

# Guiding and Gauging: Peer Leaders' Perceptions of the First-Year Student Experience

Timothy J. Bono, Katharine E. Pei, and Danielle F. Bristow

*The present study explores the extent to which peer leaders are able to accurately gauge first-year students' transitions into university life. Over the 15 weeks of the fall semester, 93 freshmen reported on their academic, social, and psychological experiences during their transition; meanwhile, 63 peer leaders reported weekly on their perceptions of the freshman experiences, along with their own psychological and academic well-being during the semester. Overall, peer leaders were highly accurate in their perceptions of the freshman transition. Peer leaders had the lowest accuracy during weeks that were personally stressful. Recommendations are provided on how to best support and train peer mentors for optimal success.*

At a time when students, families, and the federal government are ever mindful of the challenges facing higher education today, the notions of persistence, retention, and matriculation have become paramount. The increase in scholarly activities and professional conferences surrounding these topics—along with the growth of consulting agencies specializing in these areas—underscore their importance and value. Retention and persistence also have become topics for discussion among many leaders across all facets of the student services profession. For example, the 2012 National Orientation Directors Association Annual Conference featured a Symposium on Retention, partnering with several other higher education associations, including the Association for Student Conduct Administration (ASCA), National Academic Advising Association (NACADA), National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students (NISTS), National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (FYE), and National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

Given the importance of student persistence, it is essential to understand the factors that predict the likelihood a student will remain in college and be

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successful. One characteristic that can strengthen students' experiences during their transition to college is interaction with peer leaders. Peers influence numerous aspects of students' identity during college, including their "academic and social self-concept; intellectual orientation; interpersonal skills; moral development; general maturity and personal development; and educational aspirations and educational attainment" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, pp. 620-621). Given the salutary effects of peer mentoring, institutions across the country have developed many varied peer leadership roles to support new students. Specifically, first-year students are served by peer leaders who function as resident advisors, first-year seminar co-instructors, academic mentors, orientation leaders, and in other helping roles.

Peer mentors who are specially trained to develop intentional and positive relationships with incoming students and build this connection to deliver social and academic messaging within a structured setting are a particularly important support system for new students. The more positive support systems an incoming student has, especially in the first weeks of college, the greater the impact on the development of the student and the greater the likelihood of a successful transition overall (Gardner, 2001; Swenson, Nordstrom, & Heister, 2008). In particular, the new students experienced better emotional adjustment through positive attachment to upper-level peer mentors (Ender & Kay, 2001). Further, peer leaders are an effective intervention in assisting fellow students with social anxiety, leading to a significant influence on lowering dropout rates (Ender & Kay, 2001). Because peer mentors contribute to higher levels of student satisfaction, persistence, and matriculation, it is prudent for student affairs professionals to develop and maintain peer leadership programs. Peer leaders should be skilled and passionate upper-level students who are still close enough to their own first-year experience to understand the new students with whom they work. Trained peer leaders appreciate the ebb and flow of the lives of first-year students, allowing them to anticipate the needs of these students and deliver support and resources in an effective and timely manner. Additionally, peer leaders should be able to gauge the experiences of their students so they can provide the appropriate support to them at the appropriate times during the semester.

## Purpose of the Study

Because one of the key roles of a peer leader is accuracy in understanding the transition of new students, the present study assessed both the actual experiences of first-year students as well as the corresponding perceptions of peer leaders working with them. This allows us to understand the extent to which peer leaders are able to gauge the fluctuations of first-year students' experiences, such as their academic performance and the sense of community they have developed on campus. For the purpose of this paper, the terms "peer mentor" and "peer leader" will be used interchangeably when referring to upper-division students (those who have completed one or more academic year at an institution) who support new students.

## The Institution and Its Students

Chartered in 1853, Washington University in St. Louis is a four-year, private, highly selective institution, offering undergraduate and graduate programs through the doctoral level. The undergraduate student population is comprised of approximately 6,500 students, including 1,800 first-year students arriving in the fall of 2012. In fall 2011, 100% of traditional-aged, first-time freshmen students were residential, living in a residential college system located in the same geographic area of campus. The undergraduate population consists of students from all 50 states and over 100 countries; nearly 65% of these students come from more than 500 miles outside Saint Louis, Missouri. The racial makeup of this population includes 6% African American, 15% Asian American, 58% Caucasian, 4% Hispanic American, 7% International, 10% Multiracial or unspecified, and less than 1% Native American.

