

The Truman Experience
from the perspective of the
Department of Anthropology, Geography & Sociology
December 12, 2008

In response to an earlier prompt, we submitted the following brief statement on the Truman Experience:

“Truman State University – a premier public liberal arts and sciences university dedicated to fostering rich interaction among faculty and students in and out of class that nurtures critical thinkers and engaged global citizens who are able to adapt and contribute to our rapidly changing world.”

What *IS* the Truman Experience in our Department?

We are a small department with three distinct disciplines, two of which share a major program. Currently we have 6 tenured faculty, with one on medical leave until retirement, and 2 temporary faculty teaching and advising nearly 150 Sociology/Anthropology majors, a handful of Interdisciplinary Studies majors, and Anthropology, Geography and Sociology minors. Since students in our Sociology/Anthropology major tend to choose mostly sociology or mostly anthropology courses, faculty and students within either discipline get to know one another very well over multiple courses.

Introductory courses are currently designed to meet social science mode of inquiry outcomes for the Liberal Studies Program. Other courses through the department introduce and explore subject matter central to these academic disciplines while fostering critical thinking, analytical and writing skills central to a liberal arts and sciences education. Many courses focus on linking academic content and skills to students' lives and the lives of people around the world through written assignments or service learning. The capstone project in Senior Seminar gives students a chance to integrate learning across the curriculum and make a public presentation of their work.

We have invested in developing a culture of open communication within the department, encouraging student contributions to basic department functions, and seeking student feedback on proposed curricular revisions. Communication is facilitated by near-weekly emails to all students and faculty from the chair which organize announcements and provide an update on departmental initiatives. In addition, we have developed a few social traditions that encourage student-faculty interaction outside of class including: 1) hosting dinner before Global Issues Colloquia lectures when the speaker is a guest or a member of our department (usually 1-2 per semester), 2) having fall and spring picnics or open houses to welcome students back to campus and celebrate academic accomplishments, and 3) having a holiday study break in the home of one of the faculty. We seek to share what faculty and students are doing more broadly through fall and spring semester newsletters posted on our website with a link

emailed to students, alumni, prospective students and other friends of the department.

The downside to the current Truman Experience in our department is that students in the Sociology/Anthropology major see the current program as an eclectic mix of courses with students who traverse these courses differently getting very different educations from the program. They have been frustrated that although they all take two introductory courses, neither counts for their social science mode course, because they are both in the major. Additionally, since we have (until this year) lost faculty regularly since 2004 (Sharon Squires, then Rob Graber, then Mike Davis) it has been difficult for students to get into introductory courses, elective options have been tight, and there are often few new elective options for students who are nearing the end of their program. The addition of one temporary line this year with another replacing Mike Davis, who is on extended leave, has made students and faculty alike feel more hopeful about the future of the program. I am concerned about the impact of budget cuts in our department because we have been stretched so thin for so long already.

What *SHOULD BE* the Truman Experience in our Department?

As soon as we became a department including three disciplines, with some faculty teaching in the major and some not, we began discussions about the future of the department, how to redesign programs and courses to emphasize the synergy among these disciplines, and make best use of our limited resources. We have made great progress in the last year by developing a proposal for a redesigned Sociology/Anthropology major which:

- reduces the number of introductory courses by counting any introductory course in the department toward the major,
- facilitates advising and developing a learning community through a cohort-building Proseminar,
- emphasizes development of academic research and critical thinking skills through courses surveying foundation subject matter,
- allows students to choose either a sociology or an anthropology track through the major (with the option of introducing a geography track in the future),
- integrates core courses in anthropological and sociological theory with a research design course which is followed by an analytical strategies and report writing course
- reserves a semester for rich learning experiences such as study abroad, internships, research, or one of the new academic initiatives,
- challenges seniors to use what they've learned in upper level seminar and research courses with flexible topics, and
- facilitates advising for life after Truman and provides an opportunity to polish and present work to an audience beyond a single class.

The faculty and current students are all excited by the opportunities to enhance what we are already doing through the new curriculum. Seniors wish they were starting over; freshmen have caught onto their excitement. Faculty are in the

middle of developing new course proposals to bring this curriculum on line as the students who entered this fall (2008) move through the program.

The spirit of communication about learning with colleagues and students, of sharing good ideas and collaborating not simply on course design, but on the design of an efficient program full of rich learning opportunities and variety of experience for both students and faculty has already had many successes. We are working to develop a set of rich experiences that go beyond a traditional classroom setting.

- This semester, students in Social Stratification focused their service learning project on performing a community needs assessment in cooperation with the United Way and associated agencies, several students from this class are pursuing internships to further their projects this spring.
- This December, our first students will participate in an internship focusing on the role of animals in society at the Kindness Ranch in Wyoming. The Kindness Ranch is a non-profit organization that rehabilitates animals (large and small) which have been used in research and prepares them for a permanent home. Truman is one of only three schools to offer this opportunity.
- Next semester, students in Economic Geography will explore Kirksville's economic connections through a service learning project designed to produce ideas for strengthening the local economy in the midst of the current recession.
- This summer, students in Democracy and Human Rights in South Africa, will get both hands on experience working in non-profit organizations and rich historical, social and cultural exposure in Capetown, South Africa.
- We believe we will also be able to offer students an opportunity to travel and learn about cultural variation and microfinancing in India and Bangladesh through a program offered by Sewanee University.

Further, we have been active participants in developing a proposal for a Geographic Information Science Center in Kirksville, with Truman participation. This initiative would quickly provide a GIS certification program with the potential to generate significant revenue; with the addition of a single well-chosen geographer, we could also add a GIS minor and make a Geography track through our major. The GIS initiative would provide students with rich interdisciplinary internship opportunities integrating geography, public health, conservation, government, city planning, and many other fields.

Through these examples, we hope to have provided a richer understanding of what we mean when we say that for us, the Truman Experience is "dedicated to fostering rich interaction among faculty and students in and out of class that nurtures critical thinkers and engaged global citizens who are able to adapt and contribute to our rapidly changing world."