

Chapter I: Assessment Philosophy

Assessment at Truman State University is one of the fundamental pillars supporting the university's mission to provide an exemplary and affordable public residential education that is grounded in the liberal arts to well-prepared students. Specifically, the university gathers assessment data intentionally from a variety of sources to use for both accountability and continuous improvement. Assessment data serve to shape discussion across the Truman campus; to support curricular, administrative and instructional decisions; to confirm that the institution is enacting its core values and to tell the story of our mission statement.

Exemplary education is demonstrated by the student through excellence in the content area and is the product, in part, of superior teaching and research opportunities. Assessment instruments that tell us about these elements of exemplary education include the senior exams, either nationally normed or local, that are required in every major, student performance on the capstone project, the University Portfolio, student perceptions reported on the NSSE, and faculty information on the HERI.

These data benefit the student, who is able to document the high quality of his or her performance in the content area and who develops the habit of mind of structured reflection that is so essential to lifelong learning. They also benefit the academic program, which uses student performance data and reflections, along with data concerning enrollment patterns and other factors, in its five-year review to develop a self-study plan for improvement. Sometimes, a discipline will use these data to identify a concern and devise a plan for improvement outside of the five-year cycle. In 2013, the Department of Philosophy and Religion examined student performance on the CLA+, its senior exam. Faculty members realized that the CLA failed to

provide meaningful data for the department because it did not truly reflect the program outcomes. As a result, the department devised a rigorous senior test based on the capstone course and an evaluation of students according to actual program outcomes.

Assessment data gathered to illustrate an exemplary education also serve the university itself. A recent example of a campus-wide improvement brought about by an assessment effort is the establishment of a critical-thinking-across-the-curriculum measure put in place by faculty governance. During Truman's participation in the HLC Academy Pathways Project, critical thinking was recognized as one of the most important desired characteristics of a Truman graduate: "understanding and articulating well-reasoned arguments." Building on work done earlier by an ad hoc committee of the Undergraduate Council, one of the pilot projects in the Academy tested use of a critical thinking rubric that could be modified by each discipline but would result in a common vocabulary for open discussion campus-wide of critical thinking skills.

This pilot project has resulted not only in the establishment of the common critical thinking rubric at Truman but also in collaboration among faculty members to understand and implement the rubric by means of landmark assignments throughout the curriculum. Truman's portfolio prompt for critical thinking and writing has been expanded according to the common framework adopted across the curriculum. Results in 2014 were positive, and the portfolio committee expects to see continued improvement in critical thinking skills as the rubric is integrated and assessed university wide. The Academy project task force recommended that Truman continue to monitor and emphasize the good practices of higher-order-thinking pedagogy, provide professional development, and support and institute a report to faculty

governance bodies from each program demonstrating the level of implementation and including a reflection on the functioning of critical thinking measures.

Assessment is also crucial to Truman's mission to provide this exemplary education grounded in the liberal arts and sciences. The university's understanding of a liberally educated person as a citizen-leader whose participation is essential to our democracy manifests itself in several important characteristics, as well. The graduate who reflects Truman's mission and values will be globally competitive, committed to service, and prepared to lead a healthy and meaningful life. Assessment instruments that attempt to measure these characteristics include the Alumni Survey, the Employer Survey, the Graduating Student Questionnaire and, once again, the University Portfolio.

The Truman Portfolio, long the centerpiece of the assessment program, has several prompts that offer a picture of the student as a citizen of the university community. Each student writes a "Letter to Truman," summarizing his or her experience and reflecting on it. Every letter is read by a faculty staff member, coded, and then marked so that the portfolio office can collate the results and forward, when appropriate, information directly to the correct office or faculty member. Often during the portfolio reading, the reader will write an individual reply to a student whose letter has been especially outstanding. In addition, each student is also asked to discuss his or her "Most Personally Satisfying Experience." The portfolio committee looks for trends among these responses and tries to identify why the experience was so satisfying for the student. The portfolio also contains a Transformative Experience Questionnaire, which asks the student to discuss those in-depth experiences that were especially important in his or her formation.

Transformative learning experiences have become increasingly important at Truman. Our participation in the HLC Academy helped us to realize the interconnected nature of academic learning, civic engagement, critical thinking, leadership and wellness--all of which are facilitated by potentially transformative learning situations. These situations might include service learning, study abroad, capstone projects, internships, diversity experiences, undergraduate research, collaborative and task-based assignments, first-year student experiences, learning communities, participation in campus and community organizations, and course-related experiences. Since completing the Academy project, Truman has been engaged in examining transformative learning, refining its definitions, and identifying ways to facilitate and acknowledge student experiences. The portfolio contains a new civic engagement prompt, which asks the student to describe an experience--whether in the classroom or outside-- in which he or she worked to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and to write a reflection on it. This prompt will remain in the portfolio, although work is ongoing on the faculty scoring rubric.

Assessment at Truman, then, is tied directly to the university's mission and to student learning outcomes. Assessment instruments are used intentionally to gather data for discussion, change, improvement and accountability. The faculty takes a leadership role in assessment by participating in department-level reviews, faculty governance initiatives, portfolio reading and the Provost's Assessment Advisory Committee. The campus-wide conversation regarding assessment is maintained through the annual Strategic Planning and Assessment Workshop in the fall and the University Conference in the spring. Truman also makes an effort to keep assessment close to the students by conducting focus groups on

selected topics, by incorporating data from Student Affairs into its considerations and by reflecting on student perceptions of their experience at the university and their level of engagement as scholars and citizens.