## Description of the Peer Leader Program

Developed in 2008, the Washington University Student Associate (WUSA) Program assists new students with their academic, social, cultural, and personal transition to the University. In this structure, WUSAs serve in a dual role as orientation leaders during welcome week and then as academic peer mentors throughout the academic year. The program was developed by merging two previous positions, Orientation Ambassadors and Peer Advisors, from the College of Arts & Sciences. Previously, Orientation Ambassadors supported welcome week by facilitating discussions and events for each residential floor of first-year students. They maintained an ongoing relationship with these students through the first semester but did not have structured content to share with the new students. Peer Advisors in the College of Arts & Sciences delivered academic messages such as important registration deadlines; however, they did not have an ongoing mechanism to deliver this information or the personal relationships to sustain this interaction. Through collaboration with the First Year Center and the College of Arts & Sciences, the two positions were combined to create the Washington University Student Associate program.

In the current iteration of the program, WUSAs continue to facilitate discussions during welcome week and support the staffing of all social and academic events. Two WUSAs serve each residential floor, ranging from 14–68 residents; a team of 10 WUSAs serve the transfer student population. During the academic year, both fall and spring semesters, these peer leaders are required to hold a minimum of two weekly office hours on their assigned residential floor delivering academic information, such as add/drop deadlines and registration planning workshops, and celebrating milestones, such as the completion of the first General Chemistry exam. This position is open to all students who have completed one academic semester at Washington University; however, it is predominantly filled by second-year students. During the 2012-2013 academic year, 84 WUSAs will serve an incoming class of approximately 1,800 students.

## Method

### Participants

Study participants fell into two categories. The first consisted of Washington University freshmen enrolled in a psychology survey course during their first semester at the university. As part of the course, these students completed weekly forms that asked them to report on various aspects of the experiences as they transitioned to university life. Ninety-three students enrolled in the course and gave permission for their data to be used for the present study.

The second category of students consisted of 63 WUSAs. These students completed weekly forms with questions similar to the freshman form; the primary difference was that they were asked to give peer reports of the freshman experiences (i.e., how they *thought* the freshmen were doing) based on their observations and interactions with students on their floors. In addition, the WUSAs also were asked to provide ratings of their own experiences over the course of the semester.

### Scales

Beginning the second week of the semester, both groups of students completed weekly forms that asked a series of questions designed to gauge the first-year experience. Freshmen were asked to give ratings of their own personal experiences, and the WUSAs were asked to give ratings of their perceptions of the freshman experience. For example, freshmen would rate their own average anxiety levels, and the WUSAs would rate their perceptions of the average freshman anxiety levels for that week. They continued providing ratings until the final week of the semester, with the exception of Thanksgiving, when classes were not in session; therefore, students provided these ratings for the following weeks of the fall semester: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14.

### Freshman Form

The freshmen were asked to indicate to what degree each of the following factors described their experiences, providing ratings on a Likert scale ranging from *Not at all* (0) to *Extremely Much* (6): 1) Anxious, 2) Homesick, 3) Involved on campus, 4) Wanted to get away from college, 5) Happy at college, 6) Close with others on my residence floor, 7) Felt like not going to class, 8) Felt motivated to do well in school. These items were intended to gauge both positive and negative experiences and to capture what was happening emotionally, socially, and academically. The researchers were most interested in understanding the extent to which the freshman reports of these experiences would correspond with the WUSA ratings. These eight variables are hereafter referred to as “the freshman transition variables.” Additionally, the freshmen provided weekly ratings for items gauging their confidence that they would one day graduate from the university and the extent to which they felt they had a positive relationship with their WUSAs.

# WUSA Form

The WUSA form involved two sections. The first section asked the WUSAs to give ratings of their perceptions (i.e., peer reports) of the freshman transition variables (the same eight variables for which the freshmen gave self-reports). The second section asked the WUSAs to give ratings of their own experiences. They answered the following three questions each week:

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1) In terms of your school work, how would you rate your functioning this past week?

