general psychological maturity." Of the 383 former Running Start students who were attending Western in Spring Quarter 1997, 21% had earned 45 or more college credits during their junior and/or senior year in high school. In order to earn that number of credits (at a maximum allowed rate of 15 per quarter), most of these 82 students would have attended community college full-time for at least one year, in some cases for two years. Thus, depending on their level of involvement in the Running Start program, participating students may start to experience the developmental effects of college attendance described by Pascarella and Terenzini as much as two years earlier than their non-participating age-mates.

In part, that development can occur because students in college are treated in some respects as if they were adults, regardless of their physical age. For example, in contrast to high school where the parent or guardian has a legal right to access their student's educational records, in college that right is removed by federal law. Community college instructors do not send home "poor work slips," nor report lack of attendance to parents. For reasons such as these, the Running Start student has higher levels of personal autonomy and bears greater responsibility for his or her actions. The challenge provided by this reduced supervision offers an opportunity for personal growth that is not available to the regular high-schooler.

In speculating about the possible effects of the Running Start experience, we need to note that another layer

of complexity is added by the fact that any development brought about by attendance at community college quite likely occurs in isolation from age-mates. Educationally, the full-time Running Start student spends his or her classroom hours in a community college, where age-diversity is the norm (Cohen & Brawer, 1996, pp. 41-42). Socially, the full-time Running Start student spends his or her day on a community college campus, removed from regular high school life and many of the usual opportunities to maintain involvement with peers.

Running Start participants with an attenuated high school experience like this are coming to the University with an educational and social background markedly different from that of other entering freshmen. The possibility then arises that the Running Start student who has spent as much as the last two years of his or her "K-12" education attending community college full-time is in some respects *developmentally different* from the regular freshman student, who has spent all of the twelve years prior to university entrance in a traditional educational environment, accompanied throughout by his or her age-peers.

When the Running Start program was implemented by the state, Western Washington University decided to treat Running Start participants as first-time freshmen for admissions purposes. Irrespective of the number of college credits they brought with them, it was felt they would benefit from the early registration afforded them at Summerstart, and from an orientation program where they connected socially with other eighteen-year-olds. On the other hand, a Running Start participant with an AA degree arrives at the University with an educational, and probably a social, background different from that of many other freshmen students. That issue has caused some faculty and staff to question whether services and programs designed to serve the needs of freshmen generally are also adequate to serve the needs of Running Start students.

In terms of educational achievement, Running Start students are a very diverse group—a diversity that makes inferring generalized conclusions about the needs of such students during their transition to the four-year college environment difficult, if not inappropriate. It was decided therefore, as a starting point in reaching an understanding of the transitional issues for Running Start students, to conduct a qualitative inquiry into the perceptions of the students themselves

regarding that transition. The object was to obtain an overview, from the students' perspective, of the issues and if possible to isolate themes that would provide guidance to the University in further action or research in the matter.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The students who chose to participate in this study had brought relatively high levels of Running Start credits with them to Western; indeed, more than half (17 of 30) transferred at least 75 such credits. In that respect, they differ from many other Running Start students registered at Western during the same period. Of the 383 such students registered in Spring Quarter 1997, only 43 (11%) had gained 75 or more Running Start credits. Thus the experiences of the study participants may not represent well those of Running Start students in general at Western.

As is true of focus group studies in general, the findings of this study are not generalizable beyond the context within which it was conducted. Bers (1987) observed that focus group interviews are "best used to identify attitudinal dimensions and not to quantify the extent to which those are held in any population or subgroup." This study instead provides useful pointers for similar investigations at other schools and preliminary information that can be used at Western to assist in the design and explication of further research into Running Start students.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, the format chosen was that of the *focus group depth interview*, or—most simply—focus group. This qualitative mode of inquiry was chosen because in the absence of previous research on Running Start students, little could be presumed about the nature or the dimensions of their experiences. As Stuber (cited in McConaha, 1996, p. 53) has noted, qualitative studies "are most appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon and when appropriate variables for study are conjectural." The core elements of a focus group are summarized by Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub (1996) as:

- The group is an informal assembly of target persons whose points of view are requested to address a selected topic.
- The group is small, 6 to 12 members, and is relatively homogeneous.

- A trained moderator with prepared questions or probes sets the stage and induces participants' responses.
- The goal is to elicit the perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas of participants about a selected topic.
- Focus groups do not generate information that can be projected to a larger population.

