

Committees cater to Art & Science report

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Art & Science's initial report might have focused on facts and figures, but the implications put students at the center.

University President Barbara Dixon discussed Truman's future challenges Monday night when she sat down with more than 20 students at the Omicron Delta Kappa-sponsored President's Roundtable. Dixon broke down the Art & Science Group study findings on Truman's marketability presented last month (see the January 31, 2008, issue of the Index) and asked for student suggestions on how to improve the Truman college experience.

"There's the perception that it's very boring and there's nothing to do here," Dixon said. "... We need to do something so unique that everyone says, 'Oh yeah, Truman, that's the place that (blank).'"

Dixon said she met with University administrators in the weeks immediately following Art & Science's presentation and outlined both short-term and long-term plans of action. She said that in the future, the University will continue its plan to change some of the curriculum requirements established in June 2007, fitting with the Art & Science recommendation that Truman create more major and minor programs.

"There are things we can do without violating our liberal arts and sciences mission," Dixon said. "It doesn't look like we have a lot of majors. We don't have to change anything. We already have the courses, we just have to let people know."

In response to the study findings, Dixon has created five action committees focused on immediate changes in the areas of enrollment management, first-year experiences, community relations, streamlining administrative processes

and increasing spirit and fun on campus.

Students at the roundtable responded favorably to Dixon's actions, and many offered suggestions as to how to increase both fun on campus and bonds between the University and the town. Several students present said they occasionally felt unwelcome by Kirksville residents, noting that partnerships between Truman and the city of Kirksville would be beneficial to both institutions.

"One of the goals of regional institutions is to be 'stewards of place' and make it a better place to live," Dixon said. "... Truman is Kirksville's largest employer. At the same time, we rely on the community."

Student involvement with the Art & Science findings has not been limited to group discussion with top-level administrators. Lou Ann Gilchrist, dean of Student Affairs, said that as the head of the campus life, spirit and fun action committee she sought out student and committee member opinions first before approaching faculty and staff.

"I first met with these student representatives, and we talked a little bit about who faculty and staff representatives ought to be [and] how many they feel comfortable with," Gilchrist said. "We ended up with about even [numbers of faculty and students], but I went to the students first and asked how they felt the committee should be composed."

Gilchrist said the spirit and fun committee has met several times since its formation and conducted focus groups during University Conference Day to try to hone in on the student perceptions of what keeps Truman from being a fun campus. Gilchrist said her initial findings point to two distinct sources: student personalities and priorities and institutional procedures.

"When you look at students

themselves, we've got a very academically oriented student body," Gilchrist said. "Sometimes when there are fun things to do, students may choose to stay home and study. ... In terms of procedures, it's hard to define it in one thing. There are some people who will talk about us being a dry campus as having an influence on how much fun we have. There's also concerns that whether or not we have the facilities and the venues to have the kinds of events we're talking about."

Gilchrist said the Conference Day focus groups also helped the spirit and fun committee more accurately define school spirit.