Much Worse than Usual			About the Same			Much Better than Usual
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

2) Taking all things together, how satisfied do you feel about your life as a whole this past week?

Not at all satisfied			Neutral			Very Satisfied
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

3) How much do you agree with this statement: "I have a positive relationship with my students"?

Strongly Disagree	Moderately Disagree	Slightly Disagree		Slightly Agree	Moderately Agree	Strongly Agree
0	1	2	3	4	5	6

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## Results and Discussion

### Comparing Freshman Reports and WUSA Perceptions

Recall that the weekly forms were completed by both groups, the freshmen and the WUSAs, starting with the second week of the semester. They completed them for all subsequent weeks of the semester with the exception of week 12, the week of Thanksgiving, when most students were not on campus. Because students were completing these forms for virtually all weeks during the semester, researchers were able to understand which weeks had the greatest correspondence between the freshman self-reports and the WUSA peer reports. To determine this, independent samples *t* tests were conducted, comparing the two groups of students, freshmen and WUSAs, for each of the eight freshman transition variables. Tables 1-8 list the weekly mean reports of the freshmen and WUSAs. Values for which the *t* statistic

is not significant ( $p > .05$ ; i.e., the freshman reports and WUSA perceptions are statistically equivalent) are presented in bold type face.

Graphs 1-8 depict the freshman reports and WUSA perceptions, noting both the correspondence between the two as well as the fluctuations over the semester. Table 9 provides a summary of all eight transition variables, identifying with an asterisk weeks when there was no statistical difference between the freshman and WUSA averages. A grand summary appears at the bottom of the table that lists, by week, the number of variables when there was correspondence between the WUSA perceptions and freshman reports.

Because the researchers were interested in understanding how often the WUSA reports matched the freshman reports, the weeks in which the two scores are not statistically different from one another ( $p > 0.05$ ) are highlighted in bold in Tables 1-8. Overall, the variables with the highest correspondence were homesickness (all 12 weeks were statistically equivalent), being happy at college (eight weeks were statistically equivalent), feeling involved on campus (seven weeks were statistically equivalent), and feeling close with others on the residence floor (seven weeks were statistically equivalent). In the second week of the semester, the first week in which both groups were answering the questionnaires, freshman reports and WUSA perceptions corresponded for seven of the eight variables, the highest number of any of the weeks throughout the semester.

## Perceptive Accuracy as Function of WUSA Well-Being

There are five weeks in which freshman reports and WUSA perceptions were statistically equivalent for fewer than half (i.e., only two or three) of the variables. This occurred during weeks four, five, six, nine, and ten. The reason for this dip in accuracy may lie in the WUSAs' psychological wellbeing during those weeks. Recall that WUSAs gave weekly reports of their own experiences (see the "WUSA experience questions"), which allows us to understand how their experiences fluctuated as well. In week five, WUSAs gave ratings that were significantly less than the overall mean for both academic functioning ( $t = -2.24, p < .05$ ) and life satisfaction ( $t = -2.91, p < .01$ ). In week nine, there was a non-significant trend indicating a dip in WUSAs' ratings for their relationships with their students ( $t = -1.58, p = .12$ ). Further, there were major midterm exams during weeks nine and ten, which may have affected the WUSAs' performance as well. In other words, the psychological well-being of WUSAs may play a role in their ability to accurately gauge the experience of their freshmen. During weeks when their own academic functioning and life satisfaction were lower and when they felt their relationships with their students were not as positive, they were not as accurate in perceiving the freshman experience.

## The Freshman-WUSA Relationship

In addition to the eight “freshman transition variables” that students rated weekly, the freshmen also rated their confidence that they would one day graduate from the university, along with the extent to which they felt they had a positive relationship with their WUSAs. Because the primary interest was understanding the dynamic of the freshman-WUSA relationship, the researchers performed a bivariate correlation analysis between freshman reports of positive relationships with their WUSAs and the other variables they rated each week. Reported in order of the strength of their magnitude, freshman reports of positive relationships with their WUSAs are significantly correlated with the following: confidence they will graduate from the university ( $r = 0.39$ ), feeling close with others on the residence floor ( $r = 0.37, p < .001$ ), feeling happy to be at college ( $r = 0.32, p < .001$ ), and feeling involved on campus ( $r = 0.23, p < .001$ ). In other words, when students reported a positive relationship with their WUSAs, it was an indication that other aspects of their lives—both academic and social—were also going well.

