



Ball State University: An Interpretive History

Anthony O Edmonds, E Bruce Geelhoed

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This is a narrative and interpretive history of a major institution of higher education. In it, the authors want to avoid the pitfalls of too many other "college histories," which are sometimes either painfully detailed encyclopaedic catalogues of "one damn thing after another" or panegyrics praising one damn president or construction project after another. Obviously, they want to tell an interesting story, focusing on the people who inhabited the institution, from powerful presidents like John R. Emens to boisterous students like David Letterman, whose fame as a late-night talk show host makes his name a household word. And they trace the history of the institution and its people from the local business people who pushed to establish higher education in a small Midwestern city in the late-19th century to a 21st-century president who spent most of his life in the South. But this is not simply a series of stories. The authors emphasise two crucial themes that run throughout Ball State's history. First, more than most American colleges and universities, Ball State has had extraordinarily close ties with the community of Muncie, especially its elite. From the fact that it was named after a local industrialist, to vital community participation in its latest fundraising campaign, Ball State and Muncie-East Central Indiana are inextricably linked. Second, in many ways Ball State is a "representative," even paradigmatic American university. Targeting mainly students from its region, Ball State has had virtually open admission standards for most of its history. It has lived what we call the "Jacksonian" vision of access to education. It has also followed a trajectory similar to many other American universities as it moved from normal school to teachers' college to comprehensive university. Indeed, the authors argue, it is the Ball States of America that best define this nation's "genius" in higher education, separating this country's system of higher education from those of other countries. Ball State University, then, is both distinctive and representative - a fascinating case study in educational history.

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