

Chapter XX: CONCLUSION

Assessment at Truman continues to be a challenging endeavor. Although assessment activities remain solidly in place, they are not without their critics. Yet realizing we measure what we value, assessment of student learning continues to keep us more student learning focused, more focused on our values and, perhaps now more than ever, holds our feet to the proverbial fire, forcing us to face sometimes disappointing data while constantly offering us an opportunity to have conversations about the causes. Touted by some as an activity that should be abolished, assessment (as opposed to evaluation activities) gives us the chance to freely and fearlessly explore the very thing cherished most by faculty, namely musing about what does and does not present optimal learning experiences for our students.

Someone once asked the question, “Who is responsible for a student’s degree?” (as opposed to his training in the major). Obviously we all are. It is time we each truly accept that awesome responsibility. Once finished, assessment activities begin to assume a new urgency. For how is one even to *begin* to get a handle on such a huge task without a wide variety of data forming the picture of a student’s entire learning experience while at Truman? *Of course* instruments could be changed, methodology modified, different approaches taken, etc. However, the answer is most certainly not found by sticking our heads in the sand and saying the problem is too hard and consequently assessment should cease. Let’s work together to find even better ways of getting a more accurate sense of a student’s Truman experience and determining ways to improve it when needed! Let’s be good role models to our students as we set goals, create possible means of determining whether we’ve achieved the goals, and then formulate a new plan of action when we fall short. Assessment activities need not be onerous, but rather present quite an exciting, albeit challenging, and most noble endeavor.

Sophomore Writing Experience

A record number of students, including a record number of *sophomores*, completed their Sophomore Writing Experience (SWE) this past year; thus additional conferences were scheduled which increased students’ ability to find more convenient conference slots. Their attitude toward the assessment subsequently improved.

Spring semester’s end saw the first annual SWE awards ceremony, a gathering of faculty, administrators, and family members to honor students completing the SWE with distinction. University legislation made the SWE a requirement for junior registration and a prerequisite for all Junior Interdisciplinary Seminar (JINS) courses. The legislation also called for linkage between the SWE and JINS courses. Throughout the year, JINS instructors were consulted on the best way to incorporate the SWE into their courses. The initial implementation of this linkage had mixed reactions from instructors.

SWE scores dropped this year compared to the previous year. The upper set of scores fell slightly over 2%. The middle score set fell over 9%. Barely passing scores increased a little over 1% and non-passing scores increased slightly over a quarter of one percent.

Work continues on ways to incorporate the SWE into JINS courses. Alternate ways of formulating the SWE are being investigated, which, hopefully, will enhance students' benefits and perception of this assessment activity.

Interview Project

This year's interview project concentrated on the topics of recruitment and retention. The top two reasons students said they chose to attend Truman were academics/quality of education and the preparation they would receive here for graduate school or a career. Almost one third of the students interviewed said Truman lived up to their expectations due to professorial quality and availability; they said Truman let them down by being harder than they expected and not having sufficient social outlets. Almost half the students said they would tell family and friends back home about Truman's faculty, quality of education and academic reputation. The top two responses given when asked about their most rewarding learning experience were enthusiastic faculty members and taking a challenging course. The top two most frustrating learning experiences so far were having too much work/time management/study skills concerns and professor shortcomings.

Almost half the students indicated they had some experience with residence hall programming; forty percent indicated no such experience. Not surprisingly, almost forty percent said continuation of their scholarship plays a major role in persistence at Truman. About half the interviewees said they perceived Kirksville as small and about one fourth indicated they were bored here. Conversely, one fifth said they liked the small town feel and it felt just like home. About half the students liked the size of Kirksville, a little over one fourth said the size was okay, and almost one fourth said they did not like the size. The majority found the community friendly and welcoming but would like to see more movies/entertainment and more businesses.

The first person to make them feel comfortable at Truman was their Student Advisor, according to almost one third of the students followed closely by their Freshman Week teacher/class. They felt comfortable during their first week here. Sixty percent of the students said they had never seriously considered leaving Truman. Of those who had considered leaving, they stayed because of the academics and programs offered here and money issues.

Portfolio

Submissions in the "growth as a thinker" category showed a significant decrease in self-assessed critical thinking, but the "interdisciplinary thinking" category produced

essentially the same results as in previous portfolio reading sessions with more examples originating in major courses and fewer from general education courses. The “quantitative/mathematical reasoning” prompt, over a three-year period has tended to result in more students opting to indicate that they have no suitable submission for this category.