Taken together, three major themes emerged from this study. First, peer leaders were accurate in their perceptions of the freshman transition, especially regarding freshman homesickness, involvement on campus, happiness in college, and feeling close with their residential floor. Second, the accuracy of peer leaders’ perceptions were not as accurate during weeks when they encountered stress and lower satisfaction in their own lives. Third, when first-year students reported positive relationships with their WUSAs, they also reported the highest levels of confidence they would graduate from the university.

## Implications for Practice

The present study affirms the large body of knowledge that states the importance of strong upper division peer-mentor relationships with first-year students, as indicated by the third major theme identified in the previous section. These findings, especially from the second major theme, also highlight other variables that can affect a peer mentor’s ability to serve students (i.e., they are less accurate in gauging the student experience when they are more stressed and have more academic commitments).

Using these findings, Washington University implemented changes to the WUSA training program to address the knowledge gaps peer leaders had regarding the freshman transition. Additionally, individual peer mentors were provided support during academically and socially stressful times of the semester. Using these findings, the authors recommend that other institutions implement similar practices on their own campuses.

For example, peer leader training should provide campus-specific data of first-year students showing when key transition and stress points frequently occur for the new students in the academic year. This includes, but is not limited to, information on topics such as the honeymoon stage, homesickness, friendsickness, roommate conflicts, course and academic major choices, value and moral conflicts,

disappointment with co-curricular application processes, and unanticipated academic struggles. Learning outcomes regarding what new students should know and do by the end of their first year of college should be shared with the peer mentors. Expectations and suggestions for how peer mentors will facilitate the accomplishment of these learning outcomes are essential.

In addition to supplemental training, the authors further recommend providing personal support directly to peer leaders. This comes in the form of offering academic and professional development training sessions for peer mentors in areas such as stress management, time management, and major exploration to prepare for declaration in the second semester of their sophomore year. Training schedules and position requirements should be adjusted for peer mentors to allow for a lighter workload during midterms, finals, and other heavy academic exam weeks. Lastly, peer mentors should be provided with milestone celebration events and recognition for academic accomplishments, including the successful completion of key exams, major declaration in the sophomore year, and commencement recognition paraphernalia and ceremonies.

When additional training and support for peer leaders is provided, they are better able to gauge the pulse of the new student transition and provide students with the appropriate support. This can translate to higher levels of satisfaction and, ultimately, higher retention.

## References

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TABLE 1

**Anxious**

Week	Freshman Mean	WUSA Mean
2*	2.31	2.59
3	2.19	3.35
4	2.54	3.21
5	2.68	3.78
6	2.86	3.25
7	2.24	3.05
8	2.30	2.93
9*	2.39	2.54
10	2.33	2.95
11*	2.36	2.60
13	1.60	2.74
14	2.28	3.35

TABLE 2

**Homesick**

Week	Freshman Mean	WUSA Mean
2*	1.22	1.48
3*	1.51	1.38
4*	1.43	1.66
5*	1.73	1.93
6*	2.01	2.05
7*	1.91	2.00
8*	1.79	1.69
9*	1.82	1.86
10*	2.12	1.80
11*	2.66	2.44
13*	1.49	1.80
14*	2.20	1.92

TABLE 3

**Involved on Campus**

Week	Freshman Mean	WUSA Mean
2*	3.69	3.75
3*	3.87	3.90
4*	3.78	3.91
5*	3.55	3.60
6*	3.42	3.54
7	3.25	4.13
8*	3.64	4.03
9	3.58	4.21
10	3.38	4.32
11*	3.75	4.17
13	2.62	3.74
14	3.38	4.46

