



# Interacting with Students

By Jacquelyn Nelson

Students at Ball State University, like students at other colleges and universities, are heterogeneous in many ways. Although at times it may be easy to stereotype and generalize when forming impressions of students, it is important to recognize the diversity among them. This recognition will lead to better relationships with students, more student interest, more effective teaching, and increased learning. The following chapter summarizes some factors to consider when interacting with students, beginning with a demographic profile of Ball State University students.

Ball State University is a comprehensive, publicly assisted institution whose mission is to provide excellent education at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Although primarily concerned with the citizens of Indiana, Ball State attracts students, from other states and several foreign countries because of its strong academic programs.

## *Ball State University Undergraduates*

Total on-campus undergraduate enrollment for Fall Semester 2003 was 16,365. The number of students at each level of undergraduate study was as follows:

- Freshmen - 5,145;
- Sophomores - 4,352;
- Juniors - 3,341;
- Seniors - 3,276.

There also were 220 unclassified undergraduates and 31 high school students. The number of full-time undergraduates was 15,241 (93%). Approximately 7%, or 1,124, attended part-time. Most of the undergraduates were less than 25 years old; the number of undergraduates 25 years of age and older was 1,205, or 7.4% of the total undergraduate population.

Of the new freshmen, women outnumbered men 55% to 45%, and 90% of freshmen were from the state of Indiana. Enrollment by ethnicity was as follows:

- Caucasian - 3,403
- African American – 677
- Hispanic - 198
- Pacific Islander - 8
- Bi-racial - 106
- Asian American - 102
- Native American - 38

Fifty-two individuals did not indicate ethnic background. International students numbered 146.

## *Academic Credentials*

All applicants for admission to the University are considered individually; the quality and strength of high school curricula, grades earned on the academic courses and SAT and ACT scores are the primary criteria for admission. The University has two admissions classifications: Regular Admission and Admission with Honors.

The average combined SAT score for the new freshman class of 2003 was 1041. This is 37 points higher than the average for the state of Indiana (1004) and 15 points higher than the national average (1026).

The University also accepts a number of transfer students from other colleges and universities. For Fall Semester 2003, 820 students out of the total undergraduate enrollment transferred from other institutions. In descending order, the top institutions from which students transferred were as follows:

- Ivy Tech State College-Muncie
- Vincennes University
- IPFW
- IUPUI
- Indiana University-Bloomington
- Ivy Tech State College-Indianapolis
- Indiana State University
- Purdue University-West Lafayette
- University of Southern Indiana
- Ivy Tech State College-Anderson
- Indiana University-East

- Indiana University-Kokomo
- Purdue University-Calumet
- Anderson University
- Purdue University-North Central
- Ivy Tech State College-Ft. Wayne

A total of 194 students transferred to Ball State University from Ivy Tech State College campuses. Only 122 students transferred from outside the state of Indiana.

### *Teaching Freshmen: Special Considerations*

Instructors at the University can expect freshmen students to have a wide range of academic abilities. Some students may have very sophisticated academic backgrounds, others may have only the basic skills required for enrollment, and still others may be initially lacking some of the basic skills needed for success at the college level. With this in mind, there are some special characteristics of freshman students that set them apart from other students and that teachers of freshmen should keep in mind:

- Beginning freshmen have been accustomed to a system of primary and secondary education for twelve years within which: They operated daily on a set schedule in which assignments were often checked and collected; a strong support network was formed as students progressed from year to year, and the educational environment probably remained stable; and all of the school's educational and social resources, e.g., the teachers, principal, classmates, were available every day in the classroom or in close proximity.
- As a result of being closely monitored for twelve years, some students may not have developed self-initiation, independence and responsibility. Suddenly entering a collegiate academic setting may be quite startling for these first-year students.
- For many, if not most students, going to college is probably the first long-term experience with independent living, and at Ball State University a large number of freshmen are first-generation college students. The transition from a protected

family, school, and town environment may not be an easy one.

