In an ongoing effort to shape an academic program that delivers a wide variety of high-quality learning experiences, Truman explores some creative approaches to teaching and learning that build on past successes.

WHEN TROY PAINO stepped into the role of provost and vice president for Academic Affairs last summer, he set his sights on identifying the strengths of the University’s academic program. By listening to students, faculty, and staff, he wanted to develop a sense for the type of learning opportunities faculty and students were already engaged in that were successful and where there was potential to build upon areas that fit well with the student population and the mission of the University.

THROUGHOUT THE MANY DISCUSSIONS that took place with various constituents, Paino discovered an underlying theme. “I heard that study abroad is obviously one area where our students get a great deal of experience...”
and students are very interested in doing undergraduate research, interdisciplinary learning experiences, and out-of-the class experiences – all what I would call ‘experiential learning experiences,’” says Paino. “These are all the kind of highly active learning experiences that made a lot of sense if Truman is to be a highly selective liberal arts and sciences university.”

CONSEQUENTLY, a vision began forming for an academic program that accommodated a multitude of opportunities that expand education beyond the study of textbooks – especially those that allow students to become more engaged and encourage them to take responsibility for their learning both inside and outside the classroom. By building on existing pockets of learning experiences that have proved successful in the past, the University plans to keep moving forward by offering an even broader range of transformative learning opportunities for its students.

The Ultimate Class Project: Going Beyond the Classroom

ONE AREA WHERE PAINO OBSERVED the potential to invest in the academic program centered around a willingness on behalf of the faculty to develop new out-of-the-classroom learning opportunities. As a result, a challenge was issued: If faculty members could come up with innovative active learning projects, then Paino would find the resources to make them happen. When the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs put out a request for proposals for Innovative Academic Initiative grants last fall, they received 17 proposals. A review committee then selected a handful of proposals to develop, and several of these new academic initiatives will be offered to students during the 2009-2010 academic year.

DESIGNED TO DEVELOP critical thinking and problem-solving skills, the new semester-long initiatives that were selected provide some unique ways to incorporate connections between the curricular and co-curricular, as well as community-based research, service learning and civic engagement.
IN ADDITION, many of the new initiatives include an interdisciplinary theme such as the one found in “Roadtrip as Pedagogy,” which links a cluster of three courses: Southwest Lit, JINS: The Bomb (about nuclear culture), and a Spanish course. The course, which focuses on a roadtrip to New Mexico during spring break, provides an opportunity for students to learn about the culture of New Mexico, as well as the experiences of going on a journey.

MONICA BARRON, a professor of English who spent a semester in New Mexico while on sabbatical, proposed “Roadtrip as Pedagogy” because she was interested in seeing Truman offer more synergistic learning experiences. “Sometimes the impact of a course is intensified by what you take with it and by whether or not you can see and touch the world chronicled in the courses’ texts,” says Barron.

A 15-CREDIT COURSE called “Latin American Experience: History and Conservation Biology of Panama” also serves as a link between different disciplines. The course was developed by Chad Montgomery, an assistant professor of biology who lived in Panama for 10 months while doing post-doctoral research. Marc Becker, an associate professor of history, also became involved in the project bringing his background in history of Latin America to the course.

For the “Latin American Experience,” students will spend the first month of the semester on campus, followed by two months in Panama, with the final month back on campus. Students will also participate in either a history or biology course in the Liberal Studies Program (LSP), the general education curriculum undergraduates must complete in order to receive a Truman degree.

WHILE IN PANAMA, students will be involved in service learning experiences, such as tutoring English as a second language (ESL) for Panamanian students, subsistence agricultural techniques, and aqueduct design and construction to provide fresh drinking water to communities off the beaten path. “Students will also be working on independent studies related to their majors while in Panama,” says Montgomery. “For instance, a biology major may examine the aquatic invertebrate community in stream pools vs. stream riffles, while an anthropology major may do an analysis and description of local religious celebrations.”

Monica Barron, professor of English, developed a new course called “Roadtrip as Pedagogy” that includes an actual roadtrip to New Mexico over spring break to study the culture of New Mexico.
DURING THE TIME he spent in Panama previously, Montgomery was able to experience some of the different cultures within the country and to learn more about the political history, history of the relationship between the U.S. and Panama, and the process of the development of national parks and other protected areas within Panama. “I feel that a hands-on, interactive process that will be occurring throughout the course will engage students from all disciplines and allow Truman students to experience a part of the world that they may not normally have the opportunity to experience,” says Montgomery.

A CATCHY TITLE, “The Truman Blues Project,” gives a hint of what can be expected from a new course developed by Clifton Kreps, professor of classics. The examination of the popular music genre known as “the blues” will cover a broad range of disciplinary perspectives, including music theory and musicology, history, geography, folklore and oral tradition, literary studies, creative writing, gender studies, media studies, and acoustical science.

