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Bowling Green State University

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BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Outperforming expectations

BGSU graduation rates gain national attention

Since President Ribeau took office in 1996, the University has been intensively involved in creating an academic, co-curricular and administrative environment conducive to helping students learn effectively and progress smoothly to graduation, with some notable successes.

Now BGSU has received national attention for its efforts. The University has been cited in an article called "One Step from the Finish Line: Higher College Graduation Rates Are within Our Reach," as an example of an institution that is outperforming expectations for six-year graduation rates when compared with others that share its profile. Written by Kevin Carey, the article appears in a January report from The Education Trust.

Carey makes the point that, while about two-thirds of all high school graduates nationwide go on to college, "too many students—far too many students—who start college never go on to finish college," he writes.

The Education Trust has developed models for comparing institutions with their peers in order to arrive at a more fair assessment. Universities are grouped according to such characteristics as median scores on college admissions exams and availability of financial aid. To see the rankings, visit www.CollegeResults.org.

But even similar institutions often have very different graduation rates, the article states, and points to Bowling Green as one

whose six-year graduation rate of 64.7 percent is unusually high, particularly considering that a quarter of new BGSU students scored 18 or below on the math and English portions of the ACT, and 18 is "the bare minimum necessary for students to have a reasonable probability of success in college-level English, and well below the level associated with success in college-level biology and algebra."

Whatever their institutional profiles, the report found, it's what colleges actually do that makes the difference in whether students will continue on to graduation or drop out.

What we do makes the difference

William Knight, director of planning and institutional research at BGSU, recently compiled a self-study of the University that might provide some insights into its success. Written as part of a larger study by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the Education Trust, and the National Association of System Heads, the report finds a number of areas that have contributed to BGSU's increased retention and graduation rates.

"First and foremost among the factors that have contrib-

uted to the University's success in improving graduation rates are the development of a new vision statement and set of priorities by our president," Knight writes. "By placing student learning and success at the heart of all of campus activities, student success became a fundamental criterion for strategic investment and decision-making."

Administrative restructuring was carried out in 1996 with the goal of enhancing student success by placing direct responsibility for many student academic services within the area of Dr. Alberto González, vice provost for academic services. The Advising Network, the Enrollment/Retention Management Group, a revised Springboard curriculum, and Advising Excellence Mini-Grants are four examples of new efforts that promote collaboration and provide resources for student success. The Office of Student Academic Achievement, co-directed by Dr. Connie Ruehl-Smith and Marcos Rivera, coordinates mid-semester progress reporting, offers supplemental instruction in math and computer science, and conducts outreach to stop-out students.

Some other concrete steps taken include strengthening of assessment of student learning, redesign of the University's general education program from one based on student exposure to a variety of disciplinary content to the "BG Perspective," which is based on exposure to the University learning outcomes and diverse modes of inquiry. Even the significant renovation of

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PRISM spreads science, math expertise in area classrooms

When he was a visiting assistant professor of physics at Georgetown University six years ago, Dr. Stephen Van Hook knew he wanted to work with elementary and secondary students but didn't know where to begin.

Fortunately for him, a colleague at the Washington, D.C., university was already collaborating with a nearby kindergarten teacher and got him into that classroom, explaining science to 5- and 6-year-olds. "I was more scared doing that than teaching a college class," recalls Van Hook, assistant professor of physics and astronomy at BGSU.

"There's a huge barrier" separating K-12 education from those in higher education who don't know how to surmount it, adds Van Hook. He's leading one effort to break it down, however, as director of the National Science Foundation-funded Partnership for Reform through Inquiry in Science and Mathematics (PRISM). Working with him is Dr. Lena Ballone-Duran, associate

professor in the School of Teaching and Learning within BGSU's College of Education and Human Development.

Nearing the end of its second year, the three-year program pairs BGSU graduate students in math and natural sciences with teachers in Toledo, Springfield Local and Bowling Green schools, and in other Wood County districts. Washington Local Schools in Lucas County will be added to the list if the grant is renewed by the NSF, which has committed roughly \$1.4 million over the initial three years.

The participating graduate students, who are in master's and doctoral degree programs at BGSU, provide expertise in their respective fields, whether math, biology, chemistry, physics or geology. But because the scientists-in-training may also become college or university faculty, PRISM aims to make them better teachers as well, Van Hook says.

Robyn Duckworth, a BGSU graduate student in the PRISM program, helps Garrett Jex (left) and Jonathon Ittner study fruit flies at Kenwood Elementary School.

Gary Keller, for one, thinks it's working. "There's no doubt about it," says the principal of Bowling Green's Kenwood Elementary School, which hosted one of the "NSF Graduate Fellows" last year and has two others in-house this year.

When the graduate students try an instructional method that "bombs" with the younger students, they have to work with their partner teacher on modifications to make the concept more understandable, Keller explains. "That's the same kind of thing teachers face each day," he

points out. "They're (the graduate students) learning some really useful techniques in teaching" while helping the teachers explore topics in more depth than they probably could otherwise.

They're also becoming more employable, according to Van Hook, noting the experience of a former Fellow who has been "inundated" with interview and job offers since entering the labor market. "If they've been through this program, we know they're going to be a good teacher," he maintains.

