

# Chapter III: HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF ASSESSMENT AT TRUMAN

## THE MOVEMENT TOWARD ASSESSMENT AND ITS REFINEMENT

Excerpted from the Truman State University Master Plan 1997-2007 / May 30<sup>th</sup> version

In February 1970, Charles J. McClain became the third new president of Northeast Missouri State University in approximately two and a half years, initiating a nineteen-year tenure during which the institution would experience two major transformations and would emerge as a nationally prominent university. McClain brought to Northeast a very strong personal commitment to quality academic programming; at the same time he inherited an institution that was struggling to define itself in terms of its mission as a state college. A particular problem for an institution such as NMSU, with a long tradition of placing excellence in student learning at the core of its mission, was the task of defining quality in a broad range of disciplines not previously emphasized by the institution. The timing was ideal for another broad-based, institutional planning effort, and in the summer of 1971 the Faculty Senate's Planning and Development Committee issued a draft statement titled *Purpose: A Forward Goal*. This document formed the basis for the work of the Commission on Institutional Goals and Priorities for the Seventies which was established by the NMSU Board of Regents in November 1971.

The Commission was composed of approximately one hundred individuals drawn from the faculty, administration, students, alumni, and friends of the university. Interestingly, the chairman of the Commission was Dr. Jack Magruder, then a member of the faculty and professor of chemistry. Concurrent with the work of the commission, two very important developments unfolded. First, McClain gently, but persistently, led the faculty into an examination of the university's performance and the quality of student learning that was occurring on campus. He believed that all higher education institutions had a positive obligation to assure that students actually received the high-quality educational experiences they expected when they enrolled. When the institution was focused exclusively on teacher education, it was possible to verify the quality of the students' experiences through the close contacts the college maintained with the public schools it served. With the accelerating diversity of the institution's curriculum, assuring the quality of the academic program was much more complex and problematic. McClain's effort to enhance the institution's interest in, and capacity for, the evaluation of student learning eventually evolved into the university's nationally prominent assessment program. The second development occurred in 1972 when the Missouri General Assembly adopted legislation that promoted the status of the five regional state colleges to regional state universities. The importance of the work of the commission was, thereby, enhanced as the institution's fifth major transition became effective.

The report of the commission, which was adopted by the Board of Regents in December 1973, clearly outlined a program of development designed to fulfill an institutional mission as a regional, comprehensive state university. At the same time, the seeds of the university's transformation into a public liberal arts and sciences university were planted. For example, the first provision of the university's new mission statement was a commitment to provide

liberal arts-based higher education designed to educate the whole person, so that the student develops socially, philosophically, spiritually, and intellectually, prepared for work, further study, and personal fulfillment (*Report of the Commission on Institutional Goals and Priorities for the Seventies*, p. 9).

This call for a strong liberal arts experience at the core of each student's education was consistent with the traditions maintained by Presidents Baldwin, Kirk, and Ryle. In addition, numerous calls for the development of a learning-centered university using objective measures of performance were scattered throughout the report, as were admonitions to enhance the cultural environment and the diversity of the institution. Pertinent examples from the commission report include such recommendations as the following: (Note that the first four relate to assessment.)

1. standards of excellence in the structure and mode of learning and development be ascertained and maintained;
2. each academic division formulate a plan to identify and measure the skills, knowledge, attitudes, and understandings which students should attain;
3. prospective students be sought who have demonstrated excellence in ability and achievement;
4. minimum requirements for graduation which can be externally measured be established;
5. a philosophical basis be developed for the common general educational requirements for the bachelor's degree;
6. full recognition and support be given to the cultural aspects of university life in order to maintain excellence in this area; and
7. emphasis be placed on attracting to NMSU many students from diverse cultural and social backgrounds.

With the report of the Commission on Institutional Goals and Priorities in hand, Northeast set itself to the task of becoming the best regional comprehensive university in the Midwest. The effort was, of course, a success, although the resulting path was somewhat different from the one originally anticipated. New programs were added, but at a more measured pace than at other institutions. The real key to the institution's future success was its emphasis on quality through its comprehensive assessment program and its effort to recruit better qualified students. In 1983 the university attained national recognition with the receipt of the G. Theodore Mitau Award for Innovation and Excellence in Higher Education from the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. Soon thereafter the university initiated another major planning effort that was designed as a sequel to the first commission report, that is, Commission II: Institutional Goals and Priorities for 1985 and Beyond. Almost

concurrently with the appointment of Commission II, the Missouri Coordinating Board for Higher Education was considering a staff report that called for a major restructuring of the higher education system in Missouri, including modifying the mission of NMSU to become a statewide, public liberal arts and sciences university.

