

Chapter 12: Discipline Assessment Spotlight

Assessment is embedded in the culture at Truman State University, and many more endeavors exist than are recorded in this Assessment Almanac. Academic programs, standing committees such as those that coordinate curricular elements, and several other campus offices and organizations collect and/or review information directly relevant to student learning. The almanac focuses primarily on university-wide efforts. Individual faculty and staff are often deeply involved in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Rather than attempt to summarize all related work, this chapter spotlights one academic unit, to illustrate the breadth of assessment and share some best practices. This year, Political Science will be used as an example.

The capstone experience in Political Science provides the opportunity for faculty in the discipline to assess student learning both directly and indirectly. Student capstone projects are typically read by more than one faculty member, creating natural opportunities to discuss strengths and weaknesses displayed by the students. At the end of a capstone course, each senior participates in an exit interview. Interviews are approximately 20 minutes long, and cover strengths and weaknesses of the university, of the discipline, and of the senior seminar course itself. Some of the questions asked in 2010 included.

4. What are the strengths of the university? What does it do particularly well?
5. What are the weaknesses of the university? In what areas does it need to improve?
6. [What was your] Best experience outside of the major?
7. [What was your] Worst experience outside of the major?
8. Why did you decide to major in political science?
9. If you had it to do over again, would you still major in political science? Why or why not?
10. What are the strengths of the political science program? What do we do particularly well?
11. What are the weaknesses of the political science program? In what areas do we need to improve?
12. What was the best course that you had in the major and who taught it? What made it a good course?
13. What was the worst course that you had in the major and who taught it? What were the problems with the course?

The answers to these questions provide a rich account of student views. Overall, students speak very positively about their experiences, particularly those within the major. They also provide suggestions for improvement. For example, based on the information from these interviews, faculty in the discipline decided that more uniformity within major courses, especially in how and when specific learning outcomes were addressed, would be beneficial. Instructors agreed to use the same text across sections of some courses to ensure that students had the same basic knowledge upon which higher-level courses could build. Additionally, they created a research design handbook, which is now used at other universities as well.

As the senior test, the Political Science department uses the MFT in political science. A review of the test items revealed a less-than-perfect match between the outcomes of Truman's Political Science program and the content of the course. Truman's program is theory-based, while the test appears to capture more knowledge of current affairs and recent political history. Despite this mismatch, the test serves as a useful tool for benchmarking against other universities. Overall, Truman Political Science majors perform well relative to others with well over half of the students scoring above the 80th percentile and more than 95% scoring above the 50th percentile.

Faculty in the discipline also routinely review data collected in university-wide assessments. For example, there have recently been concerns about how much time students spend on coursework.

Questions on the Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) that ask about time spent studying have been helpful. Similarly in the past, the GSQ indicated some potential problems in that students felt little connection with faculty outside the classroom. To address this, faculty have worked with the Political Science Student Association to help organize social events that increase interaction between students and faculty.

Political Science is currently undergoing a five-year program review. As part of this, they are developing an Alumni Survey. The survey asks information about current employment and satisfaction with elements of the major and the university. It includes items on specific behaviors related to the major, including frequency of following politically relevant news and information, participation in political and social organizations, and working to solve national and local problems. As part of the 5-year review, the discipline faculty as a whole will review the skills matrix, reconsidering which parts of the curriculum are designed stated learning outcomes, and whether students are making progress on these outcomes.