

## **Criterion Four—Teaching and Learning: Evaluation and Improvement**

The institution demonstrates responsibility for the quality of its educational programs, learning environments, and support services, and it evaluates their effectiveness for student learning through processes designed to promote continuous improvement.

### **Core Component 4.C.**

**The institution demonstrates a commitment to educational improvement through ongoing attention to retention, persistence, and completion rates in its degree and certificate programs.**

Ball State University's approach to improving its rates of student retention, persistence, and completion involves providing students with high-quality, engaging educational experiences. However, the most intense efforts to increase student persistence and completion are taking place outside of the academic departments, few of which have even set retention and graduation goals for their students. For its part, Ball State's Division of Student Affairs has made a broad-based commitment to student persistence and completion by creating opportunities for students to connect with their peers, engage with campus activities, and be challenged in a supportive academic environment.

### **Subcomponent 4.C.1.**

**The institution has defined goals for student retention, persistence, and completion that are ambitious but attainable and appropriate to its mission, student populations, and educational offerings.**

In *Education Redefined: Strategic Plan 2007–2012*, Ball State set goals for retention and graduation that were clear, ambitious, and appropriate: achieve a first-year retention rate of 80 percent by 2012 and achieve a six-year graduation rate of 60 percent by 2012 and 65 percent by 2015. According to the *Retention Synopsis 2011*, the university's first-year retention rate improved from 74.5 percent in 2005 to 79.4 percent in 2011. The *Retention Synopsis* provides comparative data for the persistence of first-time, full-time matriculates for a given cohort, defined by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) as full-time, degree-seeking, fall matriculates. Ball State's six-year graduation rate for 2010–11 was 55.4 percent. The graduation rate for 2011–12 is not yet available.

During the six-year period when retention rates rose, the academic profile of Ball State's admitted students strengthened, and the disqualification rate for first-year students declined. A change in the university's disqualification policy, the expanded living-learning communities on campus, and increased opportunities for student engagement in special summer bridge and student life programs helped increase and sustain the retention of first-year students. Additional information about these programs is presented later in this section.

Ball State's *Strategic Plan 2012–2017* will enhance the quality of the academic experiences for all students. Target retention rates will roll forward in the new plan, with the goal of achieving and

## **BALL STATE UNIVERSITY Self-Study Report for Continuing Accreditation 2013 DRAFT**

*Prepared for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools*

---

maintaining a first-year retention rate of 80 percent. Student success initiatives will continue to emphasize strengthening the academic profile of the student body as well as career assessment, internships, and transfer students.

### **Subcomponent 4.C.2.**

**The institution collects and analyzes information on student retention, persistence, and completion of its programs.**

Effective improvement efforts require accurate and comprehensive information about students, their needs, and the factors that affect persistence and completion. Ball State's Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) annually collects and analyzes retention and graduation data in support of external agency reporting and internal decision-making processes. For example, OIE reports to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) the retention and graduation rates for first-time, full-time Ball State undergraduate students who graduate four, six, and eight years after enrolling. The university's most comprehensive annual source of data on retention and graduation is the Consortium for Student Retention and Graduation Data Exchange (CSRDE), which tracks 10 first-time, full-time undergraduate student cohorts over an 11-year time span disaggregated by gender and ethnicity. CSRDE also provides Ball State with information on retention and graduation rates for institutions that are similar in mission and student composition. Other data collection and analysis initiatives include:

**Common Data Set**—OIE collects information for the Common Data Set (CDS), a collaborative effort designed to improve the quality and accuracy of information provided to all stakeholders involved in student transition to higher education and to reduce the reporting burden on data providers. The CDS uses clear, standard data items and definitions to determine the relevant student cohort for each item. Data items and definitions used by the U.S. Department of Education in its higher education surveys guide the continued development of the CDS.

**Student Flow Model**—OIE is developing a larger "student flow" model of tracking that follows all Ball State students every semester through the receipt of a degree. Enrollment, retention, and graduation rates as well as time to degree, cumulative grade point averages, and cumulative credit hours earned are tracked for all students in a cohort. The major cohort groups are new freshmen, new transfers, new graduate students, students in living-learning communities, and adult learners. These flow models will be deployed as a series of searchable web pages on the OIE website, where users can disaggregate the data by gender, race/ethnicity, academic program and college, test score bands, residency status, and cohort year.

