

Colleges of the Year

Welcome, Freshman!
By Ellie McGrath

Photo Essay

Master College
Appalachian State

Research University
Indiana University

Liberal Arts College
William Jewell College

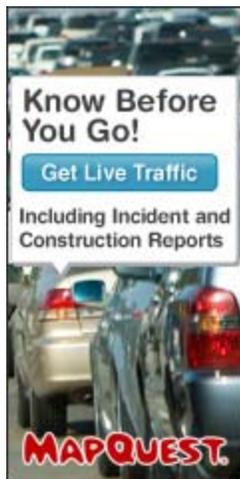
Community College
Seattle Central

Other Notable Nominees

Letter to the Editor

TIME College Center

TIME Archive Student Center



RESEARCH UNIVERSITY Indiana University

A web of friendly interest groups makes this big research institution feel less intimidating

By HARRIET BAROVICK

Justin Greis, an ambitious business major in his junior year at Indiana University, Bloomington, wants to be a partner at a major law or accounting firm. Yet when Ernst & Young, the accounting giant, offered him a rare post-sophomore year summer internship, he turned it down. Instead, he helped teach a rigorous summer seminar to incoming freshmen for \$100 a week. Greis attributes his 3.9 GPA, among other accomplishments, to the sense of belonging he developed two years ago in the university's Intensive Freshman Seminar program. "I learned how to study there and made some of my best friends. It was important to feel I was giving back some of what I got."



RYAN SCHICK FOR TIME

HOMEWORK HELP: A freshman and tutor talk calculus

In the Intensive Freshman Seminar program, open to all, about 300 of I.U.'s 6,700 first-year students get a jump on college by spending three weeks in August in tiny classes taught by senior professors with whom they form valuable relationships. They live and bond with peers and older students who help teach courses. They learn time-management and study skills. And they often become campus leaders. Alumni of the program half-jokingly describe it as a cult.

The program is relatively tiny at this 36,000-student university, a sprawling campus with doctoral programs and research facilities. But it's only one part of a comprehensive effort to make the university's freshmen feel connected and equipped to succeed. In the late 1980s the state's relatively low rate of college graduation spurred administrators to better engage I.U.'s freshmen. Those efforts got a boost in 1997 when the Indianapolis-based Lilly Endowment gave the university \$2.5 million to increase graduation rates. I.U. dedicated the funds primarily to retaining freshmen.

The university has launched several small, targeted efforts rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. Students who aren't attracted to the 12-year-old Intensive Freshman Seminar can join "freshman interest groups"; they live and study with students who share their academic interests. Minority freshmen can get mentors from among senior

faculty. Drop-in academic support centers, open until 11 p.m., offer writing and math tutors at three residence halls.

The results of these disparate efforts are encouraging. The percentage of freshmen returning for their sophomore year has risen to 85%, from 80% in 1994. Freshman retention among African-American and Latino students has jumped to 82%, from 64% in 1994. "There are a whole bunch of life buoys out there," says Travis Paulin, director of the university's summer freshman programs. "We want them to feel they can latch on to one or two that work for them."

More than 200 senior faculty members have taken part in freshman programs. Biologist Craig Nelson, a Carnegie Foundation U.S. Professor of the Year for 2000, whose focus is collaborative learning, takes students on team-building expeditions to scale rock-climbing walls at the start of his August course on evolution. One rotating group of 10 faculty members, the Freshman Learning Project, works on ways to make their large, introductory lecture classes more effective. To learn how to better empathize with baffled freshmen, an art-history scholar might sit through a painfully unfamiliar class on finite math.

What matters most, many freshmen say, is knowing that someone cares about them. For sophomore Patrick Dumas, from West Lafayette, Ind., the university inspired a "terror about getting lost" in the high-powered machinery. But early, close contact with his seminar professor, who met with him regularly for meals, made other professors less intimidating. Dumas now serves as a supreme court justice in the student government and enjoys mentoring freshmen.

For minority students, who constitute 8% of the student body, getting early support is especially important. "A girl on my floor last year said she didn't like black people or fat people," says Cherie Wardell, an African-American senior from Indianapolis, who is able to laugh at the memory. Wardell has for the past two summers been a resident assistant in a program called Groups — open to all classes but focused on first-year students — that offers a summer course and financial and academic support throughout the year for 300 low-income and first-generation freshmen. Wardell discovered that with a "family" of people who had been through similar experiences, she could feel more comfortable at the university.

Joaquin Jara, a sophomore sports-marketing major from Whiting, Ind., is part of the first generation in his family to attend college and says his parents at first discouraged him from enrolling. He says the Groups program inspired him to persevere. His three younger siblings now e-mail him daily, proudly recounting what they're learning in school. They all plan to attend college.

The university's freshman efforts are well targeted but sometimes confusing. "We could use a little more work on getting freshmen to know all their options," concedes Michael Wilkerson, coordinator of academic affairs. "It's not always easy, but it's a challenge we're constantly working on."

Yet for all the patchwork quality, I.U.'s efforts on behalf of its freshmen are creating something valuable: small communities that effectively humanize the gargantuan institution. Says summer-programs director Paulin: "It's a lot of fun every year to watch the freshmen arrive, all nervous and excited, and have a hand in getting them on their way."

— *With reporting by Matt Baron/Bloomington*