- The very size and complexity of the University can be tremendously confusing and intimidating to freshmen students whose college classmates sometimes total more than the entire population of their home towns. Moreover, their classmates are strangers, and they will probably room with someone they will meet for the first time just before the beginning of the school year. In addition, the university environment will challenge even the most mature students to seek out help rather than have assistance come to them as was done in their local, and smaller, school system.
- Many beginning freshmen are used to being in the upper halves of their graduating classes with little or no cultural diversity. They were probably well-known and respected by peers and teachers alike. At the University, however, many feel anonymous, attend large classes, compete with the top students from a large number of high schools, and become acquainted with students of cultures from around the world. This transition is often a difficult one.
- As noted earlier, instructors can expect freshmen to have varying levels of academic abilities. Study skills and college preparation will also differ greatly among entering students, unlike upperclassmen who have, by the time they concentrate on their majors, similar backgrounds, skill level and preparation. Many freshmen are shocked to discover what is expected of them at the collegiate level.

For those faculty and teaching assistants who encounter freshmen students lacking the necessary study skills, the University College Learning Center can be of great help. University College (NQ 323) is an academic unit offering comprehensive programs and services to enhance the academic success of Ball State students. Among the services offered by University College are personalized academic advising; assistance in career exploration and selection of an academic major; peer tutoring, workshops, and group learning experiences focused on primary academic skills and the Core Curriculum;

and state-of-the-art computer labs and learning technologies to help students master writing, critical reading, and academic concepts and procedures. The Learning Center also offers help with writing, mathematics, reading, study skills, and Core Curriculum courses.

### *Ball State University Graduate Students*

Total on-campus graduate enrollment for Fall Semester 2003, was 2,068; another 891 graduate students were enrolled at off-campus sites. Approximately 37% were in full-time graduate study. The number of on-campus students at each level of graduate study was as follows:

- Master's degree students - 1,394
- Doctoral degree students - 294
- Specialist in Education degree students - 19
- Unclassified students (teacher licensure and nondegree students) - 361

Of the 1,707 degree-seeking students, there were 223 more women than men enrolled for graduate study. Approximately 57% of the graduate students were women, and 43% were men. Ethnic diversity is reflected in the following numbers:

- Caucasian - 77.3%
- International - 14.9%
- African American - 3.6%
- Asian American - .8%
- Hispanic - .8%
- Native American - .1%

Forty-six individuals did not indicate ethnic background. The average age of first-time graduate degree-seeking students was 28.1 years.

### *Academic Credentials*

For the last 14 years, at least 70% of the University's master's degree applicants attended undergraduate institutions other than Ball State University; thus, these students reflect much geographic and academic variation. For the Fall Semester 2003, 73.9% of all master's applicants attended colleges or universities other than Ball State. This pattern also holds true for doctoral applicants to Ball State University.

Although the Graduate Record Examination is required by the Graduate School only when a master's degree applicant does not meet minimum admission standards, some departments do require the test to be considered for admission. Of all the master's degree applicants for Fall Semester 2003 who took the GRE (489), the average scores were as follows: Verbal, 489; Quantitative, 549; Analytical, 593; Analytical Writing, 4.4. In addition, the average undergraduate grade point average of applicants for Fall Semester, 2003, was 3.28.

### *Evaluating Assumptions about Students*

It is important for all instructors to examine their assumptions about the specific students they will encounter. Instructors should ask themselves, "What do I expect students to be like in terms of preparation, organization, motivation/interest and ability?" The answer to that question is critical because expectations and assumptions about students guide one's interactions with them. It is extremely important to recognize and remember that students will differ in each of the above areas (See Chapter 10 [Multicultural Competence in Teaching: A Guide for Graduate and Teaching Assistants](#) for information about teaching to a diverse population). Some students will be well motivated and interested, attend class each day, ask stimulating questions, and do well on exams and papers, whereas others will be less interested in academics and more interested in the social aspects of college. Still others will be motivated and interested, but still do poorly on assignments, and some who appear to be less motivated, will nevertheless do well.