**Published Reports**—OIE publishes a regular series of *Ball State Fact Book* and departmental profile reports online as a series of PDF documents. In the future, these profiles will be redeployed as searchable online reports so internal and external stakeholders can quickly understand the status of university enrollment, retention and graduation rates, degrees conferred, and other data of interest.

**Empirical Studies**—OIE also conducts its own empirical studies on variables affecting persistence and completion. For example, a 2012 OIE study found that from 2005–06 to 2010–11, the median number of semesters to complete a baccalaureate degree at Ball State was 10, and the fewer the average credit hours taken per semester, the longer it took to graduate. More surprisingly, this study found that

## **BALL STATE UNIVERSITY Self-Study Report for Continuing Accreditation 2013 DRAFT**

*Prepared for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools*

---

students who changed majors took fewer semesters to complete their degrees than did other students. Perhaps students who change majors later increase their course loads to make up for lost time, or maybe students who decide to change their field of study are more fully engaged in the academic purposes of college. Regardless of the explanation, OIE's empirical approach to understanding and promoting degree completion suggests that in addition to encouraging students to take heavier course loads, it may be important to not discourage them from changing to a major they decide is more appropriate.

### **Unit Data Collection**

Several academic programs at Ball State also collect student retention and completion data for their external accreditations. Examples include:

- The Department of Social Work tracks students at each level of its program and reports additional demographic information as part of its annual report to the Council on Social Work Education.
- The Department of Journalism participates in the annual survey of the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication and creates a student profile report that tracks graduation rates and the success achieved by minority students.
- The Miller Scholars program in the Miller College of Business is a four-year, cohort-based, comprehensive academic and scholarship program that consists of a differentiated curriculum and developmental programming focused on academic, professional, networking, and social growth. Retention, persistence, and completion of programs are tracked for each of the approximately 80 students at the end of each semester through verification of course progress, grade achievement, and future semester planning. Academic advising is required at least once each semester for the first four semesters. Students are then assigned to faculty advisors. A year-end survey is also conducted to assess student-perceived levels of importance and satisfaction regarding program offerings.

One of the most advanced practices for data collection is the Decision Points (DP) Model used by the Teachers College. In this model, each program in the college identifies key assessments for monitoring student progress and guiding decisions about student performance. Accuracy of the assessment is determined through data review to ensure that knowledge, skills, and dispositions are measured as prescribed by program and state standards and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Specialized Professional Associations (SPA). Consistency of the assessment procedures is maintained using common unit assessments (e.g., the Unit Dispositions Assessment and the Unit Digital Portfolio Assessment), allowing for comparison within and across student performance over programs, semesters, years, course instructors, gender, and other dimensions.

Remediation and appeal procedures allow units in the Teachers College to implement the DP requirements fairly for all students and across all programs, and multiple surveys (e.g., exit survey) obtain students' views of the evaluation guidelines, satisfaction with their program, and perceptions of fairness and accuracy. As an example of this feedback loop, more than 10 percent of graduating special education students in 2011 disagreed on the exit survey that they were prepared to work effectively with students having linguistic differences. As a result, teaching strategies for students with linguistic differences were added to three special education courses beginning in spring 2012.

## BALL STATE UNIVERSITY Self-Study Report for Continuing Accreditation 2013 DRAFT

Prepared for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

---

### Indirect Evidence

With too many students nationwide failing to complete a bachelor’s degree within six years, it is useful to examine correlates of persistence and completion that are under the control of university policies or practices. One useful measure of an institution’s overall success in these respects is seniors’ answers on selected items from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), such as “How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?” and “If you could start over again, would you go to the *same institution* you are now attending?” Table 2 below displays these and other relevant items organized in groups labeled “engaged learning,” “supportive relationships,” and “practical support” (which includes academic advising). Table 2 compares responses of Ball State seniors in 2008 and 2012 to responses from NSSE’s 2008 and 2012 national samples of seniors from institutions in Ball State’s Carnegie classification, Research University/High Research Activity, or RU/H.