The focus group method was chosen in preference to individual interviews with the students because while individual interviews are easier to control, record, and analyze, focus group interviews possess a number of advantages, noted by writers including Stewart & Shamdasani (1990) and Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub (1996). These advantages include:

- Synergism (when a wider bank of data emerges through the group interaction).
- Snowballing (when the statements of one respondent initiate a chain reaction of additional comments).
- Stimulation (when the group discussion stimulates excitement about a topic).
- Security (when the group provides comfort and encourages candid responses).
- Spontaneity (because participants are not required to answer every question, their responses may be presumed to be more spontaneous and genuine).

Ultimately, five focus group sessions yielded responses from 30 Running Start students. Interview questions were developed in consultation with staff and faculty who had experience in focus group design and an understanding of the University's existing Running Start programs. The questions were as follows:

Thinking back to your arrival at Western, and the first-time advising and registration process, what was helpful to you at the time? What could WWU have done to improve the process for you?

- If you had a major in mind when you arrived at WWU, what information did you receive about that major during your initial advising? What other information (that you didn't receive then) would have been helpful to you?
- Again thinking back to the time you arrived at Western, how were you feeling then? ...how well prepared—academically and socially—were you for what lay ahead? How well do you feel you have since fitted into "the system"?

- What involvement with extra-curricular activities have you had at WWU? What sort of effect do you think that's had on you?
- How do you think involvement in Running Start has affected you personally? Did you realize your initial motivation for participating in the program?
- What advice would you give now to a high school student interested in participating in the program?
- What advice would you give to faculty and staff at WWU regarding programs and services here for Running Start students?
- As you look toward your future, how do you think involvement in Running Start has affected your experience at WWU? ...your probable career path?

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

At the conclusion of the focus group sessions, the audio tape recordings were professionally transcribed. These transcripts were checked thoroughly by the researcher for accuracy against the audio tapes and edited as necessary. The data in the transcripts were then analyzed for content and frequency of recurrent themes.

Following Strauss (cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994), an empirically-driven, inductive coding technique was utilized for the content analysis. As opposed to *a priori* coding, in which a code list is (at least partially) pre-defined having regard to the hypotheses and key variables of a study, in the inductive approach codes are *post*-defined after the researcher "has collected [the data], has seen how it functions or nests in its context, and determined how many varieties of it there are" (Miles & Huberman, p. 58). In avoiding the use of a predefined code list, the inductive technique is particularly well suited to exploratory studies such as the present one, in which little was known beforehand—or could be presumed—about the subjective experiences under investigation.

The final stage of data analysis, after completion of coding, was the collating of similarly-coded text segments for review of recurrent themes in the participants' responses. The use of text-processing computer software allowed the researcher to do this quite efficiently. The location and frequency of code occurrences in each of the focus groups were listed, and printouts were created of all coded text segments sorted by code

and focus group. At the conclusion of this final stage of the data analysis process, the researcher had identified a total of ten relevant, recurrent discussion themes related to the participants' experiences prior to and during their enrollment at Western.

PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

At the commencement of each group meeting, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire providing demographic information such as age, gender, name of high school and community college attended, and number of Running Start credits earned, as well as responses to questions on their motivation for involvement in the program, their academic focus, and their use of advising services at Western. When combined with Western student records data, the following demographic profile of the 30 participants was drawn:

- There were 25 female students and 5 male students, ages ranging from 18 to 23 years.
- Thirteen of the students had transferred 90 Running Start credits to Western, and another four had transferred 90 credits when including Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate credits.
- Overall, the number of Running Start credits earned by participants ranged from 12 to 90
- Total college credits earned by participants at the time the study was conducted ranged from 106 to 215.
- Almost all participants said they had been motivated to enter the Running Start program by either a lack of academic challenge at their high school or a general dissatisfaction with high school life.
- Twenty-eight of the thirty students had attended a pre-registration advising program at Western, either Summerstart (24 students) or Orientation (4 students).
- Twenty-four students said that they had had a major field of study in mind when first enrolling at Western, and twenty said that they had a firm career objective identified at the time the study was being conducted.
- When students were asked with whom they mainly identified as peers on arriving at Western, 13 said either sophomores or upper-class students. Nine participants (most of whom had transfer credits of 40 or fewer) said they mainly identified with freshmen, and six did not specify a peer group by year of study.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION THEMES

The focus group transcripts were some 150 pages in length, and analysis of them, using the inductive coding method described above, revealed a range of recurrent discussion themes, including:

- Students' advising and registration experience
- Preparedness for academic work and the social context at Western
- Fitting in at Western
- Response to the Running Start program generally
- Advice for Western

STUDENTS' ADVISING AND REGISTRATION EXPERIENCE

Most (28) of the participants had attended either Summerstart or an Orientation Day and, with only two exceptions, the 24 Summerstart participants attended a session designated for Running Start students. Apart from the advising component, opinions of Summerstart were generally positive, although some felt there was too much "hand-holding" going on, and that they received little benefit except for early registration.