This is the first time the “historical analysis” prompt has been a part of the portfolio. Students scoring highest on this prompt were those from Arts and Humanities with students from “professional” majors scoring the lowest. The “scientific reasoning” prompt shows a three-year trend toward lower scores. Findings for the “aesthetic analysis and evaluation” prompt included a trend of decreasing scores for both analysis and evaluation with the analysis scores being better than evaluation scores.

The “most personally satisfying experience” prompt elicited the following reasons as the top five given for why the students chose the particular experience: 1) achieved personal/intellectual growth, 2) was personal best/caused pride, 3) challenging, 4) allowed work as a professional, 5) achieved personal goals/culmination. The top five places where this experience originated were in the major, in an LAS course, an elective course, study abroad course, or in a social fraternity/sorority. The “reflective cover letter” continued to show more positive than negative attitudes about the portfolio process.

Surveys:

CIRP 2000 Survey

The typical respondent is an 18-year-old Caucasian female whose high school GPA was an A or A+. She lives in a residence hall some 100 to 500 miles away from home, has both parents alive and living with each other and their combined total yearly income is estimated at \$75,000-\$99,000. She rates herself in the highest 10% (when compared with the average person) of individuals her age in every surveyed category except artistic ability, computer skills, popularity, public speaking ability, intellectual self-confidence and social self-confidence. She is probably middle-of-the road politically, although the remaining 50% of her peers are split fairly evenly between liberal and conservative viewpoints. She has not had, nor does she expect to need, special tutoring or remedial work in any area surveyed. If she has a religious preference, it probably is Roman Catholicism. Truman was her first choice. She probably did not apply to other colleges than Truman. She took 1 to 4 Advanced Placement (AP) courses while in high school but probably did not take an AP exam.

When asked about her activities last year, her top responses included attending a religious service, studying with other students, performing volunteer work (although not required for graduation), attending a public recital or concert, communicating via e-mail, using a personal computer in general, and using the Internet for research or homework. She was least likely to have been a guest in a teacher’s home, to have smoked cigarettes, felt

overwhelmed by everything required of her or felt depressed, asked a teacher for advice after class, overslept and missed class or an appointment, discussed politics, voted in a student election, or participated in Internet chat rooms.

When asked how much time she spent, per week last year, participating in various activities, she said she spend 3-5 hours studying or doing homework but 6-10 hours socializing with friends. She spent less that 1 hour talking with teachers outside of class and exercised/participated in sports for 6-10 hours. She did not party.

Last year she did not work for pay and volunteered less than 1 hour each week. She spent 1-2 hours a week on student organizations and watched TV 3-5 hours weekly with 1-2 hours a week spent on household/childcare duties. She read for pleasure less that 1 hour each week, did not play video/computer games and prayed/meditated less that 1 hour weekly. A Master's degree is the highest academic degree she intends to obtain at any college. Two-thirds of her peers expect to obtain a Bachelor's degree at Truman and a little over a fourth expect to obtain a Truman Master's degree.

Both her mother and father obtained a college degree and have an occupation in business. They are probably also Roman Catholics. She thinks she will have enough funds to finance her education but does have some concern. She has as essential or very important objectives: becoming an authority in her field, obtaining recognition for contributions to her field, raising a family, being very well off financially, helping others who are in difficulty and integrating spirituality into her life.

She values the ability to gain a general education, improve reading and study skills, increase her ability to make more money, prepare for graduate or professional school, and obtain training for a specific career. She chose Truman because of its academic reputation, merit-based scholarships, low tuition, Truman graduates get good jobs, and because of Truman's size.

The students definitely expect to make at least a B average and obtain their bachelor's degree. They expect to be satisfied with Truman, communicate regularly with their professors, socialize with another racial/ethnic group and participate in student organizations.

She believes there is too much concern in the courts for the rights of criminals, that employers should be allowed to require drug testing of employees/job applicants, the federal government should do more to control the sale of handguns, and that wealthy people should pay a larger share of taxes than they do now. She also thinks colleges should prohibit racist/sexist speech on campus, same sex couples should have the right to legal marital status, and that affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished.

Around a fifth of the students say that the chances are very good that they will change their major/career field and that they expect to graduate with honors.