**Table 2: 2008–2012 Ball State-NSSE Comparisons (Seniors)**

	Ball State 2008	NSSE 2008	Ball State 2012	NSSE 2012
<b>Engaged learning:</b> <i>Percent done or plan to do before graduation</i>				
Practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment	85 percent	77 percent	81 percent	78 percent
Community service or volunteer work	80 percent	75 percent	78 percent	76 percent
Study abroad	27 percent	23 percent	23 percent	23 percent
Work on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements	35 percent	34 percent	33 percent	37 percent
<b>Supportive relationships:</b> <i>Quality of your relationships with people at your institution (1 = unfriendly, unsupportive, sense of alienation, 7 = friendly, supportive, sense of belonging) (Percent 5 or greater shown)</i>				
Relationships with other students	85 percent	81 percent	86 percent	82 percent
Relationships with faculty members	80 percent	73 percent	81 percent	78 percent
Relationships with administrative personnel and offices	48 percent	51 percent	52 percent	57 percent
<b>Practical support:</b> <i>To what extent does your institution emphasize each of the following? (Percent very much or quite a bit)</i>				
Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically	72 percent	68 percent	71 percent	70 percent
Helping you cope with your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)	25 percent	26 percent	28 percent	28 percent

## BALL STATE UNIVERSITY Self-Study Report for Continuing Accreditation 2013 DRAFT

Prepared for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

---

Providing the support you need to thrive socially	60 percent	36 percent	39 percent	39 percent
Overall, how would you evaluate the quality of academic advising you have received at your institution? (Percent excellent or good)	63 percent	64 percent	71 percent	71 percent
<b>Overall satisfaction:</b>				
How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution? (Percent excellent or good)	87 percent	85 percent	87 percent	85 percent
If you could start over again, would you go to the <i>same institution</i> you are now attending? (Percent definitely yes or probably yes)	84 percent	80 percent	82 percent	82 percent

**Engaged Learning**—In 2008, the percentages of Ball State seniors reporting that their educations included “engaged learning” was 4-8 percentage points higher than the NSSE normative group on three items, and 1 percentage point higher on the fourth item. On these same items in 2012, the percentages of Ball State seniors were similar to the NSSE normative group on three items, and 4 percentage points lower on the item “Work on a research project with a faculty member outside of course or program requirements.”

**Practical Support**—The percentages of Ball State seniors reporting that they received “practical support” during their time at Ball State were 4 percentage points higher than the NSSE normative group on “Providing the support you need to help you succeed academically,” 24 percentage points higher on “providing the support you need to thrive socially,” and similar to the normative group on the other two items. In 2012, Ball State students were similar to the normative group on all four items.

**Supportive Relationships**—The percentage of Ball State seniors reporting satisfaction with their relationships with other students was 4 percentage points higher than the NSSE normative group in both 2008 and 2012, and the percentage reporting satisfaction with their relationships with faculty was 7 percentage points higher than the NSSE normative group in 2008 and 3 percentage points higher in 2012. However, the percentage reporting satisfaction in their “relationships with administrative personnel and offices” was 3 percentage points lower than the NSSE normative group in 2008 and 5 percentage points lower in 2012.

**Overall Satisfaction**—On the two summary questions, Ball State seniors were 2 percentage points higher than the normative group in both 2008 and 2012 in rating their “entire educational experience” at Ball State as “excellent or good,” and on the item “If you could start over again, would you go to the *same institution* you are now attending?” Ball State seniors were 4 percentage points higher in responding “definitely yes” or “probably yes” in 2008 and equal to the normative group in this same percentage in 2012.

Thus, Ball State seniors completing the NSSE survey in 2008 and 2012 were generally very satisfied and were involved in activities related to persistence and completion. They generally equaled or exceeded

## **BALL STATE UNIVERSITY Self-Study Report for Continuing Accreditation 2013 DRAFT**

*Prepared for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools*

---

seniors from other RU/H institutions in NSSE's national sample with respect to supportive relationships and academic support. Support from administrators and academic advising were average in comparison with the normative group.

