

Mission and Vision Statements

An Essential First Step

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A mission statement is the double-edged sword of academic life: we cannot do without it, but we usually cannot do much with it, either. Far too often we waste precious time and resources debating a mission statement's words and phrases that ultimately have no practical implications for the health of our institutions. A new president arrives and decides that as one of her first acts she will create a committee to redraft a mission and vision statement for the university. Because the topic is universal, the committee is a Noah's ark of administrators, faculty, staff, students, board members, and local citizens. They spend the better part of a year drafting a twenty-page document that begins, "Waverling State University is committed to academic excellence and the ability of each student to pursue his or her dreams."

During that year, there is considerable discussion about whether to use the word "dreams" in the vision statement. A member of the board of trustees and a professor from business argue that "dreams" has no place in the mission of Waverling State; two professors from humanities, the assistant vice president for student affairs, and the president of the student government finally wear down the committee by filibuster, and the word is accepted. As a compromise, the English professor relents about her concern over the use of the awkward but necessary construction—"his or her." And so it goes. The president is simply relieved when the committee finally produces the mission statement, and gratefully accepts it, disseminates it, and forgets about it.

Ultimately, of course, such discussions amount to little more than dreary academic arguments about nothing. The meetings consume time, and as with my hypothetical Waverling State, they ultimately reach their goal—a mission statement is

FIELD GUIDE

to Academic Leadership

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2002
JOSSEY-BASS
A Wiley Imprint
www.josseybass.com

drafted—but no sooner is the statement disseminated to everyone on campus than everyone moves on to the humdrum tasks of campus life.

Institutional leaders who claim that they are going to redefine the university's mission do so at their own risk. But those who do not look at the mission also do so at their peril. Productive staff and faculty will run from a committee assignment where the discussion revolves around what the university's vision should be. I entirely understand the reluctance to begin a conversation that is filled with pitfalls and seems to lead nowhere. The temptation will always be to forget the mission. Just start planning the plan! Get in there and create time lines, objectives, and PERT charts. Make decisions! Start doing!

And yet there is that nagging voice in the back of our heads that reminds us that somewhere in the Bible the prophets wrote that without a vision the people will perish. In the here and now, we recognize that there are so many choices to be made we do not know how to make them if we do not have some overarching focus. Should not all major academic decisions flow from, and relate to, the institution's mission and vision? If there is not some unifying idea that binds us together, then do we not run the risk of implementing fads rather than lasting changes? Do not newfangled words like "branding" relate to product definition, which is just another way of saying that a mission is needed? Do not the most successful businesses actually have a mission and vision statement?

Mission and vision statements are important first steps on the road to creating improved, more responsive organizations for the twenty-first century. Creating and sustaining change involves an overarching framework for principles and practices. A mission statement is the blueprint that will energize faculty, staff, and external constituents and enable us to get started and remain on track. Such a statement helps establish priorities for programs, budgeting, reward structures, and a host of institutional activities. So maybe we should think about a mission statement after all. But how? In what follows, I offer five main points:

- Define the central themes of your institution.
- Create a mission and vision statement that specifically refers to the curriculum, to key constituencies, and to the external environment.
- Develop core activities that have explicit links to the mission and vision statement.
- Communicate the mission repeatedly.
- Rethink and revisit the mission from time to time.

DEFINING WHAT MATTERS: MISSION AND VISION

The best examples of mission statements are from colleges and universities that Burton Clark (1980) called *distinctive*. A mission statement helps people make sense of the institution, where it has been, and where it wants to go. A good mission statement not only helps set the direction for where the institution wants to go but also helps define where it will not go. At a time when we all suffer from information overload and the choices we face seem endless, a mission statement helps define the parameters of possibility.

A mission is not simply formulaic goals and objectives. The first route to failure is to let a group quarrel over the definition of a mission. *Is a mission a goal? How does mission differ from vision? Is a core value part of the mission or the vision?* Although such discussions might be useful in a logic class, they do little to help the institution define what it wants to be and where it wants to go. As institutional leaders, we are well advised to set the definitional parameters of what we mean by mission and vision before we call a committee together.

- *Rule no. 1:* A mission statement contains two parts. The vision is a preamble to a mission statement. It is short and to the point. It speaks in generalities about the hopes and aspirations for the institution. The mission sets the context for goal setting. It is less broad, a bit longer, and paints a picture of how the hopes and aspirations of the institution will be put into place.

I am suggesting that we need to expand what a mission and vision statement is so that people do not just see it as a formulaic list of goals and objectives. *A mission and vision statement should inspire.* The mission hooks up the history of the organization with its present and moves the institution into the future. It is a rallying point and helps insiders and outsiders see how your college or university is different from the rest.