As typically occurs when resources are tight, the state was also increasingly interested in improved institutional performance and enhanced accountability. The university's national reputation for effective assessment was an additional advantage that it enjoyed, as well as the fact that it had avoided the temptation to grow for the sake of growth -- choosing instead to optimize size and resources to attain quality enhancements. The university also benefited several years later when the Coordinating Board adopted in 1991 the report of its Task Force on Critical Choices for Higher Education which sought to further distinguish the state's public four-year higher education institutions in terms of the ability levels of the students served. This initiative has reinforced and helped to justify the recruitment of very talented undergraduate students. It is clear, therefore, that the institution's path in the mid-1980s and early 1990s has been strongly shaped by state-level policy decisions upon which the institution was ideally positioned to capitalize.

The new statewide liberal arts and sciences mission became effective on January 1, 1986 -- one hundred fifteen years after Joseph Baldwin's private college became part of the state system and its first public institution dedicated to the education of teachers for the state's public schools. A condition of the enabling legislation was the development of a comprehensive planning document that was subject to the approval of the Coordinating Board for Higher Education. No doubt the institution's recent work on the report of Commission II facilitated the development of the new *Five-year Planning Document*, but the new plan included several major new features and innovations. For the first time at Northeast and, in fact, for the state of Missouri, the plan included specific measurable goals and objectives accompanied by projections for each year of the planning period. The plan included a new mission which explicitly embraced the liberal arts and sciences as the unqualified core of the institution's mission. The plan also described a major restructuring of the university that resulted in the elimination of more than one hundred degree programs and emphasized a strong focus on core liberal arts and sciences programs. Included in this reassessment were specific goals for incoming students, student learning objectives, and faculty recruitment. Particular priorities included (1) the Master of Arts in Education program, the Bachelor of Fine Arts, and traditional core liberal arts programs such as foreign languages, philosophy, and physics; (2) faculty scholarship and development; and (3) improvement of the student/faculty ratio. The plan was also predicated on a process of annual reviews and updates which kept the institution's focus on continual change.

Thus, on the basis of these public policy expectations -- a strong institutional focus on the liberal arts and sciences, selectivity, high academic quality, and affordability -- Northeast began the task of laying the foundation for developing a premier, public liberal arts and sciences institution. Additional direction arose from the new mission statement developed by the institution. This document announced a clear commitment to (1) establishing high standards of excellence in all educational activities -- teaching, research, and public service; (2) developing specific skills and attitudes central to the liberal arts; (3) maintaining an academically rigorous,

yet nurturing environment; (4) preparing students to succeed in high quality professional or graduate programs; (5) providing the necessary support services, physical infrastructure, and other resources for student success; and (6) emphasizing public accountability for its efforts by means of ongoing assessment.

Over the last several years, the Faculty Senate and later the Strategic Planning Steering Committee, made up of faculty, administrators, staff, and students, approved a New University Master Plan, which sets and affirms the basic values and strategies of Truman State University. The plan was approved by the University's Board of Governors in June 1997.

## **CORE OUTCOMES AND VALUES: LIBERALLY EDUCATED STUDENTS EARNING DEGREES WITH INTEGRITY**

The first component of Truman's Synthesis [see University Master Plan, pp. 3-6] -- *core outcomes and values* -- represents the fundamental objective of the institution: the attainment of excellence in student learning in a liberal arts and sciences environment as validated by both quantitative and qualitative assessment of those experiences. Furthermore, the specific outcomes listed reflect Truman's effort to support a coherent, integrated liberal arts and sciences curriculum and co-curriculum (*i.e.*, essential intellectual skills, broadly educated, and mastery of a major) and to define an appropriate balance between the various liberal arts traditions (*i.e.*, *artes liberales* -- capacity to grasp the moral and ethical challenges; liberal free - - opportunity to undertake free personal intellectual exploration or research; and general education -- prepared for effective living in a democratic society).

It should be noted that Truman recognizes that although the statements that constitute this section are expressed as outcomes, they can also be read as core values which color and set the boundaries for the supporting institutional values and the necessary strategic conditions. These core outcomes/values help ensure that the other elements of the model are coherent and are aligned with one another, as all systems must be to function effectively. As a set of guiding principles, these values -- in Truman's judgment -- differentiate liberal arts colleges and universities from all others and have, thus, become central to this institution's efforts at self-definition.