Very similar perceptions were also reported in the one- and five-year Alumni Surveys described earlier. For example, 95 percent of alumni reported a very positive or positive attitude toward Ball State one year after graduation, while 92 percent of alumni had a very positive or positive attitude toward Ball State five years after graduation.

### **Subcomponent 4.C.3.**

**The institution uses information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs to make improvements as warranted by the data.**

Several factors contributed to the improvement in Ball State's first-year retention rate from 74.5 percent in 2005 to 79.4 percent in 2011. For one, the university's efforts to strengthen the academic profile of admitted students produced a lower disqualification rate for first-year students. Also, beginning in 2006, students who previously would have been disqualified for having a first-semester grade point average (GPA) of 1.0 or lower were given the opportunity to participate in a program called Academic Made, in which they met regularly with their academic advisor and attended study skills or similar workshops. Over a two-year period, an additional 30 students persisted to the sophomore year, increasing the freshman-to-sophomore retention rate to 76.7 percent for the 2006 freshman cohort and to 78.3 percent for the 2007 freshman cohort.

Following the success of the Academic Made program, the university changed the disqualification requirements to allow first-time matriculates earning below a 1.0 GPA to be placed on probation if they participate in the Partnership for Academic Commitment to Excellence (PACE). PACE is a collaborative effort by many campus departments to provide services to support freshmen on probation in improving their performance. These support services include increased interaction with advisors, individual tutoring, workshops, assessment of study skills, and personal counseling.

### **First-Year Success**

Ball State has implemented several other programs and initiatives that are helping first-year students make a successful transition to college and boosting retention, persistence, and completion rates. The university is consistently recognized for the excellence of its first-year programs. *For example, in 2012 U.S. News & World Report* invited college presidents, chief academic officers, deans of students, and deans of admissions from more than 1,500 schools to nominate up to 10 institutions with stellar examples of first-year experiences. Ball State was included among 23 colleges and universities mentioned most often by these educational leaders. In fact, *U.S. News* has ranked Ball State's programs for first-year students among the top in the country for eight years in a row.

**Freshman Connections**—For 15 years, the Freshman Connections program has enhanced the academic achievement and persistence of new students by providing opportunities for them to interact with their peers and faculty through a variety of extracurricular activities, including cultural and social events. Special living-learning communities, a common reader, and a common writing experience also connect

## **BALL STATE UNIVERSITY Self-Study Report for Continuing Accreditation 2013 DRAFT**

*Prepared for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools*

---

freshmen with each other and with the university. In 2008, a Commuter Ambassadors program was added to Freshman Connections. In this program, upper-level student ambassadors help first-year commuter students make connections on campus, and monthly workshops address needs specific to commuter students. With the implementation of this program, commuter retention jumped from 68 percent for the 2007 cohort to above 74 percent for the 2011 cohort.

**Summer Bridge Programs**—Ball State’s Summer Bridge Programs give new students an opportunity to get a head start on college by helping them meet other students, build confidence, learn leadership skills, and become more familiar with the university. Programs vary in duration and focus. Examples include:

- Cardinal Leadership and Service Seminar (CLASS) allows freshmen to move to campus early and gain valuable experience in the areas of service, citizenship, leadership, and success.
- Early Start focuses on academics by offering a four-day, 1 credit seminar sponsored by the University College. Freshmen interact with other students and popular professors while learning about an interesting subject of their choice.
- Outdoor adventures such as whitewater rafting and backpacking, sponsored by the Office of Recreation Services, introduce students to unique environments as they get to know each other and learn about upcoming college opportunities.
- Excel Summer Mentor Program for first-year students of color is a four-day experience that features workshops designed to introduce participants to the college experience and resources that support academic and social development.
- Ball State Gives Back builds on the university’s tradition of community involvement for a one-day service project during which new students meet other incoming freshmen, interact with upper-level student leaders, and represent the university.

Many of these are offered at times that allow students to participate in multiple summer bridge programs. Students who participate in these programs return for their sophomore year at a significantly higher rate (79.77 percent) than the general freshman retention rate.

