

CONNECTING THE FIRST YEAR TO THE STUDENT'S WHOLE BGSU EXPERIENCE

Bowling Green State University has won national recognition for its first-year programs. These programs are recognized for creativity in addressing the needs of students. However, the programs have proliferated without centralized coordination and the absence of an administrative structure has detracted from the separate efforts. Given the current fiscal situation and the commitment of first-year programs to enhance the quality of the Bowling Green State University experience, we recognize that a restructuring of these programs is needed. This restructuring should occur with the dual purposes of achieving *coherence* and *distinctiveness*. Coherence can be achieved by integrating the first-year program with general education, the majors, and the student's experience across all four years at BGSU; distinctiveness can be achieved by intentionally framing the student's experience around the University Learning Outcomes, of which "critical thinking about values" will play the leading role.

This review and analysis of first-year programs is based on meetings with many constituencies and the review of a large number of written reports and presentation handouts. Meetings included directors or representatives from first-year programs; the Greater Expectations Institute Team (which separately interviewed the directors of a large number of first-year programs); and a small steering/coordinating committee to review and advise on the final draft. Reports are cited throughout and listed in footnotes.

The Core First-year Programs

Faculty and staff from all around the University have contributed in creative ways to support the success of first-year students. Importantly, many of the efforts are not aimed exclusively at first-year students, but extend throughout the curriculum and co-curriculum. At present, the programs operating in the first year are not closely coordinated; however, positive cooperation exists between some programs, e.g., BGeX and GSW. Such cooperation has enhanced student learning.

Finding 1: The BGSU community has a broad understanding of what it means to be a first-year program. In discussions of first-year programs, the university community often include courses, programs, and offices; offerings intended for first-year students as well as other students; offerings designed for particular populations with special needs; a diverse array of services; and programs administered both through Academic Affairs and Student Affairs.

If we extract from this large mix only those courses and programs that are designed for first-year students generally (excluding both those that serve subpopulations of first-year students, and those that serve second- and third-year students in addition to first-year students), we are left with two programs, a set of residential learning communities, and two courses that are targeted to sub-populations of first year students, as follows:

Program Name	Brief Description
BG Perspective	General Education program
BGeXperience	The values introduction and first-semester course
Residential Learning Communities	A mix of nine living learning communities
Springboard	Skill development course
UNIV 100	University success course

Finding 2: The programs for which the greatest benefit (grade point average, retention, credit hours accumulated, or graduation rate) has been demonstrated include Springboard and UNIV 100¹. The Residential Learning Communities, in aggregate, have also had a positive impact, although two have not demonstrated added value². A comprehensive assessment program has not yet been developed for BG Perspective; a small scale use of the CLA test has shown positive results, but this is insufficient data on which to base judgments of the program's educational value. The multiple assessments of BGeX are mixed – the educational impact of this program has not yet been demonstrated³, although BGeX has made greater progress in developing assessment instruments than has BG Perspective.

Goals of the First Year

Through its interviews of representatives of 30 different BGSU programs that contribute to the first-year experience, and through a review of the literature, the Greater Expectations Institute Team⁴ identified eight key learning goals for first-year programs, as follows:

1. Enhancing social integration
2. First-year transitional issues
3. Building academic skills
4. Critical thinking about values and the role of a liberal education
5. Multicultural competence
6. Intentional retention
7. Navigating the system
8. Engagement with external communities

Ideally, these outcomes would be addressed in a threaded way, throughout the first year, rather than as discrete topics that are covered in a modular or sequential way. Similarly,

¹ “Feedback Report on Learning Communities and First Year Programs at BGSU (Spring 2007)”, Institutional Research report.

² La Comunidad and La Maison Francaise: *ibid.*

³ The clearest indication of a positive impact is reported in Gillespie, M. A., M. D. Hakel, J. L. Blackburn, and A. Zarubin, in preparation. “The Effects of an Instructional Program on the Application of Critical Thinking to Values Expressed in Essay Prompts.”

⁴ “First-Year Task Force and Greater Expectations Institute Team Combined Report,” October 2007.

some of these topics would provide the framework for the student's entire experience at BGSU.

Looking back at the existing first-year courses and programs, particularly the five identified previously as focusing on the first year and addressing students in the general population, we can identify which of the existing programs most strongly emphasize the outcomes named above.