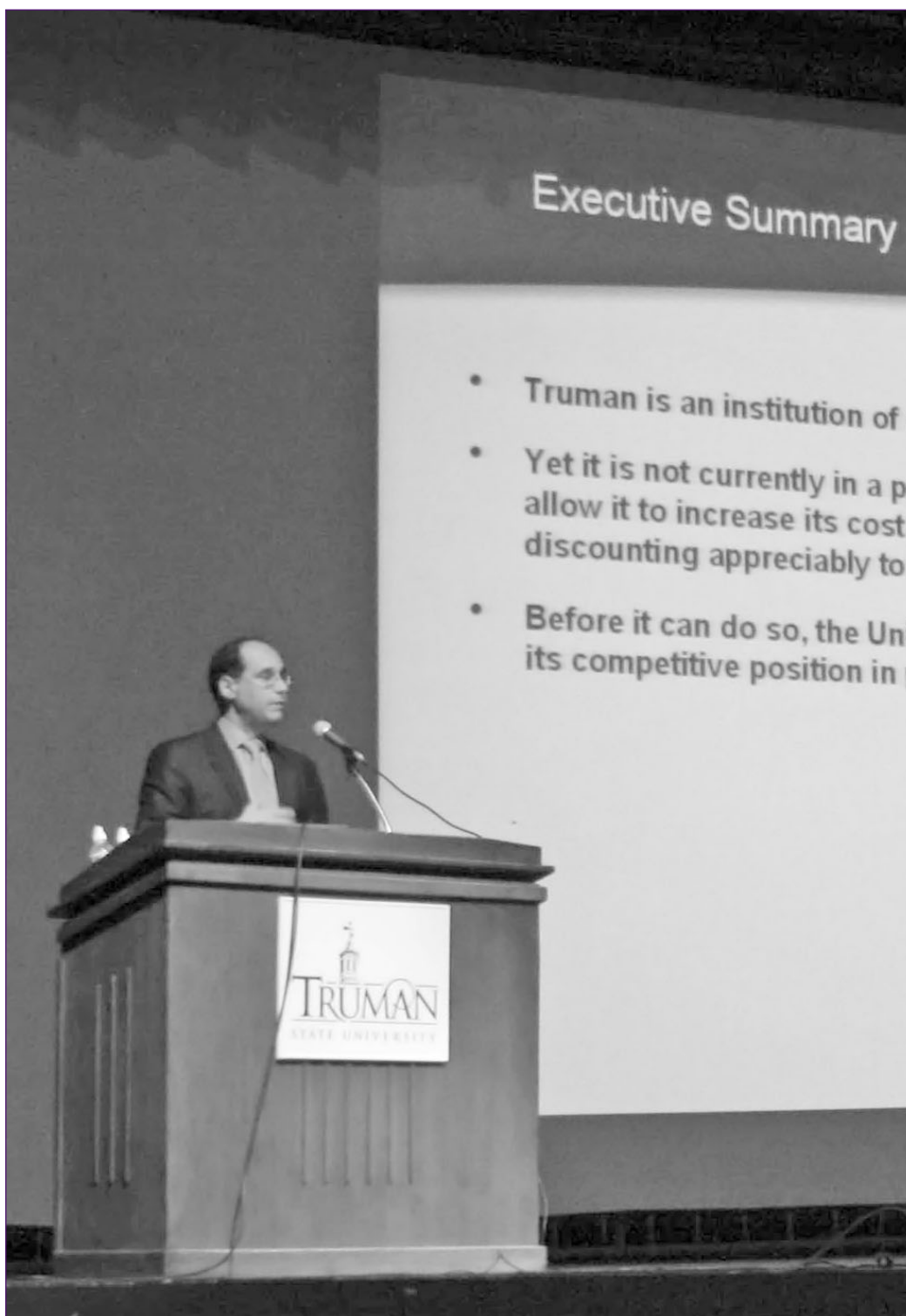
"Spirit is something that makes you feel connected with the University," Gilchrist said. "Athletics is probably one of the easiest ways to make that happen, but the debaters are [also] connected with the University. ... Social Greek organizations really get connected with the University. There's a lot of different venues that can create spirit, and we're looking at all of those."

During Midterm Break, Gilchrist said members of the spirit and fun committee gathered ideas from other universities on how to improve Truman's campus life. It is still too early to give definitive conclusions, but Gilchrist said she hopes to present some concrete recommendations to the University by the end of the semester.

"It's easy to believe that because our students are so bright and so accomplished ... that we sometimes forget that they're 18-, 19-, 20-year-old[s] ... that want to 'do' college," Gilchrist said. "Sometimes it's hard for people to understand that they're not mutually exclusive — that there's a way we can make both [academics and fun] happen."

Perceptions of fun and academic prestige are not just limited to current students. Regina Morin, associate vice president for enrollment management, said in her role as the head of the enrollment management action committee she's trying to convey Truman's strengths to the University's prospective students.

"I've been in Columbia for the past 11 years. ... Columbia is full of distractions," Morin said. "It really comes down to fit. ... The stories I hear stu-



Mark Hardy/Index
David Krauss, higher education marketing consultant, told the Truman community about the results of a marketability study conducted by Art & Science Group in January. University President Barbara Dixon has formed five committees to act on his recommendations.

dents tell about the experiences they're having both in and outside the classroom are very vibrant. I think it isn't so much changing our image because we are the only highly selective institution in the state."

Morin said her committee's biggest challenge is conveying Truman's strengths to all types of potential students: high school seniors, transfer students and international students.

"The Midwest, for all intents and purposes, the number of high school graduates will decrease up to 12 percent — probably between eight to 10 percent would be realistic," Morin said. "What that tells you is you just can't focus on the freshmen anymore."

Morin said that as Truman's pool of traditional first-year students shrinks, her goal is to retain Truman's current size of

about 5,800 students or even increase the population to the University's target number of 6,000.

"We don't want to get smaller — that's not an option," Morin said. "We can't sacrifice the quality of the experience, and we can't sacrifice the quality of the student. Those are tremendously big challenges, but I think we can do it because we are unique."

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