**Living-Learning Communities**—Ball State’s Living-Learning Communities (LLC) are either major-based (e.g., Business, Communication, Education, Nursing) or interest-based (Discover, Emerging Media, International). Students who participate in these programs benefit from learning teams that offer advising and immersive programming in the residence halls and in the community, often related to the major or focus area of the LLC. These learning teams include academic advisors, career advisors, librarians, faculty, residence hall directors, other professional staff, and student staff.

The effects of these communities on student success have been examined using surveys, focus groups, and an analysis of MAP-Works comparative data. Students reported that living close to others in the same major is beneficial in terms of creating study groups and adjusting to the university. Students in a major-based LLC have an increased commitment to their chosen major compared to students in an LLC not based on a major. Students also expressed a desire for more connections to their courses, and in collaboration with University College, a change in how freshmen are enrolled in various courses and assigned to their residence hall and room was implemented for the fall 2012 semester.



## **BALL STATE UNIVERSITY Self-Study Report for Continuing Accreditation 2013 DRAFT**

*Prepared for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools*

---

MAP-Works data indicate that men participating in a living-learning community were less likely to be on academic probation than other men. The fall-to-spring retention rate for all LLC students was 94 percent, compared with 92 percent for other students. It appears that interventions by residence hall directors with students receiving midterm deficiency notices were helpful in getting students to meet with an academic advisor or faculty member, seek tutoring, or visit Ball State's Learning Center.

**Immersive Learning Experiences**—Ball State's *Strategic Plan 2012–2017* continues to place immersive learning at the center of a Ball State education. In recent years, more and more students have participated in immersive learning experiences as part of interdisciplinary student teams that solve problems for community partners. Students have used their classroom instruction to create business plans, websites, documentaries, content and applications for emerging media, and publications designed to have a lasting impact. Students develop career-making connections and demonstrate real-world experience to future employers. In 2011–12 (the most recent data available), 4,177 students from 37 departments participated in immersive learning experiences. Ball State's goal is that all departments will offer immersive learning experiences, and all students who wish to participate in immersive learning will be able to do so.

**Building Better Communities**—One of the most popular hands-on learning options for faculty and students is called Building Better Communities (BBC), which enhances the economy and quality of life in Indiana by directly helping local businesses and organizations to improve services, quality, and competitiveness and develop new job opportunities. Other BBC goals include developing a more educated workforce and increasing the number of college graduates who stay in Indiana. The program creates new business connections for students in a wide variety of disciplines, increases their potential for employment in Indiana, and provides professional field experience. BBC enhances students' academic experiences and increases the number of students participating in immersive learning.

**MAP-Works**—To better understand and address the factors associated with retention, persistence, and student success, Ball State uses the MAP-Works system from Educational Benchmarking (EBI). MAP-Works is an assessment system designed to promote student success and retention by helping students align their behaviors with successful outcomes and by providing administrators (e.g., residence hall staff, advisors) with an early alert and monitoring system so they can identify students at risk of leaving the university. The original survey was developed at Ball State by the Office of Academic Assessment and Institutional Research (now the Office of Institutional Effectiveness), Office of Housing and Residence Life, Academic Advising Center, and Learning Center. In fall 2006, the university partnered with EBI to move the survey and its reporting online.

Ball State currently administers the MAP-Works survey to first- and second-year students early in the fall semester. Students are asked questions about factors known to be related to retention and persistence, such as their desire to stay at the university, the degree of homesickness they experience, and how frequently they attend class. After completing the survey, students receive customized reports that help them better understand their individual strengths and weaknesses in areas essential to their persistence at Ball State. In addition, the MAP-Works system provides the infrastructure to manage important support and intervention efforts students may need. Finally, summary reports and analyses provide the data necessary for informing policies and procedures that promote retention and persistence.



## **BALL STATE UNIVERSITY Self-Study Report for Continuing Accreditation 2013 DRAFT**

*Prepared for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools*

---

The Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) produces summary reports on the MAP-Works surveys for first-year students, sophomores, and transfer students. More in-depth analyses and comparisons are produced for additional subgroups, such as students participating in living-learning communities.

