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Learning Goals in Mission Statements

Implications for Educational Leadership

“PRESIDENTS AND DEANS must . . . with the cooperation of the professors themselves . . . revive the responsibility of the faculty *as a whole* for the curriculum as a whole,” asserted a national report from the Association of American Colleges, labeling this a matter of *Integrity in the College Curriculum* (1985, 9). Building on this insight, the report recommended a minimum required curriculum and ways to enhance teaching and learning. These ideas were valuable contributions to educational thought and innovation of the time. Now, two decades later, the survey findings that we will describe suggest that this formulation is insufficient.

The faculty work within organizations, and every organizational policy and practice, many outside the purview of faculty, has at least potential impact, either positive or negative, on the curriculum and the learning of students. If the curriculum is to have integrity, institutional priorities, policies, and resource allocations must all support the most important purposes of undergraduate education. Indeed, *integrity in the curriculum requires integrity of the institution*. This, in turn, means that educational programs should reflect the institutional mission and enjoy the full and informed support not just of the faculty but also of the board of trustees and the president, the primary stewards of the mission.

Peter Drucker (2005, 3) identifies integrity as the first principle of effective management, saying that “the spirit of an organization is created from the top The proof of the sincerity and seriousness of a management is uncompromising emphasis on integrity of character.” The president (and the administration for which she or he is responsible) and board of trustees must act consistently and repeatedly to assure institutional integrity. They must be certain that their organization does what it says and says what it does.

The fundamental way the president and the board establish integrity is by approving a mission statement and then acting in ways that advance the mission. The mission statement is an institution’s formal, public declaration of its purposes and its vision of excellence. Ideally it contains enough specificity for determining whether alternative educational and institutional practices could advance the mission. Although the mission statement usually is a composite of ideas and recommendations from many constituencies, it is “owned” primarily by the president and the board. The president typically designs and guides the process to secure advice from all constituencies and integrates disparate ideas into a coherent

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whole. The board reviews, revises, and endorses the mission statement.

The campus's mission statement, which in practice can be a single sentence or a lengthy document, is not the same as a mission of an institution, a living sense among individuals in diverse roles of what that institution is and why it is important. But without a statement that reflects widespread agreement and the shared understanding of central priorities among the president, board of trustees, and other constituencies, it is difficult to understand how a lived mission can emerge in practice. The mission statement is the necessary condition for many different individuals to pull together through a myriad of activities to achieve central shared purposes.

One would expect an educational institution to have a mission statement that expresses a sense of its educational vision, particularly what it expects its students to learn and how that learning can be used to benefit the social order. That educational vision should be deeply rooted in the institution's identity and practices, rather than being discarded when a president, dean, or inspired faculty leader moves on. Of course, the mission statement is merely one of many possible documents describing and supporting an institution's vision of educational excellence for its students. Yet the mission statement is the most enduring, respected, and public of these documents and, importantly, the one that will be turned to for guidance both when resources are plentiful and new initiatives can be envisioned as well as when resources become scarce and difficult choices must be made.

It is reasonable, therefore, to ask: What do mission statements say about the vision and expectations that our colleges and universities hold for undergraduate education? What do they say about the goals that are held for student learning in contemporary, globalized society?

To answer those questions, we surveyed the mission statements for institutions listed in the Princeton Review's *The Best 331 Colleges*. We sought the Internet site that presented the mission statement or, if no mission statement was available, a statement of purpose, vision, goals, philosophy, or aims for undergraduate students. Appropriate statements could be identified for 312 of these institutions. A coding scheme with thirty-nine student learning goals was constructed from several sources, including Schneider and Shoenberg (1998), Cronin (1999), and *Integrity in the College Curriculum* (1985).

Mission statements provide scant direction for undergraduate education

These "best" American colleges and universities provide little information about goals for undergraduate education in their mission statements. To our surprise, we discovered that eleven of these colleges and universities do not even mention undergraduate education in their mission statements. Furthermore, there is a great range in the number of student learning goals that could be identified: 117 institutions provide from zero to three student learning goals in their mission statements; 105 institutions from four to six; sixty-one institutions from seven to nine; and twenty-nine institutions ten or more. The average number is five.