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I N T H E N E

RNA project to create language for scientists worldwide

The March 22 issue of the *Medical News Today* (U.K.) announced that Dr. Neodes Leontis, a BGSU professor of chemistry, has been chosen to head the RNA Ontology Consortium, an international team of RNA (ribonucleic acids) scientists formed to develop a shared vocabulary and system for describing, cataloging and comparing their findings. As scientists continue to discover the roles of RNA in genetics, health, disease and the development of organisms, the consortium's work "will make it easier to turn molecular information into useful knowledge that can help us to understand how different cells grow and develop as they do," Leontis said. The National Science

Foundation is providing \$500,000 for the five-year project, which involves scientists from Great Britain, France, Canada and Australia, as well as the United States. The story also appeared on the Web site of the Community Research and Development Information Service (CORDIS), the European Union's official information service on research and innovation, and on genomeweb.com, bio.com and eurekalert.org, another science news site. In addition, genomeweb.com is doing its own story on the project.

Rat laughter research generates international interest

Some researchers view laughter and joy as uniquely human traits, but Dr. Jaak Panksepp says the joke's on them. Writing in

the April 1 issue of the journal *Science*, the BGSU Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus of psychology says that studying sounds of joy in rats and other animals may help in understanding the evolution of human emotions and the brain chemistry behind depression and other emotional problems. A BBC story about his work was posted on *tehrantimes.com*, a shorter version ran in *The Scotsman* and a LiveScience story appeared on India's *keralanext.com*. The latter story was also picked up by MSNBC.com, while scores of newspapers that carried a *Chicago Tribune* story included *New York Newsday*, the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Kansas City Star*. Among others reporting on the research were *abcnews.com* and *nationalgeographic.com*, as well as *The Blade*.

College officials insist they've tightened belts

Ohio's public universities saved nearly \$300 million from 1999-2004 by, among other things, cutting administrative staff and the number of programs they offered, according to "Results Through Productivity," an Ohio Board of Regents report that appeared in the March 9 edition of the *Columbus Dispatch*. Fifty positions were eliminated during that time at BGSU, which also realized about \$1.7 million in energy savings through changes in contracting and equipment. A similar Associated Press story appeared in newspapers statewide and on the Web site of NBC 4 in Columbus, and the Bowling Green *Sentinel-Tribune* ran a page-one story March 10 on BGSU's cost-cutting efforts.

The blending of talents: Art students collaborate on mural



Thanks to the efforts of six art students and their teacher, the Women's Studies Program in East Hall has gotten a strong visual identity. The faces of Frida Kahlo, Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony and others representing important influences in women's history now greet students and visitors to the program.

The portraits, part of a mural 7-1/2 feet high and 15 feet long, grace what had been a "stark, off-white wall," as Dr. Vikki Krane, program director, described it.

"We moved into our new offices in East Hall in fall 2003 and decided that we needed something unique that would give visibility to the program."

Six students in Gordon Ricketts' Narrative in Sequential Drawing class volunteered to design and create the mural. The team included seniors Kimberly Adams, Adrienne Buck, Sharon Mayo and Kelly Canfield, junior Heather Krol, and sophomore Kelly Seemann.

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At the same time, the K-12 students are getting the chance to work with a scientist for about 10 hours per week. The students are "very enthusiastic about the Fellows," Van Hook says, citing a crime scene investigation unit led by Robyn Duckworth, a master's degree student in biology, and her partner teacher, Susan "Chip" Harms, in Harms' sixth-grade classroom at Kenwood.

The students had to solve a hypothetical crime through study of such things as fingerprinting, blood typing and testing, and analysis of hair and fiber samples, according to Keller. "It was a

natural for all our kids to be interested," considering the recent interest generated in crime-scene work via the CSI television shows, he says. "They were just glued to the problem."

Kenwood and other elementary schools are PRISM participants' destination for the first of their two years in the program. That's to help break the graduate students of any predisposed inclination toward lecturing, says Van Hook. They move on to the middle or high school level for their second year. PRISM began with five graduate student-teacher teams last year, grew to 11 this year, and Van Hook hopes to have about the same number for 2005-06.

Matthew Steele, a master's student in physics and astronomy, teamed with Harms at Kenwood last year before helping with high school physics at Springfield this year.

"I've found both to be very fun," says Steele, who plans to teach an introductory physics course at BGSU this summer and eventually become a faculty member in higher education.

"Getting the experience of teaching at a level outside the university level allows you to develop your (instructional) skill set in a different way," particularly communication skills.

"What they really bring to it," says Keller in summary about Steele and his peers, "is a research-based approach so kids see science is a real, living thing."

Graduation rates

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BGSU residence halls (at approximately \$52 million since 1996) has helped, Knight found.

Recognizing that solid advising that meets the needs of individual students is a cornerstone of university success, Provost John Folkins and Dr. Edward Whipple, vice president for academic affairs, in 2003 convened a Collaborative Advising Task Force to develop a plan to improve undergraduate student advising. The group included members from all academic colleges and was co-chaired by Dr. Nick Hennessy, associate director of residence life, and González.

The result was an Advising Plan that identified a number of advising values and created the Distinguished Adviser Awards for faculty who model those values. Last fall, seven people nominated by their deans received the award.

Also, on-site academic advising in two residence halls was initiated. As part of the plan, the visibility and availability of advisers was greatly increased, and mandatory freshman and new-transfer advising will be implemented this fall.

Other significant factors that influence student success are the development of learning communities and first-year programs, incentives for summer semester enrollment, strategic use of institutional financial aid, numerous efforts supported by the Ohio Board of Regents Success Challenge Program and support from the Office of Institutional Research.

By producing more students with four-year degrees who are prepared to contribute to Ohio's economy, BGSU is helping to improve both graduates' lives and the overall health of the state.

BGSU

Bowling Green State University

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