The expression "Degrees with Integrity" which helps define this component of the Truman Synthesis is derived from a monograph with a similar name, *In Pursuit of Degrees with Integrity: A Value Added Approach to Undergraduate Assessment*, which was published by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities in 1984 after Northeast won the G. Theodore Mitau Award for Innovation and Excellence. This book outlines Northeast's commitment to be accountable to its students and the public by assessing student performance and fostering improvement in student learning outcomes through the use of a comprehensive testing and assessment program. This commitment was succinctly expressed in the observation, " 'Value-added' means that education should make a difference. Value-added assessment techniques show that it does." (*In Pursuit of Degrees with Integrity*, page 5) Assessment at Truman has evolved extensively since the early 1980s, but Truman's commitment to provide its students with a high quality educational experience that culminates

in a degree that is intellectually credible and nationally competitive remains fresh.

Truman's success in promoting high educational quality in the context of limited resources is due in no small part to its commitment to foster a self-regarding culture through a broadly supported assessment program. For more than twenty-five years Truman has systematically collected and analyzed data related to the academic performance and satisfaction of its students. This information has been used to implement selected improvements and to monitor the resulting change. As a pioneer in the field of higher education assessment, Truman was one of the first of what has become known as "self-regarding" institutions. This term originally appeared in the title of a monograph written by Dr. Peter Ewell, Senior Associate at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and currently a member of Truman's Board of Governors, that includes the following definition:

... to achieve excellence in the diverse activities currently comprising postsecondary education, we must create explicit, institution-specific mechanisms for regularly assessing the degree to which we are in fact attaining our collective goals. Such mechanisms are fast becoming hallmarks of what can be termed the self-regarding institutions . . . the self regarding institution is aware of its distinctiveness, its purposes, and its strengths and its deficiencies. Furthermore, . . . it has ways of structuring a dialogue about itself that is carried on by all of its members. Most important of all, discussions of effectiveness in the self-regarding institution are *informed* decisions. Indeed, they are based upon explicit and available collective information about what students at the institution are experiencing ... (Peter T. Ewell *The Self-Regarding Institution Information for Excellence*. Boulder, Colorado: National Center for Higher Education, Management Systems, 1984. Page 5)

In much the same vein as the philosophical injunction to "Know thyself," assessment and the fostering of a self-regarding culture are such an integral part of the Truman experience that it is nearly impossible to imagine one without the other.

## **THE SPECIFIC STEPS MADE TOWARD AN ASSESSMENT CULTURE**

(Excerpted from the University's 1994 North Central Study Chapter 3; some updates to the text are included.)

Quality measures in education are difficult to agree upon, yet people do make judgments about institutional quality. As mentioned earlier, in the mid-1970s, President Charles McClain made it clear that Northeast should not rely on traditional input measures, such as reputation and resources, to assess quality. Instead, McClain believed

the University should emphasize learning outcomes and value-added models of measuring quality.

One of the most important benefits of assessment is the data's ability to raise critical questions, thereby setting the institutional agenda for discussion and decision-making. The data can assist an institution in identifying problem areas and in monitoring programmatic change. Concomitantly, by combining discussions about expectations for student learning, multiple pieces of assessment information, and informed faculty and staff analysis, institutional decision-making gains legitimacy and focus.

One commitment that Truman has made during the last 20 years is that every student should participate in assessment. Moreover, the University encourages student self-assessment through such assessment measures as portfolio development, student surveys and the Sophomore Writing Experience. Advisers receive data reports about student advisees, using the information to make recommendations about course selection and career paths.

Truman also remains an atypical educational institution in that assessment continues to be the responsibility of the President, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Division Heads and faculty. This faculty involvement and the extensive use of data by the President and the Vice President for Academic Affairs has made assessment findings an important component of campus decision-making.

For example, the University has made curricular changes based on assessment outcomes. According to one Truman professor, "The key is whether the numbers shake you out of your complacency. We all thought we were good before, but the numbers convinced us that we needed to make changes in the curriculum and in the way we designed student questions and assignments"(USA Today, Feb. 2,1987, p.D1). Assessment information enabled the faculty to reach curricular-change conclusions more swiftly than they might have otherwise. The data helped raise key questions which were followed by more holistic faculty analysis. As a result, all across campus, disciplines can point out to more writing and increased library use by students, improved performance by students on senior exams, and greater student satisfaction in many curricular and cocurricular areas.