**Registration Assistance**—Another retention initiative targets freshmen who, for whatever reason, have not successfully registered for their next semester’s classes. Timely course registration is a strong indicator of student progression toward graduation. Following registration, a list of freshman non-registrants is generated, and they are contacted by residence hall staff (for students living on campus) or other student affairs staff (for commuting students). The staff member completes a Non-Enrolled Student Questionnaire based on information provided by the student. For students with university “holds,” attempts are made to help them resolve the issues to clear the path for registration. For example, the Ball State Health Center may place a hold on a student’s record because he or she has not shown proof of required immunizations or a physical. Another common example is when the bursar’s office places a hold because a fine or fee is overdue. Capturing student cell phone numbers during the orientation program has helped to increase the contact made with students living off campus.

### **On-Time Degree Completion**

In 2011, Ball State launched cost-saving initiatives to improve on-time degree completion among undergraduate students, an important priority of the university and the State of Indiana. The new Completion Scholarship awards \$500 to Indiana students who graduate within four calendar years. Students are also encouraged to take advantage of discounted tuition for summer courses and to build hybrid schedules that combine online and on-campus courses. In addition, Ball State reduced the minimum number of credits required for graduation to 120 from 126. Students who maximize all of these opportunities could save nearly \$6,000 over four years. Other institutional efforts to promote four-year degree completion include:

**Excess Credit Hours Fee**—Implemented in fall 2012, this fee is charged to Indiana resident undergraduate students who have been enrolled at the university for more than four calendar years and have earned more than 144 credit hours during that time. The charge is \$150 per credit hour accumulated in excess of 144 credit hours (not including transfer hours). The purpose of the fee is to encourage students who have earned enough credit hours to attain a baccalaureate degree to complete and accept their degree.

**Think 15 Initiative**—In fall 2011, Ball State’s associate provost and dean of University College and the associate vice president for student affairs were asked to co-chair the “Think 15” task force on four-year degree completion. The Think 15 concept resulted from research conducted by the Office of Institutional Effectiveness (OIE) showing that a major predictor of students not graduating in four years is carrying fewer than 15 hours a semester. The purpose of the task force is to identify factors inhibiting progress, including the financial impact of delayed graduation, and to gather information related to current efforts in order to identify gaps or needs. An initial report with recommendations and a plan for implementation was presented to the provost and vice president for student affairs in early October 2012. Ongoing dialogue and program and policy reviews will continue in order to eliminate barriers to graduation and support student success.

## **BALL STATE UNIVERSITY Self-Study Report for Continuing Accreditation 2013 DRAFT**

*Prepared for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools*

---

**Unit Completion Tracking**—Ball State’s provost provides academic departments with reports on degree completion within their units. This information has been collected in spreadsheet form for the past decade and can be used to identify persistence, which helps departments in terms of advising and course scheduling. Some areas such as telecommunications, nursing, and the Teachers College have begun to track students after they complete a gateway course or at each stage of progress. Others have undertaken further study as to why their students are not progressing or graduating.

For example, the Department of Physics and Astronomy used external assessment information from a study of similar physics departments to develop strategies for improving student retention, persistence, and completion in the undergraduate physics program. The department implemented several of the best practices from the SPIN-UP Project sponsored by the American Association of Physics Teachers, such as providing an undergraduate study room for students to work on homework, engage with peers and faculty, and develop a sense of community within the department. A 1-hour class, PHYCS 115, was created to familiarize students with the major, create a sense of community, introduce faculty members and their research, review program planning materials online, and otherwise offer assistance. Similar courses are required for majors in natural resources and environmental management and in psychological science.

The physics department also offers a robust colloquium series that brings to campus professional scientists from academia, business, and industry to provide networking opportunities for majors. Programmatic changes have also been made to enhance the academic experience and better prepare graduates for advanced study and careers. Changes include a problem-solving course, PHYCS 111, for students enrolled in algebra-based physics courses and a formal undergraduate research requirement, including oral and poster presentations to demonstrate communication skills.

These efforts have been effective: Over the past three years, the physics department has been recognized by the American Institute of Physics for placing in the top 15 percent of departments nationwide in the number of students receiving bachelor’s and master’s degrees in physics.