TABLE 4

**Wanted to Get Away from College**

Week	Freshman Mean	WUSA Mean
2*	1.29	1.52
3	1.24	2.13
4	1.46	2.59
5	1.84	2.87
6	2.27	3.14
7*	2.73	3.26
8	2.07	2.79
9	1.91	2.75
10	2.09	3.05
11	2.36	3.24
13*	3.25	3.65
14*	2.57	3.12

TABLE 5

**Happy at College**

Week	Freshman Mean	WUSA Mean
2*	5.11	5.07
3	5.19	4.60
4	5.00	4.53
5	5.08	4.07
6	4.76	4.29
7*	4.74	4.51
8*	4.97	4.66
9*	4.89	4.56
10*	4.88	4.68
11*	4.82	4.56
13*	4.89	4.51
14*	4.82	4.54

TABLE 6

**Close with Others on Residence Floor**

Week	Freshman Mean	WUSA Mean
2*	4.72	5.08
3*	4.73	5.08
4*	4.78	4.95
5*	4.42	4.83
6	4.38	4.84
7	4.22	4.87
8*	4.49	4.90
9	4.49	4.96
10	4.38	4.93
11	4.42	5.04
13*	4.28	4.63
14	4.27	5.04

TABLE 7

**Felt Like Not Going to Class**

Week	Freshman Mean	WUSA Mean
2	2.48	1.90
<b>3*</b>	<b>2.61</b>	<b>2.28</b>
4	2.97	2.43
<b>5</b>	<b>3.17</b>	<b>2.30</b>
6	3.29	2.30
<b>7*</b>	<b>3.17</b>	<b>2.72</b>
<b>8*</b>	<b>3.20</b>	<b>2.69</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>3.20</b>	<b>2.58</b>
10	3.34	2.27
<b>11*</b>	<b>3.16</b>	<b>2.73</b>
13	3.64	2.97
<b>14</b>	<b>3.67</b>	<b>2.35</b>

TABLE 8

**Felt Motivated to Do Well in School**

Week	Freshman Mean	WUSA Mean
<b>2*</b>	<b>5.02</b>	<b>4.78</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>5.10</b>	<b>4.65</b>
4	5.07	4.62
<b>5</b>	<b>5.10</b>	<b>4.40</b>
6	4.88	4.52
<b>7</b>	<b>4.86</b>	<b>4.39</b>
8	5.00	4.38
<b>9</b>	<b>4.82</b>	<b>4.40</b>
10	4.96	4.54
<b>11</b>	<b>4.92</b>	<b>4.48</b>
13	4.80	4.21
<b>14*</b>	<b>4.92</b>	<b>4.62</b>