Symbolically, an institution indicates to its faculty, students and other constituents what is important by what it chooses to monitor. At Truman, two decades of focusing on student learning inside and outside the classroom has produced an institution with unusually high interest in teaching and learning. Thus, a set of shared values emphasizing student learning and the creation of an intellectual, academic environment provide a common framework for decentralized innovation and use of assessment data. The entire University community realizes that there are stable expectations about student learning and dedicates itself to exploring better ways to accomplish the goal of academic excellence.

Assessment for quality improvement and assessment for accountability have both been embedded in the University's assessment philosophy. Truman believes it should be held accountable to all those who depend upon it to provide the best possible educational experience: its students, the state of Missouri, the nation and the larger global society.

This foundation gives rise to an assessment program that meets multiple purposes, including the need to: 1) know the results of the teaching-learning process, unrelated to course grades; 2) determine how (and if) students are actually benefiting from their educational experiences; 3) provide critical information on the students' growth and development; 4) monitor whether or not graduates are nationally competitive in their fields; 5) focus on quality rather than quantity as a measure of institutional success; and, 6) validate the integrity of Truman's academic degrees.

Truman's assessment philosophy and culture methodology have grown incrementally since the early 1970s. However, by 1981, the University's relatively comprehensive system required all students to: 1) take a nationally normed test upon entry to and "completion" of the general education program; 2) sit for a nationally normed exam in the major; and, 3) complete a student survey. In the mid-1980s, the Faculty Senate adopted a requirement for capstone experiences in the major and for all students to participate in writing assessment. The Faculty Senate added portfolio assessment of the liberal arts and science curriculum in 1989. In 1992, the Senate's Advisory Committee on Assessment initiated an annual interview-based study.

This report should state a caveat at this point: the term "nationally normed" is a technical term in testing. The exams Truman uses for general education program: the College Outcomes Measurement Project (COMP) (which was more recently replaced with the Academic Profile); the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP); the exam primarily used for senior testing in the major; and the Major Field Achievement Test; are actually user-normed, not nationally-normed. These exams are normed according to a large number of students who attend the self-selected institutions who choose to use these instruments, not by a random sample representative of all college students in the United States. Even so, these exams satisfy a critical element in Truman's unique assessment process: measures based on external norms with national perspective. (Currently the Academic Profile does not provide norms based on other schools but only raw scores for students at Truman, though national norms may be provided in the future; it does provide criterion-referenced assessment for students.)

In addition to campus-wide assessment, the University encourages faculty to create classroom evaluation in their courses and program-level assessment for their majors. For example, the Philosophy major requires a thesis major project, which is then presented to external examiners. Other majors may require students to make presentations at an organized forum outside of class, sit for a local comprehensive examination, prepare a discipline portfolio, or participate in an interview with faculty from the discipline.

The general model for the assessment program at Truman is "triangulation." For each educational objective, Truman includes multiple measures in its assessment plan,

creating one of the most comprehensive models for assessment in the United States.

## **HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF EXISTING ASSESSMENT METHODS**

Truman developed these assessment methods and instruments to collect data for three major components of the program: 1) breadth of liberal learning; 2) national competitiveness of the major; and, 3) student satisfaction. A brief overview of the evolution of the program follows.

### **1973-1983**

Assessment began at Northeast during Academic year 1972-73 when President McClain invited graduating students to sit for comparative (senior) exams. Beginning in 1974, all graduating seniors sat for a senior exam in the major. The various majors used a variety of senior exams, administering nationally normed instruments whenever possible. A few majors developed local exams in the absence of instruments for those fields.

Value-added, or pre-test/post-test assessment in general education began in 1975 using the Sequential Test of Educational Progress (STEP) to assess entering freshmen. In spring 1977, the University re-tested these students with the same exam to determine gains in student learning. Later the ACT exam (taken as first year students and sophomores) took the place of the STEP.

Northeast began to collect attitudinal data at about the same time as the value-added testing initiative. The University developed local instruments or adapted existing ones to evaluate Northeast's effect on the student's progress and personal experiences. The University has available more detailed documentation about this period of assessment. For example, refer to *In Pursuit of Degrees with Integrity* and the *1984 North Central Nontraditional Self-Study*.