There is a great degree of diversity in the expectations students have of themselves, the instructor, and the course. To minimize misunderstanding, it is often helpful for instructors to discuss their expectations of students (see Chapter 4 [Preparing and Designing a Course](#) and Chapter 5 [The First Day of Class](#)). Students often develop their expectations based on their perceptions of the instructor-the way the instructor dresses, the instructor's level of organization and preparedness, as well as on their

interactions with the instructor. The more consistent the instructor, the more consistent the expectations. When instructors become aware of the few students who do not seem to have appropriate expectations, they should refer them to the syllabus, where expectations are specifically stated.

Chapter 12 in this resource, [Characteristics of Effective Teaching](#), outlines some of the differences in learning styles and skills among students. The most effective teachers are those who are flexible and able to adapt their teaching styles to meet the needs of most students. Although it is impossible to make all students happy or change how students learn most effectively, recognizing the diversity among students and being flexible enough to make appropriate changes in teaching strategies, if necessary, are among the keys to being a successful instructor.

Diversity issues are discussed in Chapter 10 [Multicultural Competence in Teaching: A Guide for Graduate and Teaching Assistants](#). Concerns of international students are discussed below.

### *International Students*

Although the majority of students at the University come from Indiana, it is highly likely that instructors will meet students from all around the world. Students' relations to cultures other than their own may affect their academic performance in many ways. The most obvious is the extent to which they are fluent in English. For many students, concern about their language abilities may prevent them from participating in class discussions for fear of not being understood by others. See Chapter 2, [TA's Entering the Academy: Special Concerns](#), for discussion of this issue from the TA's point-of-view. These students often feel ignored, which perpetuates a cycle making it difficult for students to feel a part of the class. Yet, participation is crucial if students are to improve their oral skills and become more confident in their abilities.

English as a second language (ESL) students also often experience a great deal of anxiety over written work. These students benefit from additional support

for writing skills. Assistance and tutoring for ESL students is available in the University College Learning Center (NQ 323). If ESL students are enrolled in a course, the instructor might suggest tape-recording lectures and discussions as well as working with another student or meeting regularly with the instructor or teaching assistant.

It is important to recognize that international students' educational experiences might be quite different from the educational experiences of most U.S. students. For instance, as described in the section above, students from some Asian, European, and Latin American cultures may have been taught that it is a sign of disrespect to look directly at teachers when they are speaking, to question teachers directly, or to criticize their opinions. They might also have been taught that stating their opinions directly or forcibly in discussions or in writing is egotistical as well as disrespectful. Many of these students have also been taught not to speak in class and have learned to emphasize memorizing information rather than synthesizing and thinking abstractly about course material. For this reason, students from such cultures may be more hesitant to speak up in class, and their writing may be vague and passive rather than a direct presentation of their ideas. Such cultural differences may combine with gender-associated expectations, thus be particularly acute for female students from some cultures.

ESL students learn best from patient instructors who are sensitive to their difficulties. As indicated earlier, one should not assume that international students wish to serve as experts, and one should not call on them in class to explain or defend their countries and cultures unless they volunteer. The following are some

suggestions for teaching strategies for students who are not native to the US.

### *Writing Assignments*

- Focus on the meaning of the assignment, rather than on grammar and style.
- Comment on general problems with language use rather than specific instances.

- Avoid marking every error; decide which errors are the most important and easiest to understand.
- Encourage the student to use readers from the University College Learning Center.
- Discuss constructive feedback, its purpose, and how it works.
- Provide examples of acceptable writing style.

### *Class Discussion*

- Paraphrase students' remarks before responding.
- Let hesitant students prepare statements to read.
- Use small groups for discussion.
- Encourage students to speak out.
- Do not let other students ignore or interrupt them.
- Do not call on international students if they do not volunteer to speak.

### *Students with Disabilities*

Although few generalizations can be made about students with disabilities, it can be stated that they are more like able-bodied students than unlike them. The University has traditionally maintained a supportive atmosphere for students with disabilities. The Office of Disabled Student Development (DSD; 285-5293) distributes a publication [The Disabled Student in the Classroom: Building a Partnership in Equal Access to Learning](#). (Refer to this publication for a detailed discussion of teaching students with disabilities.) It contains resources and teaching strategies for working with students with particular disabilities. Although not a complete summary of the information contained in the publication, the following highlights some of the important information relevant to working with students with disabilities (see also Chapter 3, [University Policies and Teaching](#)).

