

Chapter XX: CONCLUSION

If indeed the central mission of the University is student learning, it is obvious from several perspectives that Truman is doing many things right. Excellent students are drawn to its campus. Surveys of students and alumni demonstrate considerable satisfaction with the knowledge and skills acquired at the University. North Central Accreditation praised both the work of the University and of the assessment process itself. And yet some of the objective measures of student learning indicate that there is work to be done.

The CIRP survey indicates that the University is indeed fitting into a needed niche for the state's university system: an affordable liberal arts institution that bright Missouri students can attend without going out of state to a higher costing private school. While business, accounting, nursing, communications disorders, etc., still draw a substantial percentage of incoming students, a growing percentage are being drawn into traditional liberal arts fields. The incoming students on average are bright but may not have needed to have done a lot of homework in high school, and so the University is challenged to change the mindset of these students and make sure they have the study skills to engage in challenging courses.

The Junior interview project showed that a clear majority of students interviewed wanted challenging courses. The amount of independent work and whether it made students think were the major factors in whether the course was perceived as a challenge. The level of difficulty and type of material as well as the number of tests and/or assignments was what made the courses most challenging. Students said they would take another challenging course, but would opt for the less challenging course if the course was in the core. They cite a course as their best learning experience. Forty-seven percent had considered leaving the university but stayed because of their parents and costs. Overall, students seem to be satisfied with their experiences here.

The Sophomore Writing Experience, while not always popular with students, continues to demonstrate Truman's commitment to writing and independent (that is, non-class) assessment of writing. While the major purpose of the SWE is to help student's determine their strengths and weaknesses in the writing process so that they can improve in the area, too many of them are postponing taking it. Last year only 30% of the participants were sophomores. The rest were juniors and seniors; 35% were seniors. Upperclassmen, despite their experience, did about as well as sophomores. Motivation appears to be a problem for these students.

The surveys taken of current and graduating students continue to provide useful information about the collegiate experience. The Institutional Student Survey has the advantage of providing more immediate feedback about what is going on now, but it has the disadvantage of having a much lower return rate (about 38 percent) as compared to the Graduating Student Questionnaire (this problem may be solved by embedding the survey into a course). Generally, the students indicate substantial satisfaction with their

education at Truman. A large percentage plan to go to graduate or professional school (which is the mark of a good liberal arts college). Generally, they feel more satisfied with their writing and speaking skills than with their mathematics, computer, and statistical skills. They are generally well-satisfied with courses in their major though somewhat less enthused about their core liberal arts and science courses. Thus, promotion of the liberal arts and sciences (beyond their major) continues to be a significant task for the University.

The results of two alumni surveys are included in these volumes. One is the traditional survey that is sent to a random sample of alumni every three years. The other is a survey of alumni taken by the state and gives us some comparison to overall averages of all state public four year colleges. Generally, the alumni rate Truman well on both surveys. On the state survey, our alumni generally rate us with averages higher than the statewide averages. The higher ratings are reflected not only in the most general responses to the more general questions about quality but also in answers about specific skills (such as verbal, writing, and problem-solving skills).

An employer survey is generally sent out to a random sample every three years following the alumni survey. The results of the recent employer survey are included in Volume III.

Portfolio assessment continues to grow both in terms of the number of students turning in portfolios and the number of faculty who have participated in portfolio evaluation. Faculty evaluation of student work found in portfolios has led to important changes to the new Liberal Studies Program—particularly in regard to interdisciplinary work (by adding the Junior Interdisciplinary Seminar course) and in regard to quantitative reasoning (by adding a statistics requirement). Portfolio assessment has also moved toward a more objective method of judging interdisciplinarity through inter-rater reliability. Beginning in Fall 1999 all entering students will be required to submit a portfolio prior to graduation.