### **1984-1997**

The University continued to use the three assessment components described previously. Northeast changed or updated some instruments, but the spirit of the early assessment effort has not been lost in the evolution of the program currently in place. In particular, the University has enhanced its early emphasis on multiple measures by including qualitative measures and encouraging self-assessment.

### **Tests**

The value-added testing instrument, the College Outcomes Measurement Project (COMP) which the university began using in the early 80s, has been replaced with the Academic Profile (AP). Another testing instrument used by the university is the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP), which it began using in 1990. The University divides each freshman class, administering as a pre-test the COMP to 50



percent and the CAAP to the other 50 percent. Since each test focuses on different components, the two tests together prove to be effective assessment instruments. The students who are administered the COMP take all areas of the test. The students who are administered the CAAP, however, randomly take only four out of the five sections (science, mathematics, reading, writing, and critical thinking.) All sections are not tested due to time constraints. Each student then retakes the same exam as a post-test after he or she completes 45 semester hours. In the 1993-94 school year, the University shifted timing of the post-test, re-administering it after the completion of 60 semester hours.

The COMP and CAAP provide externally developed measures of student progress in general education. The two instruments have the following designs:

#### COMP

##### Content Areas

- 1) Functioning Within Social Institutions
- 2) Using Science and Technology
- 3) Using the Arts

##### Process Areas

- 1) Communication
- 2) Solving Problems
- 3) Clarifying Values

#### CAAP

- 1) Writing
- 2) Reading
- 3) Mathematics
- 4) Critical Thinking
- 5) Scientific Reasoning

It is still not clear at this point which national test(s) will be most appropriate for curricular review and student advising over the next decade. The Undergraduate Council, Faculty Senate, and the Assessment Committee are reviewing these questions as they examine the option of adopting a new liberal arts and sciences core curriculum.

(As noted earlier, the COMP has been replaced with the Academic Profile, which provides proficiency information in these areas):

#### Academic Profile

- 1) Natural Science
- 2) Social Science
- 3) Mathematics
- 4) Humanities
- 5) Reading
- 6) Writing
- 7) Critical Thinking

Almost all majors are administered nationally normed senior exams. Many majors now use the Major Field Achievement Test (MFAT) available from Educational Testing Services (ETS). Other exams include board exams for professional degrees such as Nursing and Accounting. While the University might have changed the instruments to more appropriate and applicable exams, it continues to generate nationally normed comparative data.

## **Surveys**

The University has adopted UCLA's Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), administered by Northeast since 1983, as freshman survey. Due to considerable overlap with the locally developed freshman survey (SOSS) and availability of national data, Truman no longer administers the SOSS. Other surveys include the locally developed Institutional Student Survey (ISS), the Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ) and the ACT-developed Alumni Survey and Survey of Employers.

## **Other**

Truman has expanded its assessment program to include a variety of qualitative measures since 1984. Such measures evolved from a tradition of developing multiple measures of quality and student growth. Faculty were particularly interested in developing qualitative assessments for classroom practice, higher-order thinking skills, and writing ability.

In response to initiatives outlined in the Five-Year Planning Document, Northeast initiated portfolio assessment in 1988. The University charged faculty with the task of developing local assessment of "the liberal arts and sciences core curriculum" (State of Assessment, p.41). The University envisioned several goals, including longitudinal assessment of the individual student's growth and indications of development of higher-order thinking skills. Northeast expected students to benefit from a retrospective look at their progress. When asked to describe their experience in cover letters, many graduating seniors indicated a certain sense of pride in the amount of work and progress they had made and some specific awareness of their growth as learners.

The Sophomore Writing Experience (SWE) evolved from prior writing assessment which began in 1979 and a 1984 mandate from Undergraduate Council making writing assessment a graduation requirement for all students. The SWE assesses the effectiveness of the use of writing for learning across the curriculum and student growth as writers. Following faculty review of a writing sample, faculty confer with individual students to help them identify and reflect on their writing skills, attitudes, behaviors and processes which lead to success, and to set goals for continuous improvement. The University views the SWE as a connection among a number of initiatives in the University curriculum, including the required first-year writing course and the written self assessment of the liberal arts and sciences portfolios. Since the SWE requires a great deal of faculty support to read papers and conduct conferences, it has proven to be an ambitious task as well as a significant opportunity for faculty development.