TABLE 9

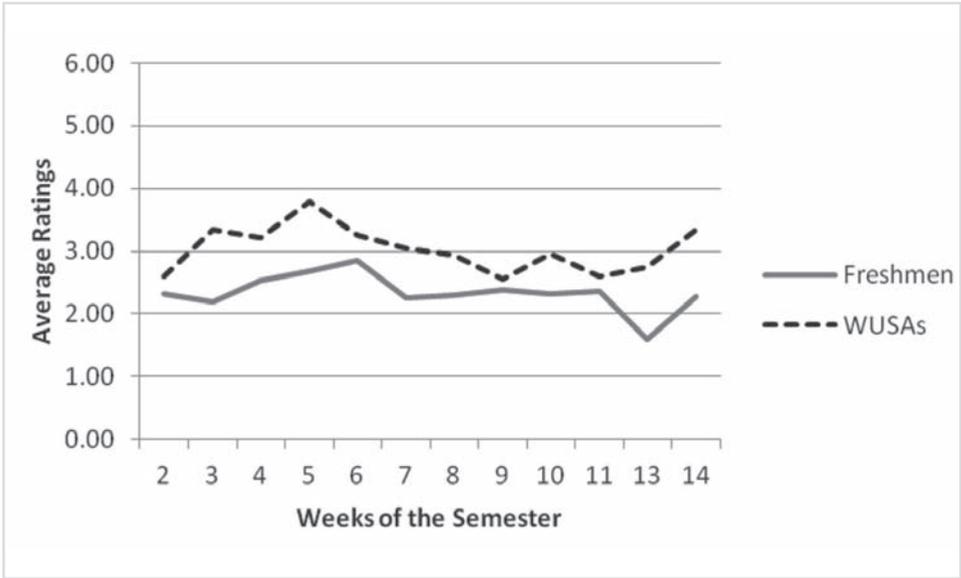
**Weeks of the Semester**

	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	13	14	Total for each variable
Anxious	*							*		*			3
Homesick	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	12
Involved on Campus	*	*	*	*	*		*			*			7
Wanted to get away from college	*					*					*	*	4
Happy at college	*					*	*	*	*	*	*	*	8
Close with others on residence floor	*	*	*	*			*				*		6
Felt like not going to class		*				*	*			*			4
Felt motivated to do well in school	*											*	2
<b>Total for each week</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	

Table 9. \*Weeks in which WUSA perceptions of the freshman experience were not statistically different from the actual freshman reports ( $p > .05$ ).

