TO: Members of the Board of Trustees
FROM: President Sabah Randhawa by Provost Brent Carbajal
DATE: October 13, 2017
SUBJECT: Academic Affairs Report: Freshman Interest Groups (FIG) Update
PURPOSE: Information Item

Purpose of Submittal:

Steven VanderStaay, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education, is providing members of the Board of Trustees with the following update on the University’s Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program.

Freshman Interest Groups (FIG)
Update to the Board of Trustees, October, 2017

In our efforts to serve the state of Washington, we seek to help an increasingly diverse student body attain the high rates of graduation and achievement Western students are known for. To this end, we have implemented a variety of evidence-based instructional and curricular programs which we rigorously assess with an eye to continuous improvement.

Western’s Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program is our largest and most established, evidence-based curricular intervention. Today we are pleased to report that analyses of the FIG program demonstrate continued and positive impacts upon achievement.

Western’s FIG program provides recommended clusters of three thematically-connected courses that groups of 15-25 students take together as a cohort. The cluster includes two large general education courses and a small seminar. The seminar is academic in focus but also provides integrated, college-success activities and a small, discussion-based format in which the cluster theme or essential question can be explored.

For instance, our Global Citizenship FIG links “Introduction to International Studies” and “Human Geography” to a small seminar where students explore the question, “What can we do, and what must we know, to live responsibly in a global world?” Course content from the larger courses informs analysis of this question within the seminar.

In contrast to similar programs at the U of O and UW, Western’s FIG seminars are academic in nature and conclude with a formal paper or presentation.

Following an evidence-based model, we have expanded FIGs so that more students can share in its benefits. Whereas 220 students participated in the program in 2009, more than 600 students are enrolled in FIG clusters this fall.
In our most recent analysis, we compared 1st—2nd year retention of low-income students who did and did not participate in the FIG program in their first year. As illustrated in the table below, FIG participation is positively correlated with an 18% increase in rates of retention for Pell-eligible students in the 50-59 band of academic preparation. This band of academic preparation includes students who entered Western with high school GPAs from about 3.0 to 3.7 and describes the “average” Western student.

Retention Rates (frosh to sophomore): FIG/not-FIG and PELL-eligible by AI
(fall, 2017, to August, 2018)

We find this graph noteworthy for two reasons:

First, this graph confirms previous demonstrations that FIGs does not seem to help students in our lowest bands of academic preparation. While most Western students are in the average bands of preparation, we want to make sure FIGs serves all our students and will follow up on this finding with more analysis.

Second, this boost in retention is greater than that we have documented in past years and may suggest that the impact of FIGs on the retention and achievement of low-income students is becoming stronger. This finding is significant because Western has had a small but persistent graduation differential for Pell-grant eligible students. It is our hope that the positive impact of FIGs on 1st-2nd year retention may help to eliminate this differential for participating students.