Birmingham-Southern College

Office of Admissions
900 Arkadelphia Road
Birmingham, AL 35254
(205) 226-4696
www.bsc.edu

Total Enrollment: 1,540
Undergraduates: 1,540
SAT Ranges (Verbal/Math): 540–660 (V); 530–640 (M)
Applicants: 867
Accepted: 95%
Enrolled: 40%
Application deadline: March 1
Financial aid application deadline: March 1
Tuition: $15,398/20,791
Core curriculum: No

Subtle Pressures

Stability should never be taken for granted in today's academic climate—there's too much pressure for change, and too many monetary reasons to accept it. But so far, at least, Birmingham-Southern College has managed to hold off the more bizarre forms of political correctness. It has a generally conservative student body with almost no history of political activism; it is situated in a traditional state and region; and it is aligned with the Methodist church. It seems financially healthy.

Most of all, there are good things about Birmingham-Southern that one hopes will be preserved. Students take small classes and have close contact with their professors. The business division has a strong free-market orientation, and more than one-third of the college's students are business majors. Southern (as it is known locally) claims to support a traditional liberal arts education, and though its core is fairly loose in construction, there is little evidence that the school opposes the traditional liberal arts. The faculty is a little
shorthanded in some areas—there is only one classicist, for example, and books in those classes are in translation—but students could do much worse.

**Academic Life: Thinking Good Thoughts**

Birmingham-Southern has no core curriculum to speak of. Instead, it uses a fairly typical set of distribution requirements. All students must take a writing course from the English department, the level of the course being determined by measurement tools like advanced placement tests, application essays, or SAT/ACT scores. Two courses in math are required, as are one lab course in astronomy, biology, chemistry, or physics; one course in philosophy and religion; one in literature; one in arts; and one in either economics, political science, psychology, or sociology. All students must also pass two units in a foreign language (or one at the 200-level or higher). These requirements apply to all students in all disciplines—an admirable policy.

There is also a requirement for one course in history, but it is very general; the catalogue actually says "any course in history." While this is not even close to a requirement in Western civilization, about 80 percent of students do fulfill their history requirement with either a U.S. history or Western civilization course. "The history faculty moans about how most students take a U.S. or Western civilization course," one faculty members says. The students' choice is encouraging, while the department's attitude is not.

The writing requirement, along with the attention paid by faculty to that skill, has been more successful at Birmingham-Southern than at other schools. Says a professor in a field not typically thought of as a strong promoter of writing skills: "I require my students to do a great deal of writing because they must know how to communicate through the written word. It's one of the real strengths of the school." According to its Web site, "Birmingham-Southern consistently ranks among the top eighty liberal arts colleges in the nation." The strong course offerings and emphasis on writing are part of what makes this ranking deserved.

Birmingham-Southern used to do even more in this area, via a list of common readings and a seminar dedicated to that idea, but that has faded away to a non-required, not-for-credit "freshman reading list" and symposia throughout the year. Predictably, freshman interest is short-lived. "They're really into it the first two months, but by November the grapevine takes over and their peers become their unofficial advisors," a professor says. "You have the students only for a while." However, the college has resisted efforts by its departments to take up more and more of their students' time.

Undergraduates have the option of either obtaining a general education degree or majoring in a particular field. "The provost is very much committed to the idea of a general education, as opposed to concentrating just on the majors," says one educator. B.A. and B.S. general education candidates must take six courses in addition to the general requirements, while eight courses in their subject are required for majors in B.A. and B.S. fields. A general education committee has been instrumental in protecting the core that remains, faculty members say.
Recent additions to the faculty—half the current group have been hired in the last ten years—have placed more emphasis on student research, and this, if allowed to expand unchecked, would also endanger the broad requirements. The research project required on a topic within each senior's major is a good idea, but more might be too much. "There is some predation on the part of the sciences and the business school," says one professor. "At a small college this has a larger impact [than at a large university]. The faculty sometimes want a few more courses; they'll shift to a research university model if they're not careful, and that's not the model for a liberal arts college. It really comes down to the definition of what a liberal education is."

While many professors at Birmingham-Southern pour the majority of their energy into teaching, others are quite active researchers and publishers in their fields. National trends certainly favor those who believe that publication demands should come before teaching, but the president and board of directors at Birmingham-Southern seem to know that the true strength of a small college lies in its ability to offer good teaching to its students. After all, if students want to attend a large research university, they can usually do so for far less money than they pay at Birmingham-Southern. "If anything, we're weak on research," a professor says. "But the atmosphere of publish or perish isn't my favorite. I don't want to feel that my life is dictated by two articles or one book every six months." Professors can't think of anyone who was denied tenure for failure to publish.

"We're a private institution and we must teach well enough so that parents will continue to pay the bills," says one teacher. To this end, the normal maximum class size is thirty-five students, though a few classes have as many as seventy. The student-teacher ratio is approximately twelve-to-one. Because Birmingham Southern has no graduate students, it also has no courses taught by teaching assistants.