Social integration	BGeX, Springboard, RLCs
Transition issues	Springboard, UNIV 100, RLCs, BGeX
Skill development	BG P ^{5,6} , Springboard, RLCs, BGeX
Values & Liberal education	BGeX, GSW, UNIV 100
Multicultural competence	BG P ⁷ , RLCs ⁸
Intentional retention	Springboard, UNIV 100, RLCs, BGeX
Navigating the system	Springboard, UNIV 100, BGeX
External engagement	RLC ⁹

Finding 3: At this level of generality, the programs achieve fairly good coverage of the learning outcomes when we look across all programs. However, *no student takes all these programs*. Most importantly, the level of achievement of the stated outcomes (as noted earlier and in Appendix A) is unknown or not well documented in some cases.

Nonetheless, the combined experience of four of our first-year programs (BGeX, BG Perspective, Springboard, and UNIV 100) gives us an excellent foundation for building a coherent first-year program and connecting it to the students' experience throughout their time at BGSU.

Creating a Coherent First-year Program at BGSU

The challenge of creating coherence in the students' experience at BGSU is not just one of coherence within and among the many parts of the first-year experience. To be truly effective, *the first-year experience must cohere with the students' experience as sophomores, juniors, seniors, and alumni*.

Challenge # 1: Acknowledging Transitions in the Undergraduate Experience. The Greater Expectations Institute Team defined three critical transition points in the student's undergraduate career. The first transition occurs at entry to the university; the second is associated with decisions regarding declaring a major; and the third deals with connecting to a career, professional school, or graduate school after graduation from college. The three transitions each present unique challenges. We can understand these

⁵ BG P was not named in this regard in the report. However, development of the skills represented in the University Learning Outcomes is an obvious purpose of the program.

⁶ General Studies Writing was named for skill development – it is a component of BG P.

⁷ The “Cultural Diversity in the U.S.” is part of BG P and should be considered here.

⁸ Global Village and PCC do well in developing multicultural competences.

⁹ PCC works closely with Toledo public schools

challenges in terms of a shared set of learning outcomes, but each transition would emphasize particular subsets of learning outcomes.

Creating a first-year program designed around clearly identified developmental and educational needs creates the opportunity to return to important themes and learning outcomes in following years, thus building coherence and distinctiveness for the student's whole BGSU experience.

Challenge #2: Building an Integrated Design. The approach recommended here places responsibility on – and early transition to – the courses and faculty in the majors. To be successful, this approach will require a comprehensive curricular review and redesign, the purpose of which would be to have *every* course – whether part of the first-year program, general education, or the major – purposefully and explicitly address shared educational goals, as represented by the University Learning Outcomes. A greater emphasis on *student demonstration* of learning outcomes with intentional use of *electronic portfolios* should also pervade all courses. Such an effort will require faculty support and development.

The Core Commitments group has been moving in a similar direction, although one that places greatest weight on critical thinking about values and “educating for personal and social responsibility.” The recommendation here is to build on that approach, but to give weight to all of the University Learning Outcomes, which include but are not limited to personal and social responsibility.

Challenge #3: Integrating the majors, the general education program, and the first-year program into a common framework. In all, we envision three steps in the shared curriculum, one corresponding to each of the three major transitions.

1. A first-year seminar should be developed that would address transition to college and university success issues, in addition to establishing baselines for student performance in each of the University Learning Outcomes.
 - a. It would provide training for student use of electronic portfolios to represent their learning and achievements through project-based work.
 - b. The seminar would draw on what we have learned from UNIV 100 and Springboard, but it should depart from those models in that it should be based on academic content, perhaps the common reading or service-learning. Alternatively, it might be built around an interdisciplinary theme such as “A Green University and a Sustainable World,” or “Navigating the Flat World from Bowling Green.” **It is imperative that the first-year seminar be part of the BG Perspective program.**
 - c. In emphasizing the importance of academic content to the first-year seminar, we are not implying that only faculty can teach it. We feel that student affairs staff members are particularly well prepared to deal with the transition issues, which are also an integral part of the first-year seminar.
 - d. We should develop three versions of the seminar, to serve
 - i. traditional students

