

Assessments prove lengthy, useful

BY KATHLEEN MEYER
for the Index

Christen Gates is ready to graduate.

But before the senior can receive her diploma, she will have to complete a list of requirements of the University's Assessment Program.

Glenn Wehner, chair of the Vice President's Advisory Committee on Assessment, explained the assessment program's goal.

"It's a revolving and evolving process of looking at trying to measure academic advancement both in the LSP [Liberal Studies Program] and in the major," Wehner said.

Wehner said the purpose of the program is to gather data and use it to improve University in-classroom experiences.

"The important aspect about assessment is we hope to be able to take this back to the classroom," Wehner said. "Any of this assessment, whether it is with the faculty or with the students, the question is, 'How can we make this a better place?'"

The University has issued an assessment program every semester for more than 30 years. The program includes components such as tests, surveys, interviews and performance assessments. Students, faculty, staff and alumni

are all assessed in different ways to benefit the University and the students and faculty. Seniors in particular participate in the portfolio project, tests in the major, surveys, the student interview project and capstone experiences.

Assessment tools are links to progress and are used to show how close the University is to its goals, according to the University's Assessment Almanac, which provides a collection of results from each year's assessment devices.

When it comes to getting feedback from the students, Wehner said he wants the process to be as painless as possible. He said he recognizes that seniors' opinions can be especially helpful.

"We try to put the bare mini-

mum in terms of requirements on them, but they are one of the best groups to actually measure gain because they've been here four years," Wehner said. "They've come all the way through it, they've persisted on campus and they're obviously a good group to ask."

One component of the assessment program that all seniors must complete is the senior portfolio. The portfolio consists of five academic requirement prompts, along with the students' most personally satisfying experience at Truman and a reflective cover letter.

Karen Smith, director of the portfolio project, said the objective of the senior portfolios is to assess the University's education program and to provide information about whether the goals are being met or not.

"One of the things that we'd like to do is to offer the opportunity for students to have reflection on what they learned," Smith said. "We know that you're really busy and if you didn't have to, you might not otherwise take the time to look back and see whether you accomplished what you wanted to do."

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Glenn Wehner
Chair of the Vice President's
Advisory Committee on
Assessment

After graduation, 20 faculty members meet each week for three weeks to read the portfolios.

"One of the things that make it important is that it is a direct measure of student learning," Smith said. "A lot of higher education assessment is survey data, so it asks about your opinion, which is very valuable, but it is harder to get evaluations of your actual work, and that's one of the things that makes the senior portfolio project unique."

Gates said she thinks the project is beneficial to the University.

"I hear that this gives us an accreditation, which actually makes us look better as we are trying to become the 'Harvard of the Midwest' and trying to have better PR, especially in St. Louis and Kansas City," Gates said. "Also I think faculty can use these results from the pro-

University assessment tools

Senior portfolio – requires graduating seniors to submit one piece of work in six categories, as well as a cover letter and permission form:

- **Critical thinking** – a work integrating analysis, evaluation and synthesis of ideas.
- **Interdisciplinary thinking** – a work that incorporates the methodologies of multiple disciplines.
- **Historical analysis** – a work analyzing connections between events, and reveals the relevance of historical context.
- **Scientific reasoning** – a work showing an ability to reason scientifically, such as a laboratory or research report.
- **Aesthetic analysis** – a work analyzing a creative work, including visual, performing, or written arts.
- **Most satisfying work or experience** – can include class work, extracurricular work, or objects of symbolic value.
- **Cover letter** – a record of the time and thoughts put into the creation of the portfolio.
- **Permission form** – allows the University to use the portfolio in the future to train new portfolio readers.

Source: Truman State University Assessment Program

Graduating Student Questionnaire – taken by all graduating seniors, with questions based on student satisfaction, campus involvement, and time spent on activities inside and outside the classroom.

Junior testing – students who earn 75 credit hours take either the CAAP test, which is focused on critical thinking, or the MAPP, which tests natural and social sciences, mathematics, humanities, reading, writing and critical thinking.

Loan exit counseling – Federal Perkins Loan and Nursing Loan borrowers are required to attend an exit interview before graduation. This has to be done through the Students Accounts Office.

Senior capstone – taken during the senior year of the student's major. It is designed to demonstrate point-of-view comprehension, positive self-worth, attitudes toward the major and the University, as well as ethical and social responsibility.

Senior testing – all seniors take a test chosen by faculty. The test, either the Collegiate Learning Assessment or a major-specific exam, measures general knowledge in the senior's major.

Reporting by Will Young/Index

gram, to see how strong their department is or how weak it is and where their limitations are, so they can improve."

Gates also said she thinks the project is valuable to students.

"I think it's beneficial when it helps a student look back and see all the great accomplishments they have made through their writings and throughout their four years here at Truman," Gates said.

Although Gates said she was a little dissatisfied with the process of the online portfolio, she found the experience rewarding overall.

"Looking back and seeing my improvement over the past four years and all the great papers I've written made me proud knowing that I have improved in the past four years here," Gates said.

Another component of the assessment program is the tests seniors take, such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment, tests in the major and the Graduating Student Questionnaire. Nancy Asher, interim registrar and co-

ordinator of testing and reporting, said tests are a way of assessing the effectiveness of the University curriculum.

"First and foremost, we want to make sure that our curriculum is preparing students to go out into whatever field and be successful at it, and the senior test is just one measurement of that," Asher said. "They're typically national-normed exams, and the content should hopefully fit our curriculum and are also the things that people out in those fields expect students to know."

Asher said the exams can lead to course changes.

"If we do find that we have students, as a whole not as an individual, who are scoring poorly in an area, then the faculty will look at that area and see if they have holes or deficiencies in their courses where they're not covering that material," she said.

Asher added that students might find the test more beneficial than expected.

"I think it's a way for the student to feel confident about how they did with the information

they've learned since they've been here," Asher said. "They get the results back, and they know how much effort they put into the exam and take that into consideration with what courses they've taken to hopefully feel good about their education here."

Gates, a sociology and anthropology major, said her senior test was not as useful because it was not tailored to her education at Truman.

"I had to take a sociology test because there is no anthropology test, so it was more difficult for me just because I've only had about three classes in sociology, yet I had to take a senior test for it," Gates said. "In my situation I felt that the senior test did not reflect my major education here at Truman because I did not take a test that was solely for my major."

The assessment program also includes the student interview project. Jeffrey Vittengl, chair of the interview project, organized the collection of data for the report. Vittengl explained that volunteer first-year students and seniors who

participate in the project are sampled from a randomly selected pool.

The questions could be geared toward things such as what advisers do and whether faculty present information in the classroom that makes the students more involved in their education. The results show a list of positive and negative faculty behaviors, he said.

The data collected from the assessment program is available to anyone for review online through the Assessment Web site at assessment.truman.edu.

Gates said she would like to learn more about the University's progression after assessment toward a better education and environment for students.

"I don't think raw statistics is the thing everybody wants to see," Gates said. "I think they really want to see improvement. They want to see more students coming here. They want to hear their parents and friends when they come back home saying, 'Oh my goodness, you went to Truman, that's so great!'"



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