

## Ball State University

As a residential public institution of 15,609 undergraduates, Ball State University strives to provide a strong liberal arts education typical of private institutions while offering degree programs encompassing over 140 majors and minors. The University's commitment to personal learning and excellence in undergraduate teaching is systemic to all aspects of undergraduate education. The heart of this commitment, though, rests in the freshman year. For Ball State University, freshman year success is not a public relations platitude. From the moment freshmen complete a required two-day orientation program, they understand the University's commitment to first-year students through several broad areas of academic life: (1) The University Core Curriculum (2) the Freshman Connections Program (3) University College (4) freshman seminar courses (5) faculty development.

### 1. The University Core Curriculum

The University Core Curriculum (UCC) program is required of all Ball State undergraduate students regardless of the academic majors they choose. Consisting of courses in English, mathematics, science, social science, fine arts, and global studies, the UCC constitutes nearly a third of a Ball State baccalaureate degree. Along with historical context, the core curriculum stresses communication abilities not only in written and spoken form, but also in mathematics. Ball State University is among the 15% of institutions nationwide that require mathematics in their general education programs. In addition, the UCC reflects the new global reality of our existence by requiring every student to take a course in international/global studies.

The University Senate's UCC Subcommittee assesses all courses in the program on an individual basis. Initial assessment has resulted in several major changes in the program. A second cycle of assessment is now two-thirds completed; at the conclusion of this cycle, the subcommittee will have created an opportunity for substantial change or, possibly, total program reform.

The UCC has been recognized by the Association of American Colleges and Universities in its Strong Foundations category as one of the exemplary programs in the country, and the American Academy for Liberal Education has praised Ball State's general education assessment process.

### 2. Freshman Connections

No other program at Ball State has so clearly demonstrated collaborative undergraduate teaching, faculty development efforts, and a measurable link between effective teaching and student performance than Freshman Connections. Initiated in 1997, Freshman Connections is a complex learning communities program involving nearly all freshmen (Fall 2001 n=3,513) except for Honors College students (Fall 2001 n=415). The program was developed through a process involving teams of faculty, Academic Affairs and Student Affairs administrators, and students from diverse backgrounds.

Freshman Connections places students in linked courses which are part of the University's Core Curriculum. The students enrolled in these classes reside in the same residence hall complex so that "community" for them becomes a seamless integration of in-class learning and out-of-class activities supporting course work. A critical component of Freshman Connections is the Teaching and Learning Team (TLC). Comprised of faculty teaching linked courses, residence hall directors, academic advisors, and peer mentors, each TLT meets regularly to discuss the progress of students enrolled in the team's courses. The scope of Freshman Connections is staggering--114 linked courses (including virtually all introductory English sections), 90 faculty in collaborative teaching relationships, 15 academic advisors, 24 residence hall directors, and over 80 peer mentors. One important piece of Connections is a required reading for all freshmen. During freshman orientation 2001, each student was given a copy of Scott Russell Sanders' *Hunting for Hope* with the assignment to discuss the book in reading groups during Fall Welcome Week. In addition, *Hunting for Hope* became part of the linked courses as faculty developed assignments based on the book. Finally, Dr. Sanders visited Ball State for a Fall 2001 convocation with freshmen and other members of the University community.

Institutional research has documented the impact of Freshman Connections on improved performance of the freshman class, including lower rates of academic probation and disqualification and improved GPAs and rates of return for the sophomore year.

### **3. University College**

Established in 1985, University College is a multi-faceted support college with a range of responsibilities that impact all Ball State students, but particularly freshman. UC's Learning Center provides free peer tutoring, Supplemental Instruction (SI), and academic workshops to over 4,000 students annually. The professional advisors in the Freshman Advising Center offer comprehensive advising for first-year students. Freshman advisors also administer PACE (Partnership for Academic Commitment to Excellence), an intervention program for freshmen on academic probation. The success of UC programs is well documented through grade results and student retention.

### **4. Freshman Seminar Courses**

Ball State's freshman seminar courses are targeted to specific populations. ID 101: The Freshman Seminar for Undecided Students is a seven-week course on academic major selection. Through assessment, instruction in decision making, and exposure to university and community resources, undecided students prepare a major exploration portfolio with the goal of deciding on a major by the end of the first semester. In addition, three of the seven academic colleges offer freshman seminar courses specific to the majors in their departments.

### **5. Faculty Development**

Essential to Ball State University's focus on excellence in undergraduate teaching is the range of development opportunities available to all faculty, contract through tenured. Most of these opportunities are part of the \$200,000 of institutional support provided annually in the Professional Development Opportunities for Faculty Program, which includes support for teaching, curriculum development, and travel, as well as funding for research and scholarly activity. The key facilitator for faculty development is the Office of Teaching and Learning Advancement housed in University College.

Ball State has made considerable effort to document freshman year success. From our Making Achievement Possible (MAP) survey distributed to all freshmen to course evaluations to institutional tracking of student academic performance, we know how and why our freshmen succeed. Our hope is to be chosen to elaborate on our first-year programs as the next step in applying to be an Institution of Excellence in the First College Year.