- ii. transfer students and
 - iii. non-traditional students.
- e. Once the first-year seminar is established, we can discontinue UNIV 100 and Springboard.
- f. The relationship of BGeX and BG Perspective is also a matter that deserves to be reconsidered. It should be noted that almost all V courses are BG P courses, and that the dual system creates confusion. Furthermore, the adoption of the name “BG Perspective” has not been clearer than the previous straightforward identifier, General Education Program.
- 2. A series of transition-to-the-majors courses, of two types.
 - a. For students who have clarity about their intended major, courses in each of the majors. These are not intended as the typical “Intro to” or survey courses, but rather as overviews of problems and opportunities in the discipline. They should be designed to help students explore the ways in which study in the discipline connects to issues of the day. Core Commitments has initiated development of pilot courses of this type in History, Communication Studies, and Business; it has also initiated an inventory of courses to target for conversion.
 - b. For students who want opportunities to explore different majors, interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary courses organized around topics of the day, such as AIDS, Global Warming, or Human Population Growth. Courses could be designed and offered by teams of faculty from three or four disciplines. Alternatively, service-learning opportunities could help students explore the connection between particular majors and community-based problems.
- 3. A capstone course in every major. These would provide a synthetic, project-based platform for student demonstration of learning. Such a summative demonstration would provide the opportunity to revisit the skills, abilities, knowledge, and personal growth resulting from the student’s entire experience as an undergraduate. With the student’s work products represented in an electronic portfolio, there is also a purposeful connection to career, graduate school, or professional school.

Challenge #4: Framing the BGSU Experience with University Learning Outcomes. For all three of the transitions identified above, the University Learning Outcomes provide an excellent statement of goals for academic growth and personal development. As a university, we are in a fortunate and unusual position to have a well-developed statement of distinctive goals for students’ intellectual growth and personal development. Where we still need development is in the purposeful threading of these outcomes throughout the curriculum.

- Writing and Presenting – Every major at the University values the ability to express ideas in written format. However, our current system relies on the General Studies Writing program for establishing competencies in writing skills. We need to develop systematic opportunities for students to build on that experience and practice writing in the courses in their majors. BGeX and GSW have provided an

excellent beginning on this approach. BGeX has created a Faculty Liaison Position that is targeted at integrating the development of writing skills within BGeX V courses. We can turn to the General Studies Writing program for guidance about how to use the GSW rubrics throughout the University.

- Critical Thinking About Values, Inquiry, and Problem-solving – The development of thinking skills is also highly valued by all majors, although the particular skills that are most highly valued vary among majors. Significantly, students also value opportunities to develop these skills. Just as we might turn to GSW for advice and support to develop writing skills within courses in the major, so we might turn to BGeXperience (and the Honors Program) for advice and support for developing skills for critical thinking about values in courses throughout the major. The Core Commitments grant and the BGeX Expansion Initiative has started this effort. We would be well served to develop common language and resources for the development of inquiry and problem solving, as well.
- Leadership and Participation – These skills are highly valued by potential employers. These outcomes are also a place to further develop the theme of Educating for Personal and Social Responsibility. Significantly, these skills connect the students' learning experience in clubs, organizations, student employment, and residence life to the shared university goals for academic growth and personal development. Service-learning provides us with excellent opportunities to develop these and other skills

In creating coherence and distinctiveness for the students' experience at BGSU we can turn to the individual students to be the designers. We and offer them

1. the University Learning Outcomes as a consistent framework for their education and personal development. We should give serious consideration to the possibility of wider use of individualized majors, which would allow students considerable latitude in designing their own requirements.
2. electronic portfolios as the vehicle for sharing the demonstrations of their developing competencies. Faculty and administrators can guide and direct the process, but the students will be responsible for collecting the project-based artifacts that represent their BGSU experience and for making the case that they have learned and developed. The electronic portfolios, coupled with project-based work and action teams, will allow them to point to evidence that represents their educational accomplishments (similar to tenure and promotion notebooks).

Challenge #5: Creating a coordinating administrative structure. We have known for years that our many creative efforts are dispersed. In order to capitalize on the many excellent programs and the creative efforts of our faculty and staff, we must create a single administrative structure to coordinate. We feel that a formal bureaucratic structure (such as an Undergraduate College) is both unnecessary and undesirable. However, we also feel that "dotted line" reporting is inadequate to produce meaningful collaboration and coordination.