Consider two presidents who talk about their mission in the following manner: President no. 1 says, "We are for educational excellence so that you can be all you can be. We have a new library and gym, the student dorms have been wired for the Internet, and service learning is a component of our curriculum. Our mission is to prepare you for the twenty-first century."

President no. 2 says, "Our mission is to create leaders. We believe in the concept of servant leadership and in the concepts of cooperation and respect for diversity. Every student, faculty, and staff member is expected to perform community service in town and at the college. All of our classes are co-taught and diversity across the curriculum is a requirement. A team project is required in most coursework, and a senior thesis is an

interactive project with a student, a community member, a professor, and younger students.”

Some of us may reject president no. 2's definition of leadership or the activities of the institution, but we at least have a clear picture of what is a core value of the institution. The college of president no. 1 does not stake out any special territory. It is committed to a vague notion of excellence and preparation for the new century. Big deal.

The second example helps people understand how the college is unique. It sets itself off from the rest by outlining core values. As a leader, you continually need to ask, “What is unique about my institution?” The mission serves as a reference point for change so that those who work in the organization are able to see how their work relates to the work of the institution. *To avoid talking about the mission or to overlook it as irrelevant and a waste of time denies faculty, staff, and administrators a sense of institutional meaning.*

CREATING THE MISSION STATEMENT

Do not think of the mission statement as a marketing document. (For simplicity sake, I will often refer here to the vision and mission statement simply as the mission statement.) Think of it as an internally generated document that expresses to the world what the institution's hopes and dreams are (Tierney, 1999). Statements such as, “We intend to be the best public state university in the region,” or “We are committed to providing a curriculum that gets good jobs for our graduates” are developed for external audiences, rather than internal ones. *Do not create a mission statement with an eye toward what others will say about you; create a mission statement about what the institution's participants want to say about themselves.* As Peter Block comments, “The vision statement expresses the contribution we want to make to the organization, not what the external world is going to bestow on us” (1987, p. 115). The focus is on who we are to ourselves, and this focus will make it clearer to others what we are about. Once we know who we are, then we will be able to convey to others what we are about through words and deeds.

- *Rule no. 2:* Think about your mission statement as an internally generated document that expresses to the world the core values at work in the institution.

In a college or university, a mission statement also focuses on two related points: people and ideas (Tierney, 1998). Who is your audience and how do you serve them? What are the ideas of the organization that tie it together?

Most organizations need to think of their clientele, so a concern for audience is not very different for a university or for a company. A restaurant develops its menu based

on the consumers it serves. It hires employees based in part on the people who buy its services. The menu at McDonald's and at the Ritz will differ because of a different clientele. A waiter at the Ritz is unlikely to move on to a job at McDonald's. Similarly, in a competitive age, colleges and universities need to advance in their mission and vision statements a commitment to their core clientele. If you do not know who your core clientele is, then you are in as much trouble as a restaurant that is unsure if its diners favor Big Macs or foie gras.

- *Rule no. 3:* Define your clientele and track how they have changed and if they will change. Determine how well you serve them and what the mission says about them.

One difference between postsecondary institutions and traditional businesses is a concern for ideas. A business gauges success in large part by how much profit it makes. Although we need to balance the books, colleges and universities are different. Insofar as most educational organizations focus on learning and the intellect rather than profit, it, ideas that will get embedded into the curriculum need to be outlined in the mission. What are the guiding ideas or concepts of the institution? In the preceding example, president no. 2 mentioned cooperative learning and servant leadership. Such ideas help focus organizational action.

One clear example of how mission statements emphasize a concern for people and ideas comes from Christian universities. Such institutions inevitably discuss in their mission statements their commitment to one or another aspect of the Bible and how they translate the teachings of Jesus Christ into the daily activities and curriculum of the institution. The mission defines the core constituency of the institution: Christian students. True, non-Christian students may be welcome, but the mission has carved out a niche and defined who the institution sees as its primary clientele and how the curriculum and out-of-class activities are linked to its ideas.

- *Rule no. 4:* Define the central organizing idea of the institution. Determine how well it is being employed.

PUTTING THE MISSION STATEMENT INTO PLAY

Although I have cautioned against creating a mission statement that is a laundry list of do's and don'ts, a mission is not merely a grand statement. True, it needs to inspire people and create a sense of organizational excitement. It also needs to be specific enough

institutional leaders often make is that they think of the mission statement as a document somewhat akin to the Bible. The document gets printed, disseminated, and the president gives a stirring speech at the start of the school year about the mission of the university. On historic occasions—Founders' Day, commencement, and the like—the president dusts the document off and talks about the mission. That is a fatal mistake.