Students are not obligated to disclose or discuss a disability. However, if a student requests an accommodation, such a disclosure is necessary. Instructors are not expected to know about that which they have not been told, nor is it the instructor's responsibility to make judgments regarding a disability. DSD is responsible for validating disability, and that office will communicate with instructors only regarding the existence of a disability and the need for any accommodations. When students do indicate a

disability and request an accommodation, it is appropriate to refer them to DSD. Upon referral, DSD will evaluate the student's disability and request for accommodation and communicate with the instructor any recommendations regarding a student's needs. In order to assure that students understand their right to discuss and request accommodations, instructors should include the following in the course syllabus and say verbally in class:

*"If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible. My office location and hours are...."*

Students who are physically challenged may be relying on special transportation and may need special considerations to attend class. Instructors who are flexible about time and make sure that physical arrangements accommodate these students help them to participate in higher education. Students with disabilities may require such considerations as extra time to take a test, a reader to read the text or test to them, or special equipment to compose written work. Should a student require special equipment, the instructor should contact Dr. Jacqueline Robertson in the Learning Center (285-8107) who coordinates adaptive testing services. Procedures have been developed which ensure test administration that is fair to the student while maintaining both test security and standards set by instructors and the University. The Adaptive Computer Technology (ACT) Coordinator in the Learning Center is also available to assist instructors and students with adaptive computer usage. The ACT lab, besides housing technology to assist students with diverse needs, contains information concerning how faculty can adapt their course materials for students with disabilities using technology.

Students with learning disabilities sometimes need extra encouragement to sustain their participation, but often do not want to be singled out for special attention. Instructors who try to maintain a good balance between helping these students and not

providing undue attention to the disability will help further their learning. As with students with different learning styles, it helps students with learning disabilities and some physical disabilities to have information presented in a variety of ways, such as visually, orally, and tactually. Supplementary sessions outside of class time can be scheduled for this purpose.

### *Assisting Emotionally Troubled Students*

Students frequently see their teachers as personal resources as well as academic resources, and it is common for students to seek assistance from their professors and TAs when they experience emotional distress that interferes with their ability to meet course responsibilities. Although students may experience periods of distress or acute emotional disturbance at any time, there are periods during the semester when emotional crises often peak-around midterms, during final exams, and immediately before and after holidays. Students communicate that they are experiencing distress in a variety of ways. Whereas some are direct about their problems and openly discuss their concerns during conferences with the instructor, others are indirect and may allude to emotional distress in comments during class discussion, in answers to essay questions on tests, or in writing assignments. Instructors who are sensitive to these communications can be very helpful in identifying students who are in need of services.

Instructors may play an important role as a referral source for emotionally troubled students. Ongoing and detailed discussions with students about the nature of their personal problems can result in ethically problematic dual-role conflicts (see Chapter 1, [Professionals in the Academy](#)), and are best handled by trained professionals in a therapeutic setting. However, instructors can assist troubled students in obtaining the professional support and help they need by:

- Recognizing and acknowledging students' distress;
- Communicating concern for students' welfare;

- Being knowledgeable about sources of psychological help that are available;
- Referring troubled students to campus services or community agencies.

In the guide [Tips for Faculty and Staff on Recognizing and Dealing with Students in Emotional Distress](#) (<http://www.bsu.edu/students/cpsc/fsinfo/fstips/>), the staff members of the Counseling and Psychological Services Center, located in Lucina Hall, offer extensive information about recognizing emotional distress; signs of suicidal behavior; how to talk with distressed students; dealing with specific problems such as a student who is depressed, a student who has been sexually assaulted, or a student who is threatening violence; and how to make referrals; This guide also includes information about consultation services available to instructors, emergency referral services, and community mental health resources. Because the instructor is often the first person a student consults for advice about personal problems, all new instructors need to review the information in the Counseling Center guide to familiarize themselves with procedures for assisting emotionally troubled students. Among individuals who experience emotional distress, problems are typically resolved more quickly and with a more positive outcome if the disturbance is treated in its earlier stages. Therefore, if in doubt about whether a referral should be made, or about the best way to deal with a student's personal concerns, an instructor or TA should seek advice from senior staff at the Counseling and Psychological Services Center (285-1736). Staff are also available after hours and weekends for assisting with urgent situations needing emergency attention (765-747-7330).

