

Evaluating Advising for Students at Western Washington University

Student Satisfaction with Advising in the Major

2/6/2024

Western Washington University prides itself on providing a rich, rewarding educational experience that helps students advance toward their potential as scholars, professionals and citizens. Academic advising plays a key role in achieving these outcomes. Responsibilities for academic advising at Western are divided among departments in Academic Affairs and Enrollment and Student Services. With the exception of Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies, undergraduate students at Western don't have direct admission into their majors. For new first-year students starting in the fall, summer Advising and Registration (A&R) provides a mandatory opportunity for advising that leads to registration for the fall quarter. This is a collaboration between the Academic Advising and Student Achievement Center (AASAC) and faculty who are contracted specifically for A&R.

From that point until students seek pre-major advising from an academic department, advising happens with the AASAC. Western is shifting its approach to advising these students to a more intrusive one, particularly for students who have been identified as having academic risk factors, such as being first-generation in college or who have been flagged due to non-participation in the Canvas course management system.

Evaluation of academic advising at Western has been an ongoing effort and has resulted in significant changes since the last NWCCU accreditation review in 2017. In 2018, Western received a comprehensive set of enrollment management recommendations as the outcome of a study commissioned from Ruffalo Noel Levitz. Among them was to strengthen first-year advising, recommending that developmental advising be delivered to at least half of our first-year student population. The onset of the pandemic delayed the implementation of some of the recommendations, but it also created some institutional learning opportunities. The summer A&R process for new students was historically done as a face-to-face event during scheduled summer sessions. It was long recognized that created additional costs for students and potentially family members who didn't live in the local community as they had to make a separate trip to Bellingham. During the pandemic, A&R shifted to a remote format; one of the unanticipated outcomes was an increase in the participation rate for transfer students for whom the program is optional. In addition, the new format is structured so that each student has an individual 30-

minute appointment with an advisor to complete their course selections rather than group advising in a computer lab setting. The feedback from both advisors and students was very positive and the format addressed equity issues that had been increasingly apparent with the previous format. With this information and feedback, it was decided to maintain the remote format for fall A&R after the pandemic ended.

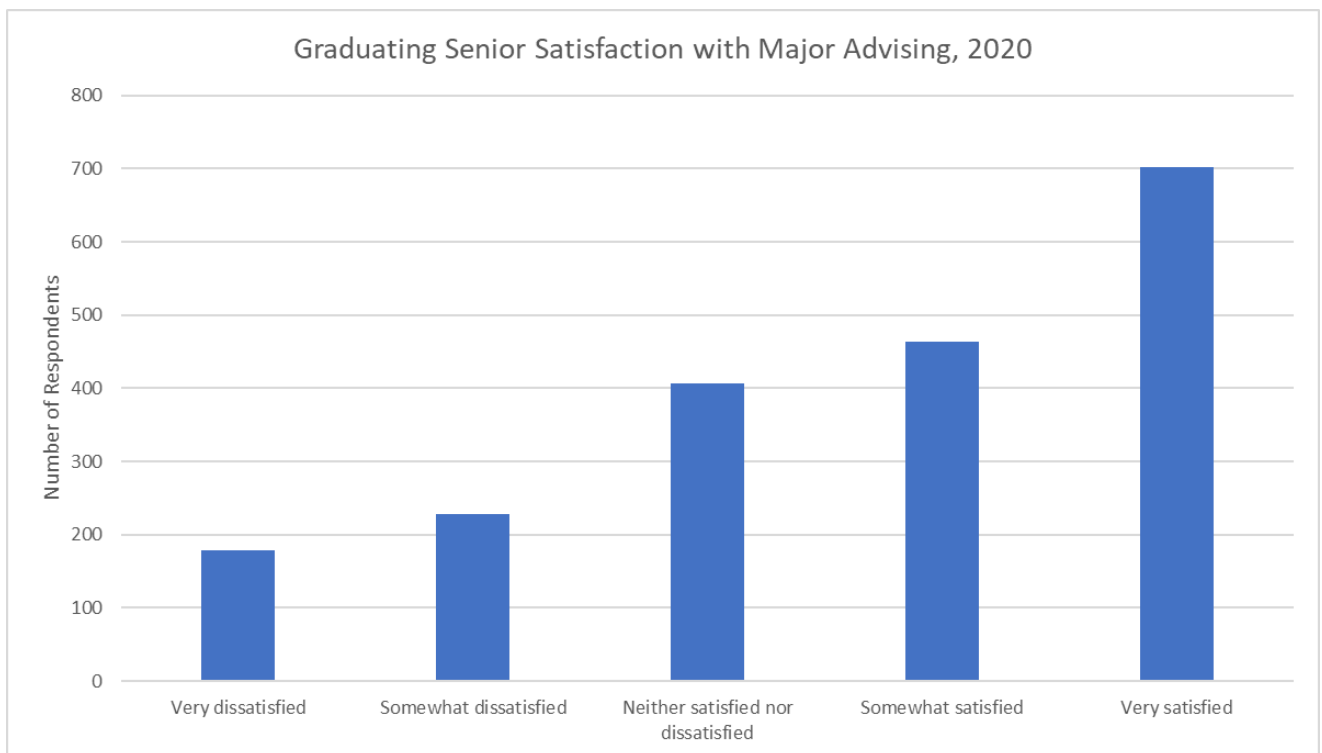
The enrollment and retention drop-off seen during the COVID-19 pandemic brought the question of advising back to the forefront of planning, and the Presidents' Cabinet identified improved first-year advising as a key component of our plan to "close the loop" and support enrollment recovery. The new [Academic Advising & Student Achievement Center \(AASAC\)](#) was created in 2023 to provide both academic advising support and targeted outreach to students, especially prior to major declaration. The AASAC is taking steps toward a proactive, intrusive advising model for first-year, undeclared students while also working to enhance support for high-needs student populations such as those categorized as first-generation and/or Pell eligible. The AASAC will be evaluated annually on the basis of continuous assessment measures (including retention and graduation rates of student served) and will engage in a program self-evaluation every 3-5 years, as per Enrollment and Student Services (ESS) assessment practices.