### **Transfer Students**

A new initiative to improve persistence and completion focuses on transfer students. Transfer student data from 2003 to 2010 was summarized in two reports, *Transfer Student Report 2010* and *2011*, which presented four findings:

- Transfer students overall were less likely than other Ball State students to persist and graduate.
- Transfer students were more likely to academically disqualify than other Ball State students.
- Upper-division (advanced) transfer students were less likely to disqualify than were freshman transfer students and were therefore more likely to complete a degree.
- Transfer students from Ivy Tech Community College were retained at a slightly higher rate than other transfer students.

In December 2011, Ball State’s vice president for student affairs created a task force to examine the issues and challenges related to transfer students. The *Transfer Student Task Force Report* was released in March 2012 with recommendations for how Ball State can better assist transfer students in the transition to meet academic expectations and connect socially in order to persist and graduate.

## **BALL STATE UNIVERSITY Self-Study Report for Continuing Accreditation 2013 DRAFT**

*Prepared for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools*

---

Several of the task force recommendations are being implemented in 2012–13, including:

- The university has begun targeted recruitment of high-achieving transfer students. The coordinator of transfer admission is working to build connections with key community colleges, and collaboration with academic advisors at the community colleges will provide transparency and improve confidence and accuracy in transfer advising.
- Prospective and new transfer students are encouraged to connect with Ball State’s Career Center early and often, and career assessment and advising are offered during the transfer orientation programs.
- Transfer students living on campus are invited to participate in the university’s living-learning communities, and key events during Welcome Week will cater to new transfer students.
- Transfer student ambassadors will assist new transfer students during the critical first semester at Ball State, with a focus on the needs of commuter and advanced transfer students.

### **Enterprise Resource Planning**

Ball State’s implementation of an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software system and database for processing all institution-wide transactions will enhance the university’s efforts to help students progress and graduate on time. The ERP system will integrate information related to all of the institution’s core functions, including course registration, grades, financial aid, finance, and human resources. Students used the system to register for fall 2012 courses. The Banner system will tie successful registration to students’ academic profile and completion or enrollment in appropriate prerequisite/co-requisite courses. A process of checking for majors and prerequisite/co-requisite courses will allow for a more accurate count of majors and will indicate whether students are progressing in a timely fashion within their major. Additional software programs such as Bb Analytics, Bb Learn, and Talisma will likely introduce tools that will assist faculty advisors and students in making decisions that support academic success.

In fall 2012, Ball State also rolled out DegreeWorks, a comprehensive academic advising, transfer articulation, and degree audit software solution that helps students and their advisors negotiate curriculum requirements. DegreeWorks allows academic departments to identify when and where students in their programs appear to lag or fall behind, and students can plot courses to complete their degrees in a timely fashion through eight-semester plans. Students who do not take unnecessary courses are more likely to stay directly on the path to graduation.

### **Subcomponent 4.C.4.**

**The institution’s processes and methodologies for collecting and analyzing information on student retention, persistence, and completion of programs reflect good practice. (Institutions are not required to use IPEDS definitions in their determination of persistence or completion rates. Institutions are encouraged to choose measures that are suitable to their student populations, but institutions are accountable for the validity of their measures.)**

Historically, Ball State’s procedures for collecting retention and graduation data have been decentralized across a number of offices using a variety of data extraction programs and procedures. Consequently, the university has no standard definition of “best” reporting practices. The Office of Institutional

## **BALL STATE UNIVERSITY Self-Study Report for Continuing Accreditation 2013 DRAFT**

*Prepared for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools*

---

Effectiveness (OIE) recently formed a permanent working group in collaboration with other campus offices to establish systematic procedures—consistent with State of Indiana and U.S. Department of Education guidelines—for reporting information both internally and externally so it is timely, consistent, and relevant to all of Ball State’s various stakeholders.

Ball State should also spell out what is expected of individual academic units with respect to collecting and analyzing student persistence and completion data. A deep investment in technology helps, but so does strong support to faculty assessment coordinators and committees who know their disciplines, their students, and the learning experiences most likely to benefit students. More empirical evidence at the department level will help in identifying the most effective and efficient ways to promote persistence and completion, after which these “best practices” can be publicized and disseminated so that other units will be able to adopt them as appropriate.