“This is a class where once again it will be very experiential where students will be involved in writing, performing, and producing their own music but also engaged in some sort of service project where they will be engaged in community activities, such as musical festivals and the like,” says Paino.
While most of the new projects are curricular projects that will begin in spring 2010, one exception is "Knowledge is Power: Making College Accessible for Minority and Low SES Rural Students," a civic engagement initiative designed by Wendy Miner, associate professor of education, and Darl Davis, director of the Regional Professional Development Center. Designed primarily for Truman students with an interest in public education, the project, which will begin this fall, involves working with families and immigrant populations in the Milan and Green City, Mo., communities to help young people know what they need to do if they want to attend college.

"KNOWLEDGE IS POWER" focuses on the idea that minority and low socio-economic students who are interested in higher education may need additional support and services. "I am often in schools with less privileged students, and I am concerned about their chances of getting into college," says Miner. "When you find people and start working with them in high school, it's often too late."

AS PART OF THE "Knowledge is Power" project, Truman will be hosting a variety of activities to help families understand the process of preparing for college and what they will need to do, such as ACT preparation and applying for scholarships. Activities will range from town meetings for the families to opportunities for 7th-9th grade students to come to campus and shadow Truman students. Sixth graders will also be invited to take tours of the campus, eat with Truman students in the residence hall cafeterias, and a host of other activities to help introduce students to a college experience.

"ALL OF THESE new academic initiatives provide a variety of experiences that are quite unique," says Paino. "They are pilots, and it is my hope that through this we are going to learn more about what is attractive to students, what is possible, and how we can sustain these really unique, semester-long learning experiences that can set Truman apart from other schools."
Students Move to the Head of the Class

“STUDENT-INITIATED” COURSES — another experiential learning opportunity available at Truman — can also hold a special appeal for students interested in taking a more active role in their education. As the name implies, this type of learning opportunity broadens the role of the student by encouraging a student or a small group of students to propose, design, and build a new course and to also facilitate the delivery of the coursework, all under the close supervision of a faculty mentor.

THE OBJECTIVE for student-initiated courses is described as “not only unleashing the inspirations and creativity of current students, and fostering engagement, but also of attracting highly capable prospective students who relish the chance to play a more active role in crafting their own educational contexts.” By identifying gaps in the conventional curriculum, students can propose a new course appropriate to an education grounded in the liberal arts and sciences. Like any other new course, a proposal for a student-initiated course must first pass through a review and approval process before it makes its way to the course catalog.

THE CONCEPT for student-initiated courses is far from new at Truman. Michael Kelrick, professor of biology and director of Interdisciplinary Studies, began running the University’s first student-led course, “Expanding Environmental Consciousness,” 12 years ago. That course spawned another student-initiated class called “Grassroots in Environmentalism” that is now entering its fifth semester. More recently, the Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs began sponsoring formal proposals for additional student-initiated courses that led to two new offerings this spring. Three student-initiated courses will be offered in the fall, and at least three more are in the pipeline.

THE MODEL the University is following for the student-initiated courses is based on an organic process where the students who have taken a student-led course become the preceptors for future incarnations of the course. “The heart of the model is helping to facilitate the knowledge that accumulated in the person or group of people who initiated a course and having that knowledge embedded in the second group of people,” says Kelrick, who works with students who after taking a student-initiated class want to step up into the role of the instructor for a semester.

KELRICK NOTES that follow-through is an important part of the ongoing experiment with student-initiated courses, and they are documenting a body of evidence to make sure they make wise decisions as they move forward. “We want to know what is required of faculty members to pull it off, the impact on other aspects of the curriculum, how the course operates, and also what the learning has been for both course takers and for the student peer instructors,” says Kelrick.

WHILE PAINO HOPES to see the number of student-initiated courses continue to increase, he says that providing quality experiences, both for the students who are teaching the courses as well as the students who are taking the courses, is the top priority. “I would like to get to the point where we’ve got two dozen of these courses coming, but to do that, we have to make sure that everyone, not just the students, but the faculty as well, are prepared to do this and the institution can give its support,” says Paino.

PAINO REALIZES that not all students will want the responsibility of creating or teaching a course, but he wants to have the option available for those who do. “For me, the goal is to offer enough of these experiences in our curriculum and to be able to support them, whether it’s study abroad, internships, service learning experiences, student research experiences, unique out-of-the-classroom learning opportunities or student-initiated learning opportunities,” says Paino. “The key is to offer multiple active learning experiences for the students to select from starting on day one of their college experience.”