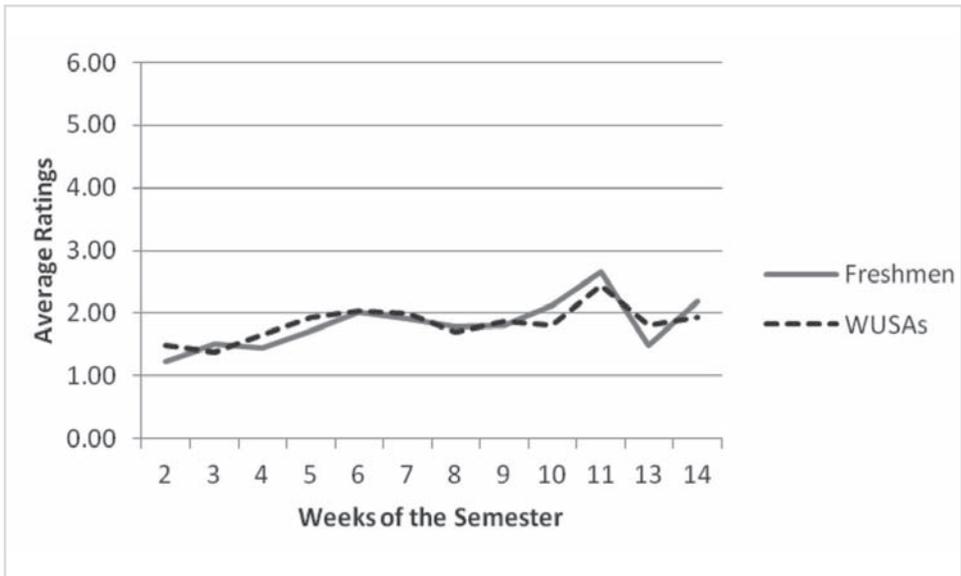
GRAPH 1

### Anxiety



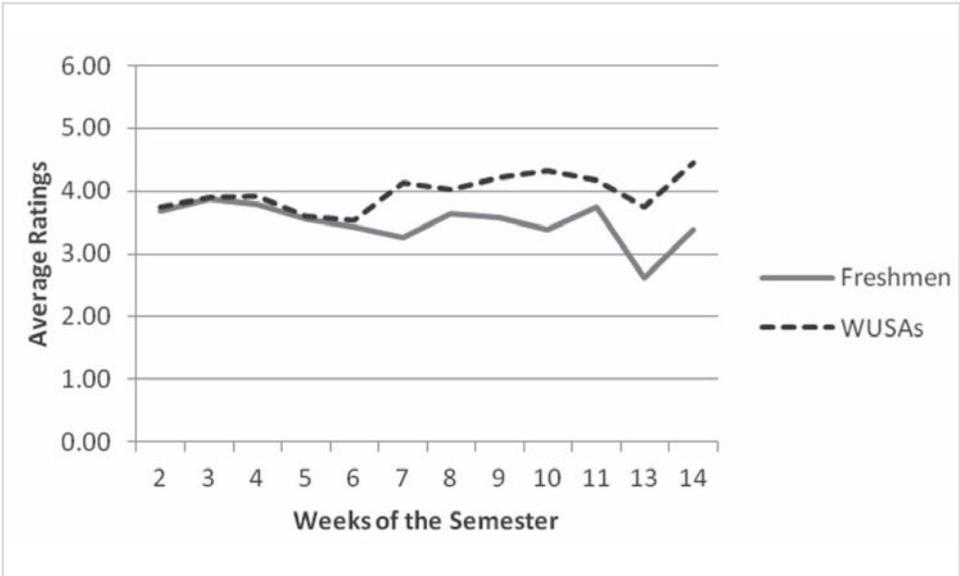
GRAPH 2

### Homesickness



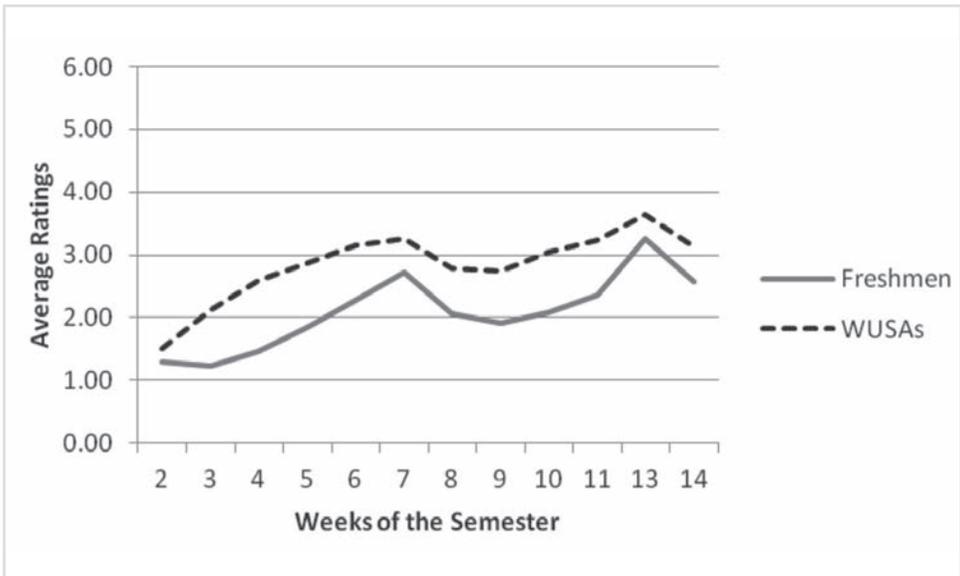
GRAPH 3

### Involved on Campus



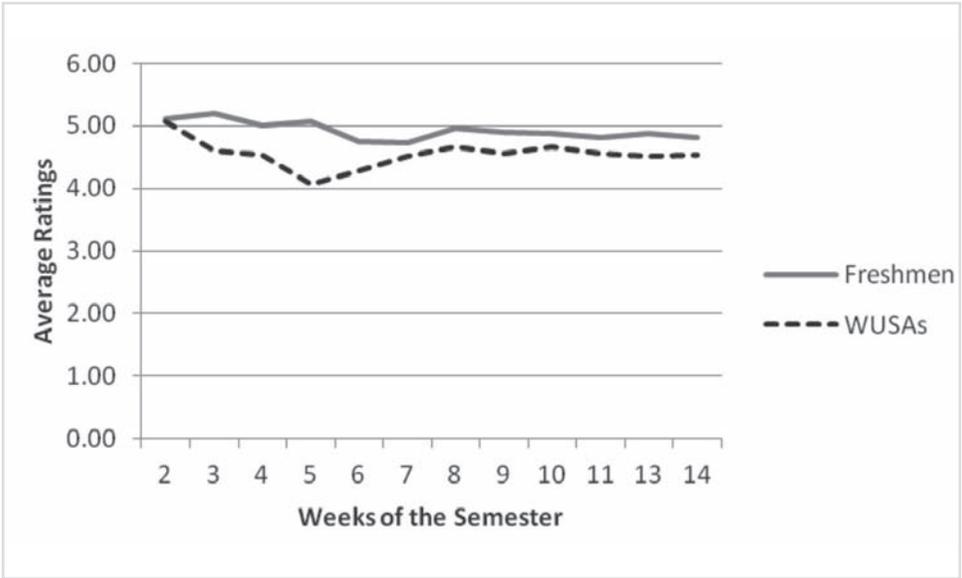
GRAPH 4