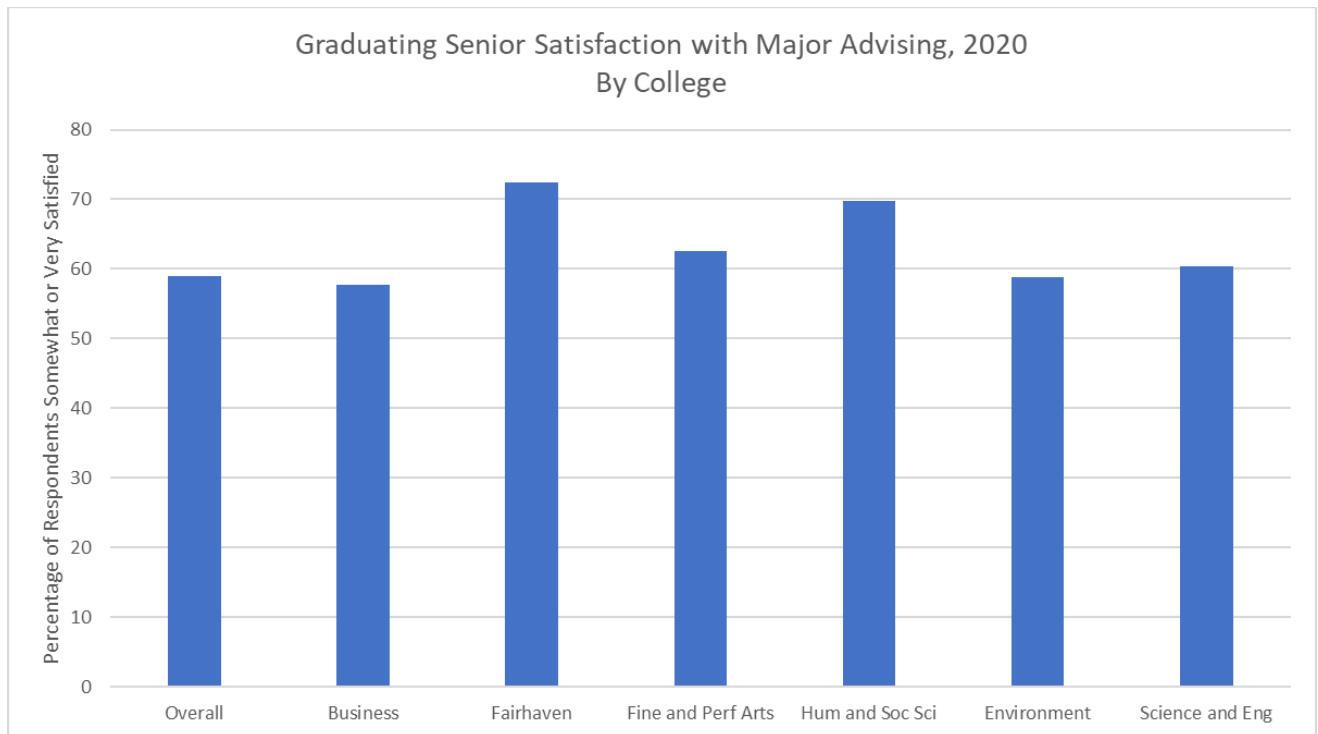
Following the advising services provided by the AASAC to students prior to major declaration, students begin receiving specialized advising from their departments upon pre-major and/or major declaration. In 2016, Western adapted its long-running Western Educational Longitudinal Study (WELS) to include an evaluation of major advising by graduating Seniors. In the last survey of students who completed most of their study prior to the pandemic (conducted in summer 2020), the findings indicated that a small majority (59%) of Western students are satisfied with their advising regarding their major requirements [see Figure 1 below]. These results did vary from college to college [see Figure 2 below]; the high satisfaction with advising at Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies is to be expected, based on the high level of faculty contact that is built into the curriculum, particularly for those students designing their own majors at Fairhaven. The high level of satisfaction with advising in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences (Western's largest, representing about 40% of all degrees conferred) highlights another area of strength within the liberal arts education at Western.