The most discouraging assessment results for this year, as they were last year, are found in the freshmen-junior testing area, designed to see if students are improving their knowledge and skills in general education areas. The CAAP tests show lower scores for juniors as compared to their freshmen scores in four out of the five areas. The Academic Profile for FY 1999 shows lower scores in all areas except for critical thinking. When faced with these results, the faculty may have several responses: (1) the tests are not testing appropriate skills and knowledge; (2) our students are arriving with such high scores that gains are unlikely (the ceiling effect); (3) the juniors have become more cynical about the assessment program and are putting in less effort; and/or (4) the curriculum is not consciously developing the skills which are tested. Any or all of these factors may be at work. The University has changed its general education program and perhaps this will help. On the other hand, the new Liberal Studies Program may demonstrate even less of a “match” for the tests given and scores may decline more. In any event, the assessment committee and the faculty discipline committees will need to review these tests for

appropriateness. Many believe that motivation to do well is a strong factor and that we may never do particularly well unless students are given reason to do well.

The percentages of students who score above the 50th percentile or the 80th percentile on the senior exam in the major probably should be higher than they currently are. Certainly, the numbers are not embarrassing since considerably more than half the students score above the 50th percentile. But with the quality of students that we have on campus and with the curriculum presently in place, it may be asked why the numbers are not higher. Those are questions that the faculty must ask themselves. Of course, as above in regard to the freshman-junior test, there may be several answers and more than one of them may be true. (1) The test is covering important material and the curriculum needs improvement. (2) The test is not covering important material. (3) Material that is covered is simply different from what our curriculum emphasizes. (4) The students have little or no motivation to demonstrate what they know and so the results are not indicative of what the curriculum is achieving. (5) Majors' curricula are based on a cafeteria model and students are graduating without taking courses central to the discipline.

As to whether the test is appropriate or not, the faculty must judge that and it is important for discipline committees to review the tests periodically and ask themselves how the test matches up to the curriculum. Unfortunately, there is often little choice as to what senior tests are available. In many cases, it is not an all or nothing proposition: part of the test may be valuable and part may not be appropriate. There is some reason to believe that if students were to be motivated to do well on the senior test, substantial gains might result. One discipline counts the senior exam score as part of a class; their scores went up dramatically. Another possibility would be to include the results of such tests on the students' transcripts. The students may not be particularly happy with such proposals and they might legitimately object that the assessment program has had a history of not being "punitive" in nature. It is difficult to see that inclusion on the transcript is all that punitive; it is consistently done on high school transcripts. And, it may not be all that difficult in some majors to include the senior test result as a part of the grading of a particular class (such as a capstone course). While motivation may not be our only problem, it may be dangerous to ignore it as a factor.

The last Faculty Survey (1998) did not seem to indicate enormous problems. While obviously not all faculty are satisfied with different aspects of the University, in general Truman faculty tended to be more satisfied than faculty at other public and private schools that participated in the survey.

The University Master Plan emphasizes the centrality of assessment as part of the University's work and calls on it to continue to determine whether the goals of the institution are being met. It may be necessary for the administration, the Assessment Committee, and the faculty governing councils to determine whether present assessment methods can adequately determine whether the "core outcomes" as enumerated in the Master Plan are being achieved. In particular, the implementation of the new Liberal Studies Program (LSP) would seem to require that the assessment process determine

whether the outcomes of the LSP program and the particular courses within it are being met. Still, it needs to be recognized that the number of assessment instruments cannot be increased significantly without meeting substantial resistance from faculty and students. For example, it may not be feasible to include a portfolio item every year for every course in the LSP program, though it may be possible for those requested portfolio items to be rotated from year to year if necessary.

The University Master Plan calls on the University to “assess” its assessment procedures, to encourage faculty involvement in assessment, to develop a comprehensive assessment plan, to expand its use by administrators and by faculty in reviewing their own disciplines, to increase scholarly activity in the area, and to increase its use in the graduate program areas. The Plan of course, as have previous plans in the University’s past, sets specific quantifiable goals for almost all areas of the University’s work. Assessment needs to continue to demonstrate accountability for use of the State’s resources and provide evidence of student learning—the basis of awarding “degrees with integrity.”