CSEQ-JINS Administration

The typical respondent to the CSEQ administered in JINS courses was an unmarried female junior living with friends in a private residence within walking distance of campus. Her cumulative GPA is an A-/B+. Both parents graduated from college and she plans to work toward an advanced degree. She spends 16-20 hours a week outside of class doing homework and does not work off campus for pay. A vast majority of her expenses are met by scholarships and grants. She does not have a loan.

Regarding her experiences in the library, she has used the library to study and has asked a library staff member for help. She read assigned material that was not a textbook. She used an index or database to find material and has written a bibliography for a term paper. She has made a judgment about the quality of information she is locating. However, she did not find something interesting while browsing in the library and she has not gone back to read a basic reference.

Her experience with computer and information technology has been fairly complete. She definitely used a word processor and e-mail. She definitely searched the Internet for course material and probably made visual displays with the computer's aid. She also probably used a computer to analyze data. She did not, however use a computer tutorial to learn material nor did she join in an electronic class discussion. She did not retrieve off-campus library materials and did not develop a web page or a multimedia presentation.

She had extremely positive experiences in all areas of course learning except that she did not role play nor do a case study for class. Her writing experiences were likewise positive; however, she probably did not prepare a major report for a class. She has had really positive experiences with faculty but probably did not socialize with faculty outside of class nor had a discussion with faculty outside of class. She has not worked with faculty on research.

She had great learning experiences in art, music and theatre classes but probably has not actually participated in an art, music, or theatre activity herself, nor has she read or discussed opinions of critics. Regarding campus facilities, she has had good experiences except that she may or may not have gone to an outside-of-class lecture or panel discussion and she probably has not used a campus learning lab/center. She has definitely attended a meeting of, and worked on, a campus committee/organization. She probably has not worked on off-campus committees/organizations nor has she met with faculty to discuss a campus group. She has managed either an on- or off-campus organization.

When reporting personal experiences, these too are almost universally positive; however, she reports that she has not talked with faculty/staff about a personal concern and it is a toss-up whether or not she has read about personal growth and self-improvement. Her experiences with student acquaintances have all been positive ones except that she has had limited discussions with students of a different country.

With respect to science and quantitative experiences, she has definitely memorized formulas/definitions/concepts. She may or may not have practiced using lab equipment and has probably not been shown how to use scientific equipment. She has not read articles about science that were not assigned and has probably not compared the scientific method with other methods. She has, however, expressed relationships using math terms, explained a scientific concept to others and completed an experiment with scientific methods.

When asked about topics of her conversations, she seems to have had a very broad range of conversations, indicating a discussion regarding virtually every topic surveyed; however, it is unclear whether she has discussed scientific theories. Her conversations have referred to readings or classes, explored different ways of thinking and referred to something an instructor said. As a result of conversations, she has subsequently read something on a topic, changed an opinion because of others and also persuaded others to change their minds.

She has read a little over 3 texts and over 2 ½ course packets. She has read a little over two non-assigned books and written three essays. She has written slightly over three term papers.

Regarding the campus environment, all her answers were positive. Her most common finding is that it is scholastic. She also has found it to be a highly analytical place with a significant emphasis on information literacy skills. She has been able to develop relationships with other students to a significant degree and relationships with faculty. Reporting on the positive end of the scale, but not as enthusiastically as the previous measures of the environment, she found an emphasis on aesthetics, diversity, vocation, practical courses, and good relationships with administrative personnel.

Finally, when reporting on her perceived gains while at Truman, she reported gains in every area surveyed. The highest reported gains were in gaining a broad general education, understanding herself, and learning on her own. She also reported high gains in skills for a professional career, writing, using computers and other information technology, values and ethical standards, getting along with others, functioning as a team member, thinking analytically, synthesizing ideas, and adapting to change.

GSQ

The *University Master Plan* made yearly projections, beginning with 1997 on “Strongly Agree” responses to various questions asked of the seniors. The following is an attempt to summarize our progress (by looking at a few questions within each question category) with respect to the projection and actual result pairing from 1997 through 2001. Of course, concentrating on the “Strongly Agree” category gives us the most critical view

possible; however, this seems prudent as we are in the midst of a new planning cycle and at the juncture where mid-point corrections may very well be in order.

The results appear to be somewhat disappointing. Generally speaking, student responses are often well below projections. Perhaps projections were unrealistic in some categories; nevertheless, there seems to certainly be cause for concern as the results are reviewed.