### *Preventing and Resolving Conflicts Conflicts Between Students*

Perhaps the best solution to resolving student conflicts is prevention. Emphasizing the importance of diverse viewpoints and that all students' views are equally valued at the beginning of the course makes the later discussions and interventions regarding student conflicts easier and more natural. How should

instructors respond to interstudent conflict when it arises? The best approach is to deal with it immediately when it appears in class. If the situation is not clear-cut, talking to one or more students outside class is often helpful. Instructors using discussion formats must be willing to accept high emotions and conflict as a natural and necessary accompaniment to student-centered learning (See Chapter 6, [Teaching Methods](#)). However, ground rules for discussion should be set, such as not raising voices or making rude remarks. When resolving student conflicts, instructors should be clear about the limits of their role. Instructors are most effective in the teacher/mentor role rather than as a friend. In addition, it is best to remain neutral and not take sides. If students cannot resolve their differences, they should be referred to the Student Ombudsperson (285-1545).

### *Dealing with Difficult Students*

It is inevitable that teachers will come across students that are difficult to deal with. However, it is important to remember that although it is natural to perceive problems as the student's, it is often helpful to examine whether other issues such as instructor behavior or classroom dynamics might be influencing the student's behavior. Although certainly not complete, the following are suggestions for dealing with some of the common difficulties instructors have with difficult students.

Occasionally, students who seem to have a chip on their shoulder will appear. These students display hostility both verbally and nonverbally. Instructors often react by ignoring the student, which may succeed in avoiding a public confrontation, but may result in the student acting-out even more. A good strategy is to become better acquainted with the student by asking him/her to meet individually outside class to discuss concerns in depth. Emphasizing concern about the student's perceptions of the course may be enough to communicate interest and may diffuse hostile feelings. The key is to be respectful, calm, and professional at all times when dealing with such students. This is even more important if the student is verbally hostile in class. It is often helpful to

listen carefully and acknowledge the student, then indicate that not everyone will always agree on the issues covered in the course.

A common problem for both instructors and other students are those students who carry on conversations during class. In some cases, it is appropriate to call upon one of the students and ask him/her to share the discussion with the class. However, this can engender hostile feelings and may exacerbate the problem. Another approach is to meet with the students outside class individually and ask for comments regarding how the class might better maintain their attention. It can be pointed out that although it is their class, they are disturbing other students and that the behavior is distracting to the instructor. Other indirect approaches include breaking up the class into small discussion groups, rotating seats, or having in-class writing assignments.

With all difficult students, the key is patience and respect. It is much better to deal with a difficult situation as it arises than to ignore it and hope it goes away. Those who ignore problems with students often find that the problems become worse rather than go away. It is helpful to consult with other instructors and brainstorm about how to deal with difficult students. Experienced teachers are usually great resources for new instructors for dealing with difficult students.

Informing students of instructor expectations such as policies concerning attendance, requirements for class participation and appropriate classroom behavior, both verbally and in writing (in the syllabus!), at the beginning of the semester may prevent student grievances. In the event of a student grievance, it is best to try to minimize the possibility of personal liability and to protect the student's rights. This can be accomplished by avoiding any judgmental statements, accusations, or public remarks (verbal or written) regarding the conflict to individuals other than those who need to know (such as one's supervisor, department chair, etc.). Faculty supervisors and department

chairpersons should always be informed of a student's wish to pursue a grievance formally. (Consult the Faculty and Professional Personnel Handbook, [www.bsu.edu/it/faculty/handbook](http://www.bsu.edu/it/faculty/handbook), for a description of procedures for dealing with grievances.)