The Advisory Committee for Assessment designed and implemented an interview project for juniors in 1992-93 to gather information beyond that gathered by the institutional surveys. The pilot project focused on classroom experiences. Faculty interviewers asked students to describe their best and worst learning experiences. Interviewers assured confidentiality and discouraged stating names of individual faculty or staff. Not surprisingly, both best and worst experiences hinged greatly on teacher quality. Once again, assessment brought teachers and students back to what is most important at Truman: the learning environment and what makes it work. The interview project is currently in its fifth year. In 1995-96 and 1996-97, the committee decided to focus on freshmen to learn more about their adjustment to college. In 1997-98 the committee again gathered information from Juniors.

Faculty in each discipline have designed a capstone experience for their student majors. Listed as an outcomes goal in the Five-Year Planning document, capstone experiences continue to evolve as faculty initiate new experiences and continually review existing ones. The capstone experience gives the student the opportunity to see several years of study come together as a unit. For faculty, it is an opportunity to evaluate individual students as well as the whole major program.

Earlier reports and those in this document detail the findings of the Portfolio Committee, the SWE, the Interview Project and descriptions of several capstone experiences. Clearly, qualitative measures call for a new kind of commitment from the faculty who participate in them: time. While the information the University gathers is much more complete, by its very nature it is much more difficult to gather, summarize and report. The price paid for the information is more effort on the part of the faculty. This accelerated effort requires the involvement of more individual faculty, which results in a higher number of faculty who have first hand knowledge about who uses assessment data. The annual participation of 12 faculty members in the interview project, of 50 to 70 faculty members in the SWE, and over 50 faculty members in the portfolio project, increases and improves the use of assessment results to inform and improve classroom practice.

### **Use of Assessment**

Truman's assessment program is ambitious in its intent and scope. It gathers data from each of the approximately 6000 students on campus every year. The data is used at the institutional and divisional level, but the University intends for it to be useful to the individual student. For national test data, Truman reports exam scores so they can be aware of their progress. Qualitatively, many students are pleasantly surprised by the benefits of self-assessment gained through participation in the portfolio and writing assessments. In cover letters for portfolios, students have reported that once they began gathering materials for the portfolio, it was quite interesting to see they had grown so much as a student, as a writer and as an individual. The comprehensiveness of the assessment system, as well as its implementation, make assessment meaningful at Truman.

Over the past two decades, Truman has discovered that extensive faculty involvement and role-modeling of use by the President, Vice President for Academic Affairs and other University administrators are the keys to successful use of assessment data. In the words of former President McClain, “Northeast strongly believes in placing outcomes in the hands of the people who make the decisions. Widely sharing the results of assessment studies ensures accuracy and promotes use.” He continues, “Collection, analysis, and dissemination of information are coordinated by the Vice President. The data are sent directly to division heads, faculty, and other interested persons for further analysis and interpretation.”

Truman has a record of consistent use of assessment data for more than two decades. Faculty in most disciplines have revised major requirements during that time. Faculty revisions to curricula have often been the result of disappointing assessment information. Continued assessment data monitoring assists in faculty evaluation of the success of these revisions to curricula.

The University has also used assessment to evaluate the co-curriculum. Surveys, special initiatives, the Interview Project, and portfolios reflect this important area of student experience. Early on, the Residential Colleges solicited the assistance of faculty and student research teams to conduct anthropological assessment of the co-curricular culture of the residential college initiative. In another example, the structured Junior Year Interview elicited the following results with a question about the “best non-course learning experience.” The interview results identified students’ best non-course experiences and the reasons for listing these activities. The results showed that students value highly their on-campus work. Alexander Astin has consistently found that while work off campus is detrimental to student learning satisfaction, work on campus enhances the college experience. Findings from the interview project support this claim. The data also affirm the role that Greek organizations play at Truman.

Symbolically, the leaders of Truman have used assessment to draw increased attention and vitality to the dominant focus of the institution: student learning. To quote former President McClain, “At Northeast, the assessment program has become a rallying point for addressing qualitative issues. The entire university community has been spurred toward excellence. An ethos of quality has manifested itself breathing life into otherwise catatonic planning documents, accreditation self-studies, and institutional annual reports.” President Magruder and Vice President Gordon have reaffirmed their strong support for assessment.

Perhaps the most significant use of assessment at Truman has been more subtle than many realize. Assessment focuses attention on students and learning. It helps the University focus on its mission, concentrate its resources on instruction, monitor progress toward planning goals, and demonstrate institutional integrity and high-quality education.