Two of three assessment-related questions are below projections in every case and are trending downward. One question dealing with whether the assessment program has helped students understand their strengths and weaknesses had one “up year” but then began a downward trend. We clearly need to do significantly more work in communicating to students the extent to which assessment results help improve student learning and are used in campus-wide decision-making as well as continue working on ways to improve student motivation to take the tests/surveys/etc. seriously and give us samples of their best work. It goes without saying that a student’s total experience while at Truman requires constant surveillance to ensure he or she is achieving what is intended.

Regarding the co-curriculum, as with the assessment-related questions, all sampled questions are below projections with the exception of one year for one question. No real trend is noticeable as some have slight declines, some slight increases, and some no discernable tendency at all.

Sampled questions regarding the liberal studies courses reveal a similar pattern: responses are either all below projections or have only one year of one question up with the remaining responses below projections. Again, no discernable trend is observed with some trending upward slightly, some downward slightly, and some fluctuating.

Questions about seniors’ experiences in their major courses as well as questions regarding overall liberal arts culture also were disappointing, generally similar to assessment and co-curriculum questions. In every case the question asking how often major courses were challenging had responses well below projected targets. Some questions had responses all below targets and fluctuating slightly below said targets. Two years’ responses showed results above the target and the rest below target; all below targets had a slight or definite downward trend. The question regarding attendance at cultural events had two years’ responses above projections with a slight downward trend. The question asking number of hours per week spent outside of class on course-related work generally had above target responses in the three response categories between 0-15 hours but below target responses in the remaining four categories between 16 and 31+ hours. When asked the number of hours a week spent reading beyond course assignments, the first two categories (none and 1-2 hours) had above target responses, the remaining four categories (3-5, 6-10, 11-15, and 16+) all had below target responses.

Much work remains in determining why these collective results are so disappointing and in determining appropriate means of addressing the identified causes.

Freshman/Junior Testing

Analyzing results of the freshman/junior tests is indeed a challenge. Both the AP and CAAP exams generally show declines when comparing freshman scores to those obtained as juniors; however, very few would support what these tests seem to indicate—that student learning, as measured by the tests, erodes as a result of spending the first two years at Truman. So why then are the results indicating declines if, in fact, student learning is occurring during the freshman and sophomore years in these core academic areas? One explanation is that student motivation to give optimal test performance has declined; many students indicate no perceived need to do their best work for several consecutive hours on many different test segments. The Assessment Committee has been looking into possible underlying motivational issues and is developing a plan to address them.

Results from last year's AP freshman/junior test comparisons show declines in all areas (Humanities, Social Science, Natural Science, Reading, Writing, and Math) except critical thinking which did show, incidentally, a decline the previous year. The largest decline was in reading.

Last year's CAAP freshman/junior test comparisons (FY 01) showed declines in all five areas tested (writing, reading, math, critical thinking, and scientific reasoning) as was the case in FY 97. During the four-year period FY 93 through FY 96, three of the years had all areas showing at least minor gains. The three-year period FY 98 through FY 00 each had four of the five areas with declining scores. FY 01 showed the largest decline to be in reading and the smallest decline in math.

Past Work and Future Directions

Much work remains in our quest to ensure the vitality of assessment. We have recently taken steps toward this goal. We have established a systematic review of each assessment program component, a sort of “assessing assessment” activity. We have suspended freshman tests, replaced the first-year student assessment with the CSEQ, and replaced the Institutional Student Survey (ISS) with the CSEQ. We have participated in NSSE and developed new interview questions for the Interview Project. New portfolio prompts have been created and a staff survey is under development, nearing completion. We have made plans to begin offering Tek.Xam, an exam designed for liberal arts students to showcase their computing problem-solving skills.

We plan to develop ways to provide additional analysis of assessment results, to restructure the Assessment Committee as a way of enhancing analysis activities, and to find ways of increasing data accessibility. We plan on examining the “Junior Test” experience in light of the “Freshman Test” suspension, bringing in an assessment consultant to help us better utilize our assessment results, and to find a non-intrusive means of assessing the computing literacy essential skill requirement of the LSP. Seeking campus-wide input on revitalization efforts is on our agenda as is investigating

the Graduating Student Questionnaire's suitability in light of replacing the ISS with the CSEQ. Finally, we plan on finding ways to "link" various assessment instruments in an attempt to perform data mining and glean even additional information from assessment activities.