### **Core Component Summary**

Since 2006, Ball State has collected a variety of information, created a number of intervention programs, and seen its student persistence and completion rates improve slightly. However, persistence to the sophomore year has not quite reached the 80 percent target for 2012, and persistence of certain subgroups of the population (e.g., commuters, students of color) lags behind that of Ball State students in general. Graduation rates have also fallen short of strategic plan targets. Continuing and expanding the institution’s commitment to educational excellence, retention, persistence, and completion should remain a high priority. Since different students have different reasons for staying in college or leaving and are likely to respond in different ways to particular programs, a useful next step would be to examine more closely the success rates and contributing causes for the persistence and retention of specific population subgroups. Other challenges include:

**Unit Goals**—Every academic department at Ball State has a plan by which students can graduate in four years, and some have three-year plans. However, only art, nursing, architecture, and a few other programs have explicit persistence and completion goals for their majors and a process for monitoring them. Some departments are interested in setting goals and monitoring persistence and completion, but the majority of academic units admit that both historically and currently the retention and graduation of their majors is not a high priority for them. A challenge for Ball State is to develop a comprehensive plan spelling out what is expected of individual academic units in this regard and how thorough a university-wide “student flow” system will be in tracking persistence and completion on behalf of all units.

**Unit Initiatives**—Success and failure in the areas of retention and graduation affect the entire university community, and further progress in persistence and completion probably calls for something more than broad, campuswide efforts alone. Reliance on a single, comprehensive “student flow” system could relieve units of any sense of responsibility for persistence and completion. However, new initiatives at the unit level are more likely to support academic and nonacademic retention factors in an integrative fashion. That is, a student may pass courses but still drop out because of nonacademic issues, such as wavering commitment to obtaining a particular degree, low academic self-confidence, poor study skills, or insufficient academic and social integration into the program or the campus. Academic departments enjoy a special relationship with the student that extends for at least a year (and typically more), making the unit one of the best places to conceive and implement the engaging and integrative experiences needed to further improve persistence and completion rates.

## **BALL STATE UNIVERSITY Self-Study Report for Continuing Accreditation 2013 DRAFT**

*Prepared for the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools*

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For example, many students find digital methods and materials more engaging than print materials, in both their academic and their personal lives. Ball State's Departments of History and English both hired specialists in digital humanities to introduce significant changes in the instruction and preparation of students to use digital technologies in teaching, learning, and research. Similarly, virtually all academic units at Ball State sponsor student organizations. However, it's not just having student organizations in a department that keeps students engaged and progressing toward a degree, but what students actually learn from participating in them, such as self-confidence about their academic potential and future career prospects with the degree they expect to earn.

**Empirical Evidence**—Another challenge facing Ball State is the need for much more empirical evidence on university and departmental retention efforts to date, so the most effective and efficient ways to promote persistence and completion are identified. For example, in 2008, the Department of Journalism responded to low examination scores on its entry skills test (now the Language Usage Proficiency Examination, or LUPE) by restructuring its Journalism Writing Center to promote more student engagement (e.g., enhanced classroom interaction, a revised coaching structure, and a test revision). Follow-up analysis shows the coaching has been effective in improving student scores on the LUPE, but more research is needed to measure its effect on overall student retention. Once the effectiveness of these and other “best practices” is determined, the university should increase the visibility of such efforts and assist other units in adopting them as appropriate.

**Adequate Resources**—A final challenge facing Ball State involves whether, in tight fiscal times, the resources exist to fully achieve the desired rates of persistence. For example, many departments report that they track overall numbers of majors not for retention and graduation purposes but to anticipate future course demand. If persistence improves significantly, as desired, how will the university enable academic units to accommodate the increased numbers of students wanting to enroll in what have historically been smaller-sized junior- and senior-level classes (e.g., internships, immersive learning, capstone)? Will resources be provided for nonacademic retention programs, such as further efforts to create and enhance the living-learning communities? Ball State should seriously consider the level of new resources it can afford to invest in the important goals of improved persistence and completion.