Recommendations

1. Agree on a set of learning outcomes important to success in the first year. ***In addition to the outcomes already identified in the University Learning Outcomes***, outcomes of particular importance to the first year include the following¹⁰:
 - a. Enhancing social integration
 - b. First-year transitional issues
 - c. Building academic skills
 - d. Multicultural competence
 - e. Intentional retention
 - f. Navigating the system
 - g. Engagement with external communities
2. Create a new first-year seminar, designed to secure first-year students a smooth and successful transition to, and retention at, BGSU. Require this seminar for all first-year students.
 - a. The first-year seminar departs from the current designs of Springboard and UNIV 100 in that it should be organized around **academic content**. The common reading idea might be expanded to include an additional book or books, for instance; or service-learning opportunities might be used effectively in the first year; or the first-year seminar might be organized around an interdisciplinary theme.
 - b. Focus on the agreed-upon set of topics of importance to **success in the first year**.
 - c. The seminar should establish baselines for student abilities in the **University Learning Outcomes**. It should also establish the expectation that courses in the BG Perspective and the major will continue to guide the students' development of these skills and abilities.
 - d. Establish **electronic portfolio** use as the basis for demonstrating student development of skills and abilities.
3. Develop second-year courses intentionally organized around the University Learning Outcomes
 - a. Two types of courses:
 - i. Transition into a major, for students who are ready to begin work in a particular major.
 - ii. Exploration of majors (interdisciplinary, topics-based courses, such as "the Oceans," "AIDS," "Water," or "Oil"). The university is currently identifying signature programs that have an

¹⁰ One person observed that this list includes a mix of two types of outcomes. Some are direct educational outcomes (e.g., social integration or multicultural competence) whereas others are indirect consequences of the first type (e.g., retention). Others have argued that the list is incomplete, specifically calling for the inclusion of career development. Creating the final list of outcomes should be the charge of the first-year seminar design team, referred to in recommendation 7.

- interdisciplinary character. Such areas of strength serve as a foundation for the interdisciplinary, topics-based courses.
- b. Use of action teams and project-based work, as envisioned by the Strategic Positioning Group¹¹
4. Develop capstone courses in all majors
 - a. Synthetic, cumulative, project-based work
 - b. Transition to career, professional school, or graduate school
 5. Initiate a comprehensive and university-wide curriculum review.
 - a. Every course should be reviewed for its role in meeting the University Learning Outcomes.
 - i. Specific efforts should be made to expand opportunities for writing in the majors.
 - ii. Specific efforts should be made to expand critical thinking about values in the majors.
 - iii. Specific efforts should be made to include opportunities for leadership and participation in the majors.
 - b. Every course and program should include assessment of student learning with respect to the outcomes defined above. Make explicit efforts to make use of project-based learning, experiential learning, and service-learning, with documentation in the electronic portfolio.
 6. Arts & Sciences has a set of “Group Requirements” that partially overlap BG Perspective requirements. However, the A&S Group Requirements are organized around distribution requirements, and are neither modern¹² nor consistent with the structure of the University’s general education program, BG Perspective. Arts & Sciences faculty should be charged with modernizing the structure of the group requirements and reducing the confusion created by their partial overlap with BG Perspective.
 7. Develop an agile, efficient, and centralized administrative structure for the coordination of all these efforts. This structure could be located in the Provost’s Office, or report directly to the Provost.
 - a. Appoint a curriculum-design team to create the first-year seminar, as described in recommendation 2.
 - b. Recruit faculty to create a series of interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary courses, as described above in recommendation 3.
 - c. Charge chairs and directors to lead the creation of capstone courses, or equivalent culminating experience, for each undergraduate major, as described in recommendation 4.

¹¹ “Premier Learning: A Scenario for BGSU in 2020,” October 11, 2007

¹² For an excellent recent analysis of goals of a liberal education, see King, P. M., M. K. Brown, N. K. Lindsay, and J. R. VanHecke. 2007. Liberal Arts Student Learning Outcomes: An Integrated Approach. *About Campus*, October 2007: 2-9.