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There is little consensus among this national sample regarding what should be the primary goals of undergraduate education. Aside from liberal education (or liberal arts or liberal learning), found in the mission statements of 157 institutions (about half of the 312), none of the goals was found in as many as half of the mission statements. Contributing to the community appears in 121 of the mission statements, and leadership skills in 101 of the mission statements. Only twelve educational goals were contained in the mission statements of 15 percent (forty-seven) or more of these 312 institutions. In addition to the three already mentioned, they include social responsibility (eighty-nine institutions); personal perspectives, values, and moral character (seventy-seven); ability for critical analysis and logical thinking (seventy-five); appreciating diversity (sixty-seven); imagination and creativity (sixty-seven); capacity for continuing, lifelong learning (sixty-two); building communities that acknowledge and respect difference (fifty-nine); engaged, responsible citizenship in a democratic society (fifty-three); and international and global understanding (fifty).

National consensus on student learning goals

The results of this survey of mission statements can be fruitfully compared with the conclusions of a national report, *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate Degree* (2004). Drawing from the standards of regional and specialized accreditation agencies, best practices articulated by educational associations, qualities sought by employers, and contributions from faculty and administrators at various colleges and universities, this report describes a “widespread and growing” consensus throughout American higher education regarding the desired learning outcomes of a twenty-first-century undergraduate education (see sidebar). To what extent do campus presidents and boards of trustees share in this national consensus?

Six of the twelve student learning goals found most often in campus mission statements are similar to those identified as central to the national consensus: social responsibility; appreciating diversity; capacity for continuing, lifelong learning; building communities that

acknowledge and respect difference; engaged, responsible citizenship in a democratic society; and international and global understanding.

But many of the undergraduate educational goals identified in the national consensus are missing from the mission statements of the 312 colleges and universities that were surveyed. Not only that, many significant student learning goals that are widely discussed and valued among faculty, students, parents, employers, and the general public appear in the mission statements of fewer than 15 percent of these “best” American colleges and universities.

For example, we are impressed by the national consensus that communication skills—including college-level writing and effective oral communication—are essential both as foundation skills for college and university learning and as lifelong skills for citizenship and the professions. Yet writing and public-speaking abilities are rarely included as explicit student learning goals, each appearing in the mission statements of only thirty-eight (12 percent) of these 312 campuses.

The national consensus is that a strong undergraduate education includes breadth of knowledge. However, fewer than 15 percent of these mission statements include, as goals for student learning, knowledge and understanding of science (thirty-two); knowledge and appreciation of the fine and performing arts (twenty-four); knowledge and understanding of historical and social phenomena (fifteen); mathematical reasoning (nine); or environmental understanding and sensitivity (eight).

Consensus Goals for Student Learning

- Strong analytic, communication, quantitative, and information skills
- Deep understanding and hands-on experience with the disciplines that explore the natural, social, and cultural realms
- Intercultural knowledge and collaborative problem-solving skills
- Civic, social, and personal responsibility
- Integrative thinking and the ability to transfer knowledge from one setting to another

Ethics and values are central to the national consensus on student learning goals. On the positive side, expectations for the development of personal perspectives, values, and moral character are found in seventy-seven of the mission statements. Yet the national consensus is broader, moving beyond the personal and individual to include concerns for professional and societal issues. Fewer than 15 percent of the mission statements encourage students to acquire knowledge and appreciation of the ethical dimensions of humankind (twenty-eight); engage with challenging ethical, moral, and human dilemmas (twenty-three); or understand social justice issues (ten).

Curricula not organized to advance highly valued purposes

Three student learning goals appear frequently in campus mission statements but do not stand out in the national consensus on goals for student learning as described in *Taking Responsibility for the Quality of the Baccalaureate Degree*. These are contributing to the community (121 of 312 mission statements), leadership skills (101), and imagination and creativity (sixty-seven). Certainly the political, economic, and environmental challenges that our students will face in their lifetimes will require attention to community needs, determined and effective leadership, and sustained application of imagination and creativity.

Yet few curricula have been implemented to facilitate the attainment by students of the propensity for contributing to the community and the skills of leadership and imagination that many presidents and trustees foresee that our students will need. Yes, many campuses are developing opportunities for service learning and more educational engagement in the community; others have developed leadership courses and student-life programs emphasizing the development of leadership skills. But these tend to be on the margins of campus life and available to only a few students. And creativity and imagination are seldom drivers of educational programs. One wonders why these learning goals, thought by presidents and trustees to be so important that they appear in mission statements, are often neglected in actual programs of study.