Opinions of the advising were, however, quite negative. Although the advisors were seen to be of good will, students frequently felt inadequately advised regarding transferring college credits, and especially so regarding information about their intended majors. (Because of system restrictions—the fact that at this point students cannot be differentiated in advance of the time of enrollment by the number of transfer credits they will have—RS students attend Summerstart, which was designed for first-time, incoming freshmen, for whom information on transfer credits and intended majors is not generally as critical.)

Students also voiced concern with the quality of *post-registration* assistance they had obtained. One student said: "They're (advisors) just not very knowledgeable as far as Running Start students and what they need to do." Some students said they had simply consulted the course catalog following Summerstart, while others said their best source of advice on requirements for majors turned out to be the relevant departmental secretary. Other students complained of being "bounced around" the administration, of having to call or visit several different offices before obtaining definitive answers to questions. One student, who contacted the University prior to applying for entry, said, "They sent

me to five different people before I got *somewhat* of an answer. Like, *nobody* in the registration and admissions departments knew anything about Running Start. They're like, 'oh wow, that's pretty cool.' But I needed *information*."

PREPAREDNESS FOR ACADEMIC WORK AND THE SOCIAL CONTEXT AT WESTERN

The students generally reported feeling excited at the time of their arrival here, and "eager to start a whole new college." Having already learned to navigate the culture of one college system, they felt well prepared to tackle another. In the words of one student, "I felt very motivated and knew what I was doing."

Study participants also reported feeling well prepared academically for Western. Their eventual experiences in this regard, however, appeared dependent upon the quality of their previous experience at the particular community college attended. In some cases students had been disappointed in the level of challenge encountered there in comparison to Western: "community college was at least as easy as high school. [Then] I came here and... it was a big shock." Other students however had found community college a good "bridge" to the four-year scene: "community college was very, very hard, [and] it definitely prepared me academically."

Some students complained that they were taking longer than expected to complete their degree at Western because of poor advising at the high school or community college level. One student said, "I was told not to get my AA by my advisors from community college and from high school, because they said I wouldn't be able to transfer in as well, as easily. So I didn't get it, and half of my credits didn't transfer across. So I thought it was kind of a waste of my time that I took all those classes and I have to retake them now." Other students had lacked good advising also, but they had apparently made better course choices: "I just happened to take the classes I needed. It worked out fine for me but it would have helped for other people if they'd had more advising in community college. It was just random luck that I had taken what I had."

FITTING IN AT WESTERN

Some students had felt apprehensive about how they would fit in with older students at Western. One remembered sitting in a class "filled with juniors, seniors,

and some sophomores, and here I was this little freshman, *really* intimidated.” Mostly, though, students reported that the diverse age range they encountered at community college had prepared them well for the social context of an upper-level class at Western. Indeed, some said that they found Western lacking in age diversity in comparison with community college.

Students who lived in Western’s residence halls reported some adjustment difficulties. Most frequent was the complaint that the “freshman dorms” which participants reported being assigned to did not provide an appropriate study environment. Two typical comments were: “I was so academically oriented and so focused on my studies, and [my roommates] were so social”; and “I realized that the mentality of partying and stuff totally wasn’t me, so I had to move out of there pretty quick.” Other complaints about life in the halls appeared to relate to difficulties which the students had also experienced in high school: “It was way too high school for me—I just had to get out of it. I hated high school, I hated the dorms.”

The question of whether they themselves were freshmen, or juniors, or something else was itself an issue for most of those participants who had high numbers of transfer credits. They did not share classes with freshmen, although this was their age-peer group, and “freshman” was what they heard the University call them. Typifying students’ confusion, one participant said, “but I already had an associate’s degree and this piece of paper saying I had completed two years of college, and I considered myself a junior and I know my parents did. But I was really confused as to where exactly I was. No one really knew where to place me, and I wasn’t sure if I was a freshman or a junior. It was just one thing that gave me an identity crisis.”

This problem seemed less intense for students who had not gone to community college full-time and, in the process, lost touch with their age-peers. One student who reported no difficulty in seeing herself now as a freshman, had remained half-time in her high school, and said, “I think that might have made it easier for me to stay at my peers’ level, because I still had a lot of contact with them.”