Mission statements mean nothing and consume vast amounts of time and energy if the people in the college or university are not able to articulate what such ideas mean. As Louis Pondy has noted, "The real power of Martin Luther King, Jr. was not only that he had a dream but that he could describe it, that it became public and therefore accessible to millions of people" (1978, p. 20). A leader's job is to follow in King's communicative footsteps. Print the mission on a one-page sheet of paper and memorize it. Speak about it at every talk you give. "Thank you for asking me to speak at the alumni luncheon," you may say. "As you all know, the three values we hold dearly in our mission statement. . . . Or perhaps, I am honored to speak about the role of athletics in college life. At my university our mission holds that we value. . . ."

The president is the institution's main communicator. In part, the understanding of the mission will succeed or fail based on a president's ability to communicate it—clearly, constantly, and consistently. However, we often overlook the central importance of all of the institution's leaders' ability to articulate the institutional mission. The president is not ubiquitous; he cannot be everywhere. Faculty see and hear much more from their dean over the course of a year than they do from the president. Faculty often listen to the president of the academic senate in a different way than they do other individuals. Student affairs personnel pay attention to what the dean of students has to say. What we need to hear is a consistent message about what the institution stands for and how it is tied to clearly articulated goals. Those goals usually get played out on local levels, such as in student affairs or in a college.

- *Rule no. 5:* Develop a mission that has no more than four main points and communicate those points at every opportunity.

CHANGING THE MISSION

One concern that some individuals have with the creation of a mission in the manner that I am speaking about is that it might appear to be an institutional straitjacket. How often have we all heard someone kill an idea by saying, "That's not the way we do it

so that all people know where to focus their energies. As Peter Drucker observed, "A mission statement has to be operational, otherwise it's just good intentions" (1990, p. 4). In effect, a mission statement should contain a finite list of core values. A core value of a liberal arts college might be that interdisciplinary work and teaching are central to how the institution defines and articulates knowledge. Perhaps not everyone, but a sizable majority of the institution must believe the value is true—that it is a central aspect of what the college is about—and individuals need to be able to put the value into action. The implications of a core value in a mission and vision statement are quite clear. If an individual produces quality research in an interdisciplinary area, then we expect that individual will receive tenure. The curriculum will be interdisciplinary, as will teaching. Core means core, not "nice if we have the time and money."

When I visit a college or university I am troubled, then, when I ask individuals about the driving theme of the institution and am met with a shrug of the shoulders or laughter. I recall one senior professor saying to me after I asked what the mission of the place was: "You know: truth, motherhood, apple pie. We're an apple pie kind of institution." An apple pie college is a recipe for disaster in a consumer-oriented competitive environment where individuals need a sense of what the institution stands for and how it articulates what it values. What I hope to hear from someone on the faculty or staff when I ask what is the mission of the institution is something like, "We serve working-class students in the region and we believe in community involvement; you'll see that in our curriculum and how academic affairs and student affairs work together," or "We see our relationship to the business community as essential and we believe that everyone should be involved with issues pertaining to the Pacific Rim, so the faculty take an interest in sending kids abroad, and student affairs has a very heavy concentration of study abroad programs." The point with these comments is that they are finite, summative, and concise.

COMMUNICATING THE MISSION STATEMENT

Mission statements need to have pictures attached to them so that listeners can see what you mean when you say that you want educational excellence. It cannot be a laundry list because people cannot remember more than about four points. If you have ten tasks that you want to accomplish, that is fine—but do not cram them into a mission statement. And once you have completed writing the mission and vision statement remember that it is necessary to talk about it every chance you have. One mistake that

around here. That's just not us." Although we need to hold onto the core values that get embedded in the mission statement, as times change, so should the manner in which we articulate the mission.

During a time of significant structural change there is a need for a sense of who we are, what people believe, and what we hope to accomplish. Sometimes that means we need to shed assumptions about the past. Think of a religion. Certainly there are religions that hold onto their values and traditions so tightly that they go out of business, but most religions constantly think about what it means to be Catholic, Jewish, Methodist, and the like, and how they are to keep pace with the times. If anything, a mission is not an encumbrance but an anchoring ideology that serves as a focal point for discussion and reformulation. The art of administration is always one of balance. Although an institution that dramatically reformulates its mission every year is one that I assume has no identity, we also ought not fool ourselves into thinking that a mission is so rigid that in a decade's time there will not be reconsideration and renewal.