One of the best times to see the faculty in action is during "Interim Term," the January session required for four years of all students at Birmingham-Southern. Faculty offer courses either in their own more specialized field of research or, at times, in a very esoteric aspect of their discipline. "A major objective of the curriculum is to encourage all students to develop their potentials for creative activity and independent research," the college catalogue states. "The January interim term provides a unique opportunity for innovation and experimentation on the part of both students and faculty." Students may choose one of the offered courses or design their own, but they are expected to "use initiative and imagination whether their project is a group endeavor or an individual effort."

During Interim Term, for example, business students might study a single industry and take field trips to living examples of that industry—perhaps Delta Airlines in Atlanta or General Motors' Saturn plant in Tennessee. Invited speakers address various elements of business and economics, and students present Harvard Business School cases before the critiquing eyes of outside experts. Other students might travel to Italy and Greece to see firsthand the material remains and cultural descendants of the ancient civilizations they study. Students in the sciences may undertake intensive laboratory experiments under the watchful eye of their professors. This program is seen by most as a resounding success, although one professor notes that "a student may resent the rigor of a lab course versus a business internship. You've
got one guy working his tail off in, say, chemistry while another is being taken out for lunch."

A good bit of travel seems to accompany the Interim Term, which is the last remnant of a 1968 curricular reform at Birmingham-Southern. "There is a strong social consciousness on campus, which is reflected in the fact that every January, thirty-five students or so go off to work with the poor in a Third World country," a professor says. A faculty committee must approve every new January course, and the presence of some lesser fare proves that the system isn't fail-safe. Still, the Interim Term is an excellent opportunity for students to broaden their knowledge and experience in myriad fields, and students should take full opportunity of this offering.

Among the outstanding professors at Birmingham-Southern are Paul Cleveland in economics; Dan C. Holliman in biology; V. Markham Lester and Matthew Levey in history; Cecilia McInnis-Bowers in business administration; Michael McInturff in English; Samuel Pezzillo in classics; and Janie Spencer of the Spanish department.

The Division of Economics and Business Administration has four endowed chairs in business and free enterprise, and is considered one of the strongest areas of the college. It is also the most popular division on campus, as more than 35 percent of students select majors in this area—nearly four times the national average. Also very good are the departments of music, history, biology, and the fine and performing arts. Some years ago the college merged with a Birmingham conservatory, and thus the music and arts departments are much more oriented toward performance than at similar institutions.

Birmingham-Southern reflects the values and beliefs of its middle-class, Methodist constituency in that it remains a collection of scholars and not a gathering of ideologues. Most course offerings are traditional at least in title, and the culture that produces most of Birmingham-Southern's students works to rein in radicalized tendencies faculty members might have. The administration has also shown that it is willing to fight for serious courses. Solid offerings can be found in the humanities departments, always the most politicized on any campus. Faculty are, for the most part, politically liberal, "but on the whole they're pretty sensible on academic matters and are committed to old-fashioned standards," says a faculty member.

But while overt radicalism is not tolerated, the generational shift to a more politicized mode of thought can be detected at Southern. "There is bound to be a non-fit with the new people and what the curriculum had been," one professor says. "For example, someone hired to teach eighteenth-century literature may have a different tack, but it is subtle and not overt." This professor tells of a colleague who has been on the faculty for a number of years. When she arrived she taught her humanities courses in a way that was "quite traditional." And yet, now "she does quite a bit of feminist theory along with it. And they [the students] still get all the material with it, so that's OK. The ones who turn it into a religion eventually grate their colleagues to the point that they [the graters] leave."

The college is hardly Duke or Stanford in its level of politicization, although some courses certainly are taught with an advocate's point of view. The catalogue lists several of this type,
and though many titles look traditional—okay, except for "Socialism"—the perspectives are not always so. Some examples:

- Sociology 305, "Sociology of the Family," in which one studies "the relationship between the family and the changing external environment as well as the dynamic processes within the family. Historical and cross-cultural perspectives are considered along with alternatives to the traditional family."

- Philosophy 303, "Socialism," which is "an examination of some of the philosophical, political, and economic claims of modern socialists, beginning with and emphasizing Marx, but also moving beyond Marx and Marxism into the work of contemporary socialists who stress the democratic character of socialism and the need for a socialist market economy."

- English 220, "Literature and the Social Experience," which studies "a faculty selected topic (such as African-American Literature, War in Literature, or Androgyny in Literature) focusing on a cultural movement, a social issue, or the perspective of a social group."

- English 230-231 (and cross-listed in history), "Plural America I & II," has as its intent "to recognize the aspects of other cultures appropriated into the Western tradition but often either unacknowledged or glossed over. The end should be an appreciation of the achievements and limitations of our Western heritage, and a heightened sensitivity to the cultural diversity of the world-at-large [sic]. Plural America I focuses on Native American and Chicano history and literature and on the European context of American society; Plural America II focuses on African-American and Asian-American history and literature and on the 1960s as a catalyst for multiculturalism."