Most participants had not become involved with extra-curricular activities. The usual reason given was “no time.” Nonetheless, most appeared at least aware of the range of activities on offer, and the few who had become involved in student government, clubs, or

intramurals were enthusiastic about the benefits, with one student noting: “creating that balance is really important.”

RESPONSE TO THE RUNNING START PROGRAM GENERALLY

All students were positive about the personal and educational benefits of involvement in Running Start, and they would recommend it enthusiastically to others. Typical comments were: “I’ve grown a lot through that. It’s made me realize who I really am”; “Running Start made me feel like I’d gotten ahead and really done something positive”; and finally, “Running Start is a real advantage as far as everything I got to learn, all the different people I met... I feel like I am a lot more mature because of it... Anyone who can do it, should.”

The only cautionary note sounded was that high-schoolers needed to be personally committed to succeeding in the more independent environment of a community college. In the words of one student, “you just get in a whole different ball game, I think, when you get into college. You definitely have to be self-sufficient.” To which another responded, “Yes, don’t expect somebody to hold your hand.”

In reflecting on the effects of Running Start participation on their choice of a major field of study at Western, all students said that their exposure to the broad range of courses available at the community college had been helpful to them in this regard. For some, it had served to confirm earlier career choices, but for others it had opened up new vistas: “I was on a business track [in high school] and I was going to be this international marketer, and now I’m going to be an elementary teacher, and I wouldn’t have even *thought* about that if I hadn’t gone to Running Start.”

ADVICE FOR WESTERN

The advice offered by study participants related principally to the concerns voiced earlier about perceived inadequacies in the advising received on arrival at Western. For instance, one student offered this advice to faculty, “If [you] are going to be an advisor at Summerstart, know your stuff. Know what you’re talking about.” Comparisons were drawn with community colleges which had designated Running Start advisors or coordinators: “What they really should do [here] is have a specific person to answer questions for

Running Start students.” Suggestions were also made for former Running Start students to be used as “peer advisors” during Summerstart: “If you’re going to do a Running Start seminar, get some people who can give them advice from a [student] perspective.”

Other participants were concerned that the University community attempts to “pigeon-hole” Running Start students. “That’s just really annoying,” one student said, “it’s like, everybody asks, ‘What year are you?’ It’s like that with other students, it’s like that with faculty, it’s like that with everybody. You go to talk with an advisor, the first thing they ask is, ‘What year are you?’ ...I don’t know how to fix that problem.” Another student said, “We shouldn’t be like, oddballs, the thing that messes everybody’s schedule up because we’re not freshmen and we’re not transfers.” Overall, students were firm in their desire not to be dealt with as oddities, but as a legitimate, and accepted, segment of the Western student body.

Most students who participated in this study were satisfied with the quality of their experiences at Western, both during their transition and subsequently. In general, students praised the expertise, helpfulness, and availability of faculty. They appreciated the “extra mile” gone sometimes by staff to get them the help they needed. They enjoyed the quality of student life at Western, and, even if they did not themselves participate in organized extracurricular activities, they acknowledged the range and quality of those on offer.

CLOSING REMARKS

Interest in and concern for Running Start students by the University is high. Yet their unique background also brings out unique issues to be addressed, administrative as well as academic. Certainly one of the most important issues is their initial contact with Western via orientation programs, where certain technical problems will slow the implementation of some solutions. At the time of this report’s publication, for instance, it is not possible for the University to know in advance the number of transfer credits a first-time, incoming student will have. This knowledge is crucial when considering the needs of RS students. Those RS students with only a few transfer credits might still be best served attending Summerstart, the freshmen orientation program. Those RS students with substantial numbers of transfer credits might be best served attending Transitions, the transfer orientation program.

Or it might be best to allow RS students their choice of orientation programs, apprising them that one thing students gain by attending Summerstart is access to a wider course *selection*, as they are allowed to register for classes at those summer sessions.

Also under consideration is the designation of a general advisor to incoming students who have been Running Start participants. This person would be trained specifically as to the unique issues facing RS students, and be available to them until they were formally admitted to a major (at which point the major advisor would take on the primary advising role).

At this point, it may have to suffice to say that issues affecting RS students are being taken seriously at Western, even as solutions are somewhat slow in evolving. The University is well aware that RS students are here to stay, and are a part of its fabric of students and student life. A couple of decades ago, it was common in higher education to refer to the “traditional freshman” as a norm with which variant elements of the student body could be compared. More recently, college educators have recognized the increasing diversification of incoming freshman classes, and observed that the time is approaching when the “traditional freshman” may become more notional than real. The arrival of Running Start students, and their equivalents in other states, on the four-year college scene should be seen as adding just another facet of diversity to an ever-changing student body.



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