

Department of Anthropology, Geography and Sociology
Improving Student Experience
February 8th, 2009

To support Truman initiatives to make sure that students have the best experience possible, in spite of potential resource shortfalls in this difficult budget climate, the faculty of the Department of Anthropology, Geography and Sociology has invited student feedback on the student experience in order to learn what we can do to improve that experience for our students. Overall, students report a very positive experience with faculty, in classes, and with negotiating procedures in the department. They believe the curricular revisions which are already underway are likely to improve the experience of continuing and future students. They have also made some productive new suggestions and highlighted some simple things we could do right away to improve their experience. Here we report our methods for collecting feedback, the feedback we received, the responses we've already made and our plan for continuing to monitor and improve the experience of students in our courses and our department.

Collecting Feedback

We have collected feedback from students in three ways: 1) soliciting suggestions from the 32 students enrolled this semester in our Senior Seminar, 2) hosting an All Department Meeting one evening, and 3) including student representatives in our regular department meetings. Each of these sessions was productive in a different way. The discussion in Senior Seminar included the greatest number of students and touched on a wide range of topics. Without an offering of pizza, we only had 3 diehard students at the All Department Meeting who did make some excellent suggestions which specifically focused on the strengths and opportunities for improving student experience in the department. The student representatives at our department meeting supported and reiterated some of the points made in the other venues.

Suggestions Received

What We Already Do Very Well

Students said that the addition of our two temporary faculty lines this year significantly improved their experience because having more professors [4=>5 teaching in the Sociology/Anthropology major; 20% increase, net gain of 1] provided them with exposure to more perspectives in their field of study and a greater choice of electives (which had been much more limited before). Those who have been around for a while agree that the new curriculum looks really good and they expect it to improve the experience for current and future students. Features that were specifically noted include the Proseminar to help new majors learn what they can do with the major. Students commented that compared with their friends in other departments, our department seems well-organized, professors communicate well with each other, and don't send students in circles to accomplish administrative business. Students sense that the professors in this department generally like one another and get along, that

they recognize students as individuals with their own interests, strengths, and goals, and encourage/challenge students to think for themselves. Students report having a more challenging experience in our courses in general because they have to think through choices about projects, arguments in assignments, and are allowed to make their own mistakes and get help digging their way out.

What Could Improve Student Experience

Suggestions for improving student experience ranged from a desire for chairs in the classrooms that don't fall apart to more incentive/ pressure to pursue internships, research, etc. to improving our web site and expanding our range of course offerings. These items are easier to list than to synthesize. Those in italics have already been accomplished.

- Suggested class topics:
 - archaeological methods, working with artifacts, museum studies
 - more on international subjects/ global issues
 - rural sociology, sustainability, environmental studies
- Increasing engagement
 - Push harder for students to do internships, research
 - [More than 85% of students in the Senior Seminar reported having had at least one experience with study abroad, internships, research, service learning while at Truman – about 50% reported experience with more than one of these kinds of experiences. Research was the least often pursued outside of class.]
 - Incorporate more activities in classes
 - Field trips, conference trips, guest speakers
- Social networking
 - *Facebook site to connect current students & alums for ideas and advice about opportunities & shared interests*
 - Encourage student study sessions
 - With new more linear curriculum establish mechanism to connect experienced students with those new to major
 - Mentoring/ tutoring
 - Sharing experiences
- Web site
 - *Can't tell if office hour schedules are current*
 - Careers page is too empty!
 - Link faculty course descriptions to registrar site
 - Organize so course descriptions and syllabi are easier to find
 - *Post all syllabi if possible*
- Advice to faculty
 - Don't overdo library resource information sessions
- Facilities
 - *Chairs that don't fall apart*

Departmental Response to Suggestions

All of the suggestions we received from students were thoughtful and productive. Some can be accomplished quickly while others take longer to develop a response or require perpetual attention.

Chairs: Within a week of learning how many chairs were falling apart, the problem has been fixed with the efficient cooperation of physical plant staff who fixed desks which had been improperly assembled. With student help, we will monitor the chairs in our classrooms and notify physical plant staff if more chairs become dysfunctional.