**Political Atmosphere: Nibbling, But Not Biting**

A few years ago some feminist faculty at Birmingham-Southern made an attempt to require so-called gender-neutral language on campus, but didn't get much support from their colleagues. Still, the use of this sort of language is unofficially enforced. For example, if a professor brings a course description before a faculty committee for approval, an amendment will likely be forthcoming to change the wording if it is not already gender-neutral. According to one professor, a man who uses conventional English when speaking before the faculty will be politically corrected before the words are halfway out of his mouth. There seems to be little faculty opposition to this imposition, and, indeed, this is the way many radical ideas have found their place in the standard operating procedures at colleges and universities: no one stands up to them.

There was some talk of a speech code at Birmingham-Southern as far back as the Vietnam War, but nothing has been done to revive that idea recently. One administrator did say that there are "no codes, but we would be open to issues of sensitivity as needed." Whether this would include limitations on the speech of those who transgress the current boundaries "correctness" is difficult to say.
Most departments at Southern host a variety of viewpoints. "There is an emphasis on diversity," a professor says. "I don't see it as much of a threat. It's the kind of diversity you actually want in an academic community. There are some multicultural types here, but the administration wouldn't let them get control of the place."

The composition of the faculty is itself controlled by several layers of administration through which any prospective faculty member must pass before receiving a job offer. "We have forty to forty-five members of the board, and a president [Neal Berte] who's a monarch," a professor says. "We still have an affiliation with the Methodist Church, which of course is itself one of the trendiest institutions in the country. But the particular Methodists who are connected with us are conservative." When a vacancy arises at Birmingham-Southern, the department head nominates three candidates to the provost. The candidates, if satisfactory to the provost, are interviewed by the president, who sometimes vetoes choices. The provost and department interview all three, as does the tenure and promotions committee.

A small school like Southern must be careful to serve its primary constituency: as one professor notes, though 45 percent of the school's budget comes from its endowment, a drop of ten to fifteen students can cause budgetary problems. The state of Alabama has made significant cuts to the university system budget recently, and the governor has said the state spends too much on higher education and not enough on kindergarten and elementary school. Alabama has quite a number of community colleges and will soon eliminate the meager $600 grant it gives to in-state students who attend in-state private colleges like Birmingham-Southern. With all the cutbacks, public universities have been scrambling for monetary support from the same businesses that donate to private colleges. Despite this, one professor says the future at Birmingham-Southern is promising: "The academic outlook here is good. We have a good age range and mix of ages with our faculty." In the past few years, Birmingham-Southern has received several donations over $10 million, which is a good sign for its financial future.

**Student Life: A Pleasant Place**

According to the school's literature, Birmingham-Southern is "a 188-acre haven located on a wooded, rolling hilltop." Just three miles away is the city of Birmingham. Birmingham has grown by leaps and bounds over the past few decades, and the presence of the University of Alabama-Birmingham, with its attendant hospitals and world-renowned cardiovascular center, has brought a great deal of new wealth to this city. Birmingham did not exist before the War between the States and thus has no antebellum charm, but it has turned into a dynamic place and has recovered well from the blows dealt it by the demise of most of the steel industry, which gave birth to it. It is by any measure a very pleasant place to live.

Most of Southern's students (nearly 75 percent) are from Alabama, the rest are from twenty-two other states and seven foreign countries.

Somewhat more than half of both men and women at Birmingham-Southern pledge the Greek organizations, and more than three-quarters of all students live on campus. Southern features six men's national social fraternity chapters and seven women's social sorority chapters. There is no coed housing. Southern offers a variety of visitation options for students
in dorms: no visitation, limited visitation, and open visitation. For students less than twenty years old, the choice must be made by both the student and his parents. For students older than twenty may decide on their own.

Southern boasts more than eighty student organizations and enters the big-time sports arena in basketball and baseball but not football, an oddity for any Southern school. There are several academic organizations, including the American Chemical Society, a concert choir, a pre-law organization, and the *Southern Academic Review*, a scholarly journal for the college community. There seem to be very few politically active groups on campus, although the president did ask a faculty member several years ago to serve as an adviser to a gay and lesbian support group. The group is not activist compared to similar groups on other campuses; it once planned a demonstration on campus along with students from the University of Alabama-Birmingham, but according to a professor, "that was headed off before it ever began."

After hours, many students and faculty hang out at The Cellar Coffeehouse, an entirely student staffed and run operation. In addition to steaming coffee, The Cellar features "delectable dessert," live music, judged open-microphone nights, and poetry readings.

Birmingham Southern's campus is surrounded by fencing and the university has no off-campus buildings. On campus, at least, there is little crime, according to official statistics, but off campus, the risk is well above average for a college community according to statistics compiled by apbnews.com.