The question of satisfaction with major advising was also posed to graduating students in the WELS conducted in 2016 and 2017. In those two years, the percentage of students who indicated they were somewhat or very satisfied with major advising

was 60% and 58%, respectively, compared to 59% in 2020, indicating that satisfaction with major advising was fairly stable prior to the pandemic. The first survey post-pandemic was conducted in 2023, and the satisfaction level was at 61%, well within the error limits of the survey of the previous results. This is an interesting outcome given the disruption to normal academic experiences that these students experienced during the pandemic.

The WELS provides some additional insights into students' experience with major advising. For example, students who graduated in 2020 having taken more than four years were asked if poor advising from their major department was a factor in their graduation being delayed. A strong majority (66%) indicated that poor advising was NOT a reason the delay; only 12% indicated it was a major reason. Students were also asked if poor pre-major advising was a factor in the delay of their graduation; 25% indicated this was a major reason, and 23% said it was a minor reason.





Western also surveys students at the end of their second year in the WELS, and students who were dissatisfied with their experience at Western to that point were asked why, and about 3% indicated that inadequate academic advising was the reason. Among those students completing their Sophomore year in 2020 who anticipated that completing their degree would take more than 4 years, 5.6% indicated that poor advising was a factor in the delay of their graduation. In both cases, many other factors were indicated as more important than academic advising. Students in this survey who had not yet declared a major were asked if the lack of advising was a factor; 11% of those who responded indicated that lack of advising was a major factor in their lack of a major, and 19% indicated that it was a minor factor.

While these numbers fall short of the general expectations Western has for the students' perception of the effectiveness of academic advising in their majors, it is also not clear if this has played any role in the decline in student retention and graduation rates that have emerged in the last four years.

Summary for wwusatwhy

Why are you dissatisfied with your experience at Western?

Answer	Count	Percentage
Difficulty getting into classes (1)	20	2.73%
I am unlikely to graduate in four years (2)	32	4.37%
Difficulty getting financial aid/scholarships (3)	19	2.60%
Poor quality of teaching (4)	23	3.14%
Academic advising is inadequate or lacking (5)	25	3.42%
Lack of caring and support from professors (6)	16	2.19%
Classes are too big (7)	5	0.68%
Courses/exams are too difficult (8)	11	1.50%
I have not enjoyed my time at Western as much as I would have liked (9)	34	4.64%
I have not been accepted into the program I want (10)	5	0.68%
I'm not getting my money's worth at Western (12)	29	3.96%
Other, please specify below (13)	8	1.09%
Not completed or Not displayed	679	92.76%

Why do you expect to take more than four years to earn your bachelor's degree at Western?

Answer	Count	Percentage
I am earning a minor degree (29)	30	4.10%
I am/was uncertain about which major to choose (30)	64	8.74%
I can't get into the classes I need (31)	50	6.83%
I changed my major (23)	26	3.55%
I had to retake classes due to low grades (32)	42	5.74%
I am pursuing more than one major (33)	13	1.78%
I took quarters off (38)	20	2.73%
I spend a lot of time working for pay (34)	27	3.69%
I am involved in student activities, athletics, etc. (35)	10	1.37%
My major/intended major takes longer than 4 years (36)	38	5.19%
I took classes that didn't end up counting toward my degree requirements (25)	63	8.61%
I received poor advising prior to declaring my major (24)	41	5.60%
I wanted to take a lighter course load (26)	31	4.23%
I need to complete an internship, practicum, student teaching, etc. (37)	11	1.50%
Other (27)	15	2.05%
Not completed or Not displayed	566	77.32%

When the restructuring of the undeclared advising through the AASAC goes through its first program self-evaluation, Western will also implement an expanded assessment of major advising. This will be done through an expanded WELS of graduating seniors who will be asked about their experiences with aspects of their pre-major and major advising experience, including published catalog and departmental materials, the [Degree Works](#) tool for evaluating progress toward the degree, and the accessibility and responsiveness of major academic advisors. We will also evaluate the process and impact of the roll-out of the [Navigate](#) tool for academic advising that became widely available to all academic advisors in 2022 with the addition of a new staff support position.