In effect, I am suggesting that a mission statement is an organic document that needs to be nurtured, supported, and every now and then, fine-tuned. A company will be in danger of going out of business if consumers do not know what it offers because it changes its product every season. But that same company will also go out of business if it blindly follows "what works" without thinking about how to change its core values from time to time.

- *Rule no. 6:* After agreement about the mission statement has been reached, set a time three to five years down the road when you will want the statement brought back for reconsideration. Such a time frame communicates that there will not be any further changes until that time, but the document is also a living one that benefits from periodic reflection.

CONCLUSION

If we seek lasting changes, rather than helter-skelter, flash-in-the-pan kinds of changes, then a focus on the vision and mission of the institution is imperative. A mission and vision statement needs to be owned by the entire university—it cannot rest in the domain of one or another group. If student affairs defines the mission and the faculty avoid thinking about it, or the board of trustees sees its prerogative to be the creation of the mission to the exclusion of everyone else, then the institution will fall short on

living up to its potential. A college or university's mission needs to be owned and nurtured at all levels of the institution. People need to work collaboratively and supportively toward a clearly articulated and agreed on mission and vision statement. Once we have reached agreement, the hard work of communicating it and enacting it begins. The mission and vision statement is the living testimony of the institution, and because it defines the institution we need to see traces of it in the curriculum, in student affairs, and in how we work with one another. When we do this, a properly executed mission and vision statement is not so much a double-edged sword as the Holy Grail that propels us toward institutional excellence.

HOW CLEAR IS THE MISSION OF MY INSTITUTION?

1. Define the mission in sixty seconds. If you cannot do it, then the mission is too complicated and cannot be communicated.
2. Describe two examples of when an outsider would see the mission at work.
3. Ask new faculty to the institution what they see as the mission.
4. Ask longtime faculty what they see as the mission. If the faculty's response differs radically from yours, you have a problem.
5. What are the three central projects that took place over the last twelve months and how do they relate to the mission? If they do not relate to it, then the mission needs to be realigned.
6. How does your mission differ from a similar institution's? If there is no difference, then get to work.

References and Resources

- Block, P. (1987). *The empowered manager: Positive political skills at work*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- A book about how to create change in organizations. The author outlines the problems that exist in organizations and works from the assumption that politics pervades them. Successful managers are able to see organizational life through a political lens.
- Clark, B. (1980). The organizational saga in higher education. In H. Leavitt (Ed.), *Readings in managerial psychology*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- The seminal piece on what a distinctive mission is about. The author outlines the pieces of a saga and provides examples of colleges that are distinctive based on his research.

Drucker, P. E. (1990). *Managing the nonprofit organization: Principles and practices*. New York: HarperBusiness.

Practical, hands-on guide about management from the guru of organizational change. He first outlines the current dilemmas faced by nonprofits, then suggests how to use organizational principles and what might be done.

Pondy, L. (1978). Leadership is a language game. In M. McCall & M. Lombardo (Eds.), *Leadership: Where else can we go?* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

A thoughtful article about the importance of communication in leadership. The author makes the compelling case that leadership is not a simple list of do's and don'ts. Instead, leadership depends on effective communications.

Tierney, W. G. (Ed.). (1998). *The responsive university: Restructuring for high performance*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

A group of scholar-practitioners discuss how to create change in academe. In each chapter the contributors diagnose a specific problem and show how reorienting basic work strategies and designing more creative organizations can lead to solutions.

Tierney, W. G. (1999). *Building the responsive campus: Creating high-performance colleges and universities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

A guide for reform based on the ideas of reengineering. The book offers a critique of modern colleges and universities and suggests how better to meet the needs of clients and customers.

CHAPTER 5

Moving Mountains Institutional Culture and Transformational Change

JUDITH A. RAMALEY

Our institutions are changing all the time but for the most part these do not make a big difference, either because the results are confined to a related segment of the organization or because the environment is not responsive. Considered truly transformational, the initiative must alter the culture of the organization by changing select underlying assumptions and institutional behaviors, processes, and products; it must be deep and pervasive, affecting the whole institution be intentional; and it must occur consistently over time (Eckel, Hill, & Green

QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS UNDERTAKING TRANSFORMATIONAL CHA

For those of you who are seeking to introduce transformational change, here are questions to ask yourself. If you consider them carefully, your answers can improve your chances of leading a successful change effort.

- Do you have a mandate for change? If so, from whom?
- Do you understand the factors in the institutional culture and history as well as in the external environment that can support or resist change?
- Is the campus ready to change? If not, what might you do to create a more receptive climate for change?
- Have you thought through a strategy to manage institutional response as change process unfolds?
- Can you undertake and lead change?