In summary, many of the student learning goals for which there is a strong national

consensus—communication skills, breadth of knowledge, ethics and social justice, integrative learning, critical thinking, and working together with others—appear in fewer than 15 percent of the mission statements of these “best” colleges and universities. Our aim is not to suggest that there ought to be uniformity among institutional mission statements. Rather, it is to suggest that institutional leaders are missing an opportunity to convey to students especially, but also to other constituencies, what they stand for by adopting more educationally robust mission statements.

Indeed, it seems essential that the mission statement of any educational institution include a description of the education that is envisioned for its students. The length of the mission statement—whether a single sentence or several paragraphs—is not critical; what is important is that the mission statement should be as long as necessary to articulate the most basic purposes of the institution.

Educational leadership and shared governance

Why is there such a divergence between the national consensus on goals for undergraduate education and the mission statements of these “best” colleges and universities? We fear that at least part of the reason may be a lack of educational leadership among presidents, the senior administrators reporting to them, and members of boards of trustees.

In recent decades, some presidents have been selected more for their management skills, fundraising abilities, and public relations expertise than for their educational views. Similarly, boards have become more focused on providing oversight, raising money, making connections with external groups, and dealing with community issues. Both are highly focused on institutional priorities, perhaps to the neglect of the educational heart of the enterprise, which in practice is delegated to the academic administration and the faculty.

This practice, of course, reflects the widespread adherence to principles of shared governance, as set forth in the landmark document jointly drafted in 1966 and adopted in 1967 by the American Association of University Professors (representing the faculty) and endorsed by the American Council of Education (representing presidents) and the Association of Governing Boards (representing

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trustees). The president and board have primary authority over the mission, strategic directions of the institution, and finance, but they are to consult with the faculty about major issues in these areas. Because the faculty possesses disciplinary expertise, they have primary authority over teaching, learning, the curriculum, and related academic matters. Only rarely and for clearly articulated reasons should the administration or board overrule the faculty on academic matters. By and large, this division of authority has worked well.

But over time, administrators and board members have learned that many faculty guard their prerogatives jealously, and so they have been hesitant to exercise leadership for the educational program. Their resulting lack of sophistication about substantive educational issues, or lack of confidence in dealing with them, may be reflected in the limited inclusion of student learning goals in mission statements.

Another problem is that while faculty may be responsible for the educational program, most faculty tend to work primarily in their own disciplines, departments, and narrow specialties, and thus have only a partial view of the institution's academic programs and the

course of student development. In many instances, shared governance has served as a thin cover for faculty to avoid thinking

about and discussing together what an education at their institution adds up to for students. It was to correct this dispersion of academic authority and to promote wholeness and integration of learning that the Association of American Colleges issued its call, in 1985, for the faculty as a whole to be responsible for the curriculum as a whole.

Indeed, educational excellence is most often found not when responsibilities are sharply divided but when faculty members and academic administrators, perhaps with the support of an academic policy committee of the board, come together to work on common agendas. It is unfortunate that the original ideas behind shared governance did not include a listing of areas where faculty and administrators have common cause and call for cooperative educational leadership among *both* faculty and administrators. The success of any academic program requires both faculty leadership and administrative support.

One important area for administrators, trustees, and faculty to work together is in identifying important goals for student learning.



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Faculty, for all the knowledge they possess, cannot claim exclusive authority over which knowledge, skills, and attitudes form an educated person and which will be most important to the lives of students in coming decades. In fact, trustees probably have better perspectives than do faculty because they come from various careers and different parts of the community, whereas many faculty have little experience beyond the academy. Trustees know what qualities they seek in hiring workers, the kinds of impact educated people can make in a community, and the qualities that are valued outside the academy.

In addition to guiding the purposes of undergraduate education and expressing their vision and aspiration in mission statements, presidents and trustees can be helpful in asking hard questions about the campus's educational programs. Among the questions that might be raised are these: Are the educational goals expressed in the mission statement reflected in the curriculum? How do general education and departmental requirements for students compare with the agreed-upon student learning goals? What is the evidence from objective assessment—not merely in anecdotes—that important learning goals are actually achieved by students? Asking these questions might once have been seen as “interference” in the academic affairs of the faculty. But today, they are precisely the kinds of questions that accrediting agencies are requiring institutions to ask of themselves; they reflect prudent concerns of a president and a board with a legitimate interest in being accredited. In answering these questions, the faculty and administration need to work together to assure that there is an assessment process that provides useful information for making judgments about what and how well students are learning.

