

New VPAA gets acclimated

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Submitted Photo
New VPAA Susan Thomas. Thomas began working at Truman during July.

Truman State's new Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs was selected May 2014.

Susan Thomas, formerly the Associate Provost for Academic Planning and Program Development at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, began operating in her new role at Truman July 21, 2014. The Index spoke with Thomas during late July to learn her goals for her new position.

Austin Hornbostel: Have you gotten anything accomplished in your first week of work, just getting acclimated, or have you gotten started with any projects or anything?

Susan Thomas: Well, I'll tell you one of the coolest things I got to do last week was to see the mathbio presentations. That's an NSF [National Science Foundation] grant that Truman has. Students come and work for nine weeks of the summer and, I have to tell you, their presentations were absolutely amazing.

They were professional, they were knowledgeable, they did it without notes and probably the most impressive thing to me is sometimes it's hard for students to explain what goes on in their discipline in a way that people who are outside that discipline

can understand, but these students were fabulous at it. I was able to follow every one of those presentations and what they were talking about.

So, I guess what students might need to know is at the beginning what my job is, in addition to taking care of some other things, it's really getting to know who Truman is. I have the perspective from being outside Truman.

Now, if I'm going to work with all the people in Academic Affairs to make sure we have the best educational experience for students, I have to understand Truman from the inside out. In many ways, my job is to take the skills, talent and expertise of everyone in Academic Affairs and make sure they are utilized to their maximum potential, because that's what it takes to offer the very best educational experience to students.

AH: Moving from the outside looking in to being on the inside just trying to get acclimated and getting to know everyone, right? You're trying to make it a great experience and get a lot accomplished?

ST: Right, so I'm trying to find out now all the really cool things that are going on. A lot of times, people will come in from the outside and they have all these ideas and plans. I think that's awfully presumptuous to do that when you don't even know the institution. How can I come in from the outside and say what's in the best interest of Truman? I need to know who Truman is and I need to gather the collective knowledge of everybody in Academic Affairs so we can figure out where we go.

So that's what these beginning weeks are, meeting with lots of people, finding out what they do and what they're passionate about, seeing what are the coolest things they're doing, if they'd like to see more support for what they're doing, those kinds of things.

AH: So the rest of the summer before students are arriving on campus is just getting to know everyone at the University and getting started on the path to what comes next?

ST: Exactly right. I'm sure there are other things that come up that I need to be doing but overall, I need to understand how Academic Affairs operates at Truman ... I'm kind of in a

major fact and opinion gathering mode.

AH: Once the freshmen arrive on campus for Truman Week, do you have any plans in mind for meeting some of the students or going to some of the events that will be going on, like the presentations during the week?

ST: I'm actually just learning about Truman Week and Convocation and those things right now, so I can't give you anything specific right at this moment because I'm just learning how the whole [week] works. I will tell you I'm very committed to getting out of my office as much as I can. I love going to all kinds of student presentations, whether they are artistic presentations, research presentations, just thoughts that they have, readings, all those kinds of things are very important. That's the life of Truman, that work.

I think to truly understand students and what they do here,

While classroom stuff is enormously important, so is all the other stuff that goes on at a college campus.

AH: So students, be they incoming or students who have been around for years already, should be looking forward to seeing you around [campus]?

ST: Absolutely, and if returning students have any advice for me, I'm most interested in hearing it. The freshmen and I will be in the same boat and my guess is, just like returning students have all kinds of wisdom for freshmen students, I'm open to that as well. What are the coolest classes, what are the coolest experiences here? What makes them so proud to make a Truman student? I have to tell you, in the short time I've been here, people are so enormously proud of this university. What makes students so proud of this university? Those are the kinds of things I want to hear.

[finding out if] administrators, faculty, staff and students see a Truman education in the same way. Even though they may not use the same words and they experienced it differently, are they all in agreement about its core components and values or are there differences?

I really want a sense of what it means to have a Truman education, and then we can figure out how you enhance that and support all its components. If I don't know that first, any other plans don't make sense.

AH: So this first semester is just a step up to further plans?

ST: Right, but I want you to know this University is [already] really good. I always think there's a focus whenever a new person comes in [on] what they're going to do to improve. Things can always be improved, but I also want to celebrate what's already so amazing about Truman. I think sometimes that gets lost when a new person comes in. Everybody wants to know, "What are you going to do that will be new?" or "What will be the next biggest and best thing?" and I think people lose sight of all the really good things that are already going on.