Website: The department website has been updated so that on each faculty web page there is an updated schedule noting class times and office hours, descriptions of courses taught and links to syllabi for recent courses; course descriptions and syllabi are also posted for the department as a whole in the area labeled Major/Minors and Forms. These changes were already underway as we were getting comments from students.

Further changes are planned. The department has requested technical help designing and managing the website through the College of Arts and Sciences. Within the last week we have signed up for a consultation and hope to get much-needed help soon. We seek advice and help implementing changes that will make information easier to find and web design more engaging both to better serve our current students and to better attract prospective students.

The faculty has just realized how empty the careers page is and is beginning to organize information to list here.

Library workshops: Faculty members who have enthusiastically taken advantage of library workshops are now aware that some students are overexposed to this simple material. They will redesign courses to ensure less repetitive use of this workshop in the future.

Social Networking: The Department created a Facebook group “Truman Anthropology, Geography and Sociology” within a week of the suggestion. Recent graduates who were already networked with Drs. McDuff and Johnson through Facebook have been invited to participate in the group. The invitation to current students will be in this week’s Department Update with other announcements.

While some faculty already encourage student study sessions, receiving this suggestion has made other faculty aware of the positive role they can play in facilitating academically focused student networking. We will be more self-conscious of the need to promote study sessions and will encourage students to study together whenever that is feasible and appropriate.

The suggestion that with our new more linear curriculum we develop mechanisms to connect upperclassmen and new majors is a great one. We have already thought of ways to include Junior/Senior advice in the Proseminar which serves as the official introduction to the program for new majors. They can be included to share the experiences they have had with internships, research, study abroad, service learning and co-curricular activities. They can be a resource for students interested in planning courses outside the major to emphasize particular interests. We will also begin to develop ways for successful upperclassmen to mentor new majors through some key courses. Our level 2 courses all emphasize critical thinking skills. Upperclassmen with strong skills could be mentors to help newer students develop these skills. The integrated method & theory sequence is an especially good target for this mentoring. Developing this mentoring program will take a couple of years; in the first year the course is taught there should be students with the course experience to serve as mentors.

Class topics and increasing engagement: There are several ways in which we are already encouraging students to seek engaging learning opportunities outside of the classroom. In our new curriculum we designed the Proseminar to help students plan their time at Truman so that they build in time for these experiences and we have deliberately carved out a semester in the spring of their third year for students to explore options beyond a required curriculum. We have also designed our upper level coursework to keep topics as flexible as possible in order to allow us to focus level 4 courses on the topics students are interested in exploring. With the more linear curriculum, we will have access to the cohort of students who will be taking those courses when we are planning our future semester schedules. The plan is to seek student ideas each year as we plan the next year's schedule.

Of course, some course topics and some forms of engaging students in classes require more or different resources than we currently have available. While trips to conferences are not built into the structure of any of our courses, we do encourage students to travel with faculty to regional conferences and the department does support the cost of travel and lodging for these trips. This has been more common on the Sociology side of the major. We can seek opportunities for Anthropology students to participate in regional conferences, as well. We will seriously consider ways of increasing the level of student engagement while balancing content and cost considerations. There are some obvious places we could build these experiences into the curriculum. For example, both sociology and anthropology have regional conferences in the spring semester. In the future, our theory courses will both be taught in the spring and it may be that a trip to the Midwest Sociological Society or Central States Anthropological Association meetings could be an optional part of these course experiences. Increasing the level of participation from our majors will also increase travel costs. It is certainly worth exploring, but may require long term fundraising and planning to implement on a large scale.

Our Pledge to our Students

As a department, we pledge to encourage student participation in our ongoing assessment in both formal (student representatives at all department meetings) and informal (polling students in classes) ways so that we continue to learn how we can best improve their experience.

Further, we pledge to take student suggestions seriously and to incorporate their feedback into our discussions about developing and revising departmental policies, courses, and websites, and managing other department resources.

Finally, we pledge to update students on our progress addressing the issues they have raised through regular communication channels (weekly Department Updates, periodic All Department Meetings and posts on Web Site).