



bsu.edu/immersive

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY: **IMMERSIVE LEARNING**



By: Jackie Grutsch McKinney, Professor of English and Director of Immersive Learning and High Impact Practices

QUICK FACTS

Year founded: **2000**

Project source: **Faculty**

Duration: **Semester-long**

Students per year: **1,500-2,000**

Interdisciplinary: **Yes**

Vertical integration: **No**

PROGRAM SUMMARY

Immersive Learning is Ball State University's signature program. The name describes a high-impact practice that provides authentic, deep and transformative learning experiences for undergraduate students and faculty. Immersive learning courses are credit-bearing courses offered in departments throughout the university with a blend of collaborative, community-based and project-based learning. These courses have the following characteristics:



- At least 10 undergraduate students enrolled in a credit-bearing course
- Intensive work with a community partner (local or national nonprofit, small business, government agency, school, campus organization, etc.)
- Collaborative approach
- Creation of an outcome or deliverable that addresses a community-identified issue or need
- Faculty focus on serving as mentor, liaison and guide

The origins of immersive learning at Ball State University can be traced to the [Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry](#) in 2000, an endowed program sponsored by the Ball family that originally enrolled up to 60 students a year. Building on the success of that model, the university embarked on a concerted effort to expand immersive learning opportunities to all students in three- or six-credit courses that would fit more easily into degree plans. Now, in a typical year, 1,500 to 2,000 students participate in an immersive learning course. All told, there have been approximately 3,500 immersive learning courses offered, reaching 48,000 students.

BY THE NUMBERS:
Immersive learning:
Fall 2022 + Spring 2023



145 classes

2,193 students

30+ departments

Faculty are incentivized to create and offer immersive learning courses with one-year and three-year grants, though most courses offered are not grant funded. Grant funding can be used for course buyouts, supplies, travel, consultants and student wages. Students in immersive learning courses are assessed yearly on two program-wide student learning outcomes: 1) students will create a constructive collaborative climate and 2) students will apply previous knowledge or skills to demonstrate comprehension and performance in novel situations.

RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATIVE MODEL

The Office of Immersive Learning serves as the academic and administrative support unit for immersive learning activities across campus. We support faculty in planning and implementing immersive learning projects. Focal points include project development; identification of internal and external funding; introductions to community partners and internal collaborators; recruitment of students; management of projects and budgets; assessment of learning outcomes; and identification of scholarly research and presentation opportunities.

Immersive Learning is a unit within Academic Affairs under the purview of the Vice Provost of Academic Affairs. The team consists of a full-time director, two project managers, a project coordinator and a videographer. The director's title is "Director of Immersive Learning and High Impact Practices," and she has a split, though overlapping, appointment, as immersive learning is seen as a high-impact practice. The director holds faculty rank (professor of English) and reports to the Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs and Professional Development.

In addition to personnel, the unit has resources to fund immersive learning projects, incentivize professional development and scholarship, and recognize outstanding immersive learning projects. Funding comes primarily from the general university operating budget as determined by the provost. Additionally, immersive learning has donor-funded, endowed foundation accounts. Funding for immersive learning has been a priority for several administrations now and the budget has remained steady, even in recent years when enrollments have dipped.

BY THE NUMBERS:

Support for faculty teaching immersive learning classes

\$270K
course grants

\$20K
conference travel

\$6K
faculty awards

\$20K
summer scholarship
grants

\$15K
professional
development

BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The widescale adoption of immersive learning by faculty, programs and departments reflects its prominence in the last three strategic plans and university marketing initiatives. [The 2007–2012 Strategic Plan](#) called for immersive learning opportunities for all undergraduates and wrote immersive learning into the mission of the university. Specifically, the strategic plan named immersive learning in Goal #1, stating the aspiration to “place immersive learning at the center of a Ball State education.” The [current strategic plan](#) keeps immersive learning prominent in Goal #1, naming immersive learning as one of four high-impact practices (HIPs) that students should have the opportunity to participate in before graduating.

Similarly, university marketing efforts over this same timespan have focused on immersive learning as [a mark of distinction](#) for the university. At one point, Ball State billboards across the state simply said “IMMERSIVE.” Because of the strategic plan initiatives, and because immersive learning is seen as part of the brand of the university, immersive learning has become well known across campus by faculty, staff and administrators — particularly those who have been at the university for some time. As a result, we do not have put a lot of effort into selling immersive learning or proving its worth to stakeholders at every turn.

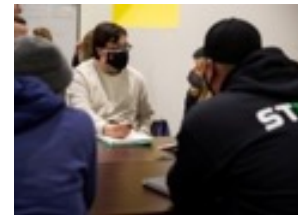
Of course, the program would not have had buy-in without resources, particularly funding and staff. The call for immersive learning courses for all undergraduates in 2007, for example, was accompanied by an ask in a major capital campaign to make immersive learning viable long into the future. Likewise, the program has been able to draw on a well-staffed office to oversee and maintain the initiative.

The 2007-2012 Strategic Plan named immersive learning in Goal #1, stating the aspiration to “place immersive learning at the center of a Ball State education.”



CONSERVATION TALES (VIDEO)

Combined art and biology course creating children's books to bring attention to endangered and invasive species



REPURPOSING ABANDONED PROPERTIES (VIDEO)

Urban design course making recommendations to city on which properties to acquire and how to repurpose them



WORK-RELATED STRESSORS AND POSITIVE WORK-RELATED EXPERIENCES OF NOBLESVILLE FIREFIGHTERS (VIDEO)

Psychology course using research to determine appropriate mental health interventions for firefighters

CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

Data, data, and data. Over the years, getting an accurate count of immersive learning courses has been challenging, as faculty in any department can offer a course. Additionally, until recently, there has not been a good way to get participation data on students who take immersive learning courses. We now have courses designated as immersive learning through our course registration system (we use Banner attributes for this) which, if used by all units, will finally give us reliable records of courses and student participation data.

We are particularly interested in disaggregating data to see who opts into immersive learning classes. Research shows that students in the “new majority” (first generation, lower income, Black and/or Latinx) are less likely to engage with HIPs, and yet, [HIPs are typically associated with compensatory effects for this very student population](#) — closing equity gaps in retention and graduation rates. Initial data analysis of the academic year 2021-2022 shows that we do have a participation gap in immersive learning of 2% for Black and Latinx students, and we suspect an even wider gap for first-generation students. We intend to undertake additional research to understand the sources of these disparities and identify what it might take to remedy them.

Simultaneously, we are pushing academic programs on campus to map immersive learning courses (and other high-impact practices) right into majors and minors, so students don’t have to swerve off their degree plans to participate. If we can do this, students will not have to opt-in; all students will participate. In summer 2023, we piloted an inaugural cohort of eight departmental teams participating in a HIPs Curriculum Mapping Team program.

Ball State University is located in Muncie, Indiana. It is a public, regional comprehensive university with about 18,000 students (14,000 undergraduates) and 110 majors. About 40% of students are first-generation and over 75% receive financial aid.