My [desire] is to know all of the really cool things that are going on, and then we figure out where we go forward, because Academic Affairs is part of the bigger institution. I need to know how Academic Affairs works very closely with Student Affairs and the other areas of the University. How we collaborate, how we work together to enhance the experiences of students on this campus and how we [handle] all of that through tough budgetary times.

There's less and less money and more and more expectations from the state, and all those kinds of things that administrators have to work with. Students should not have to pay any attention to it all. Higher education is in a very interesting position right now in that it has more and more demands on it and less and less state support, so part of my job is to help figure out how Academic Affairs moves forward to meet the academic needs of the institution in that environment.

You guys don't really care how much money we do or don't have, how much regulation we have or don't have. You just want an amazing experience and that's what you should get.

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-Susan Thomas

you have to go and listen to them. I'll tell you, the mathbio presentations set a very high bar for how students present at Truman. I'm perfectly comfortable talking to students in cafeterias, talking to students in social events, those kinds of things. You know, I have a 20- and 23-year-old of my own, so I have personal experience [with communicating with college-age students].

I don't see my position as anything other than another member of the Truman community, somebody who can help move things along and lead things. In some ways, I'm a brand new freshman ... I'm hoping to attend some of the social things. I don't want to see students just in academic settings. It's very clear to me that a university education is an education of the whole student, which includes social things, what goes on in residence halls, what goes on in co-curricular activities.

All of that is a very important part of their college experience.

I think it's outrageously important to be proud of your institution, so that's the kind of sense I want to get as well ... Now, if there's also something that drives you completely crazy, I want to hear that, too. If something is driving you crazy, that's impacting your ability to appreciate the whole Truman experience.

I think student feedback is really important. Not student griping, because everybody gripes. More like really thoughtful ideas about what is brilliant about this place and what maybe could be a little better, because students live it every day and they live it in a very different way than faculty and administrators.

AH: If there is one thing that you want to accomplish during your first semester at Truman, what would that be?

ST: I would say a true understanding of what a Truman education actually is, from everybody's perspective. One of the things that will be interesting is

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"It should not have been put in without gender identity," Palmer said. "Working in the LGBTQ rights area, a lot of people traditionally have been real skeptical about including trans[gender] and gender identity in with LGB rights ... so they left trans[gender] out to get it passed and very quickly knew it was a mistake."

Palmer said the advocates for the addition of the gender identity and expression clause from the Student and Faculty Senates are asking the Board of Governors to hear the issue as soon as possible, but have received word from University President Troy Paino that the Board of Governors have a full agenda for the remainder of 2014.

Paino said he spoke with Palmer and Board of Governors Chair Susan Plassmeyer about the issue and the Board has expressed they might not hear the matter right away. He said Board members are not opposed to hearing the issue, but Plassmeyer had set a rather ambitious agenda for the year and did not want to deviate from the current goal of conducting a comprehensive revision of Board policy.

Paino said he wants to communicate that part of the reason for any perceived lack of urgency on the part of the Board is he thinks gender identity and expression currently are protected under law for the purposes of Truman's campus, students, faculty and staff. He said in his understanding the clause in the current policy which specifies protection from discrimination on the basis of sex includes protection for transgender people. He said he recognizes the symbolic significance and message of inclusion or omission of the clause, but does not find the language necessary to guarantee legal protection.

"As an institution, I just want to be clear to everyone," Paino said. "We do feel gender identity is included and we in no way believe that we can tolerate any form of discrimination against someone based on their gender identity. From a legal standpoint we feel that it's covered in our non-discrimination policy."

Paino said at this time it is unclear if the Board will pursue a discussion of the issue during 2014. He said throughout his experience the Board has taken interest in listening to students and faculty and there is potential for future discussion and development of this issue.

POLICY UPDATE

Eleven universities in Missouri have added gender identity and gender expression to their university nondiscrimination policies

1 A.T. Still University

2 Fontbonne University

3 Rockhurst University

4 Saint Luke's College of Health Sciences

Source: campuspride.org

5 Missouri University of Science and Technology

6 University of Missouri-Columbia (Mizzou)

7 University of Missouri-Kansas City

8 University of Missouri-St. Louis

9 Washington University

10 Westminster College

11 William Jewell College

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Sunday, August 24th at Rotary Park

11:00 A.M. Worship

Noon — Free Lunch

Shuttle Bus service will be provided to and from campus in front of the SUB beginning at 10:30 a.m.

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