Legitimate questions such as these can lead to self-reflection, conversations across the campus, additional cycles of assessment of student learning outcomes, and strengthening of teaching and learning for students. On most campuses forums do not exist for bringing presidents and trustees together with faculty for substantive conversations about the purposes of undergraduate education, explicit goals for student learning, or examination of and reflection on results of assessments of student learning outcomes. If such conversations are to occur, new forums will have to be created

that are conducive to honest, constructive, and creative dialogue, not only on our campuses but also regionally and nationally.

Of course, once agreement is reached about the most valued student learning goals and evidence is gathered to indicate how well students are achieving them, it is the faculty who need to design (or redesign) the curriculum and implement it. But even these tasks require the active support of the trustees and administration if resources such as faculty hiring, buildings, and equipment are to be made available for educational programs.

There is empirical evidence that the steps we recommend pay off in terms of effective education for students. George Kuh and his colleagues (2005) have studied “student engagement,” shown by much previous research to be a critical variable in educational achievement, among students at hundreds of colleges and universities. In their project on Documenting Effective Educational Practice, they identified six conditions that are common among those institutions that most effectively engage students in learning: a “living” mission and a “lived” educational philosophy; an unshakable focus on student learning; environments adapted for educational enrichment; clearly marked pathways to student success; an improvement-oriented campus culture; and shared responsibility for educational quality and student success. All of these conditions start with a clear mission statement that declares what is important in undergraduate education and what students are expected to learn.

Our recommendations for both increased educational leadership and greater collaboration among trustees, presidents, and faculty are not Pollyannish. We recognize that some boards and administrations have acted unilaterally to mandate changes in academic programs without seeking faculty advice or cooperation. In recent years, we have seen the emergence of “activist trustees” in some state systems who politicize academic matters by trying to impose their personal agendas on institutions, usually with destructive results. And some presidents steadfastly refuse to bring faculty members into dialogue with the board of trustees. These examples are not what we are proposing. In fact, they are anathema to the greater collaboration among presidents, trustees, and faculty members that we urge.

Emerging educational leadership

AAC&U has launched a group of initiatives that involve college and university presidents as well as faculty members in educational leadership roles. In the Campaign for the Advancement of Liberal Learning (CALL), presidents were invited to sign a statement about the importance of high-quality contemporary liberal education. Over 525 presidents accepted, including many representing institutions listed in *The Best 331 Colleges*. The statement they signed includes the following: “As educational leaders and presidents of colleges and universities, large and small, public and private, two-year and four-year, we call on our colleagues around the country to ensure that every college student experiences the full benefits of a twenty-first-century liberal education.” The Presidents’ CALL concludes with their commitment to take steps to ensure that their own educational programs address the aims of liberal education, including intellectual and ethical development, knowledge of science, culture, and society, and preparation for all the dimensions of a full life. (To learn more about the Campaign for the Advancement of Liberal Learning, visit www.aacu.org/CALL.)

Another AAC&U initiative is Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP), a public advocacy and campus action initiative designed to promote access to excellence for individuals interested in a college education. This initiative is sparking lively public debate about the kinds of knowledge, skills, and values needed to prepare today’s students—from elementary school through college—for an era of greater expectations in every sphere of life. Presidents commit to work with their campus faculty to stimulate improvements in teaching, learning, and the curriculum and to assess and document learning outcomes. Although this initiative is in its early stages, already presidents of all kinds of colleges and universities are expressing interest in participating. (Additional information regarding Liberal Education and America’s Promise is available at www.aacu.org/advocacy.)

Developing stronger educational leadership, always a work in progress, among presidents, senior administrators, trustees, and faculty can be expected to produce more educationally effective colleges and universities. Of course, the task of defining the education that will be most effective for students and our society in

the coming decades can be difficult for an academic community. Yet stronger leadership might well lead to more educationally robust mission statements that are explicit about expectations for the most important goals and outcomes of student learning. It could lead to greater collaboration among presidents, trustees, and faculty for the benefit of students and to more genuine sharing in governance. And educational leadership can contribute not just to integrity in the curriculum but also to integrity in the institution. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors’ names on the subject line.

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