### Wanted to Get Away from College



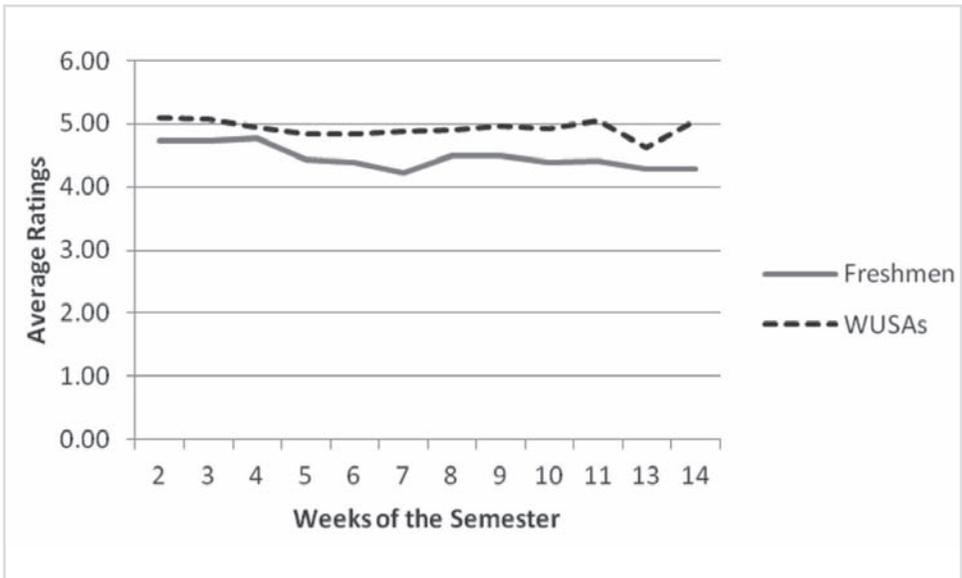
GRAPH 5

### Happy at College



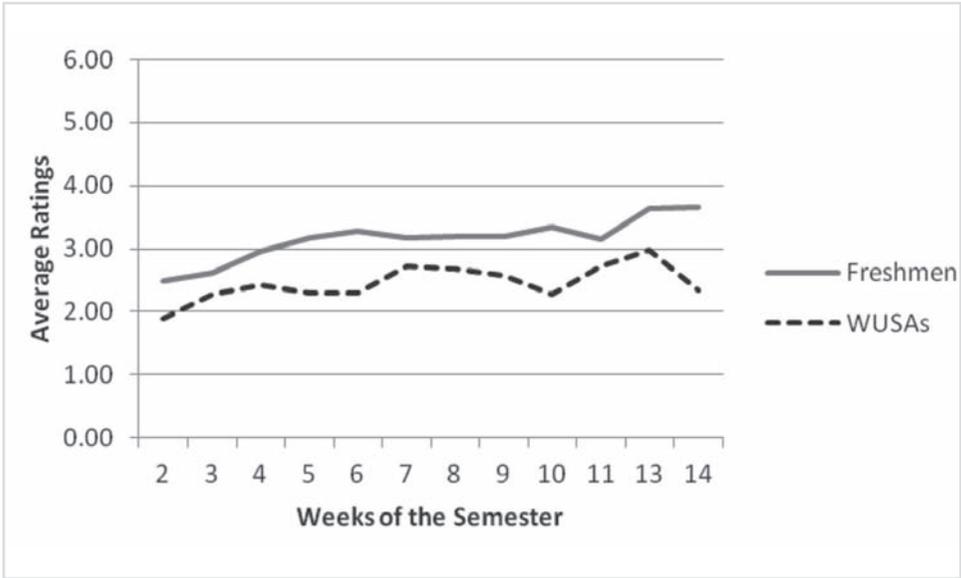
GRAPH 6

### Close with Others on Residence Floor



GRAPH 7

### Felt Like Not Going to Class



GRAPH 8

### Felt Motivated to Do Well in School

