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**Achieving an Institution's Values, Vision, and Mission**

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**Abstract**

The measures of institutional success are more meaningful through the further realization of the institution's vision and mission and how the institution is supporting its declared values through various initiatives and behaviours. Institutions and their leaders rely on these statements as foundational pillars by which to launch new programs, services, carry out applied research, sustain and enhance their operations, and to build a future capacity for change.

Without meaningful evaluation of the achievement levels of values, vision, and mission (VVM) statements, how can leaders state that their institution was extraordinary or even successful? An ongoing evaluation process of these institutional statements helps to demonstrate to stakeholders how serious the institution is about its own existence. It is through meaningful evaluation that these critical statements become more relevant, tangible, and understandable.

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Evaluation, assessment, measurement, and validation are all very dynamic processes and a significant part of any institutional planning process (Tromp & Ruben, 2004). Strict attention to ongoing evaluation practices is indispensable in monitoring the progress of planning and gauging the results. Without thoughtful consideration in identifying the proper factors to assess and the appropriate procedures for doing so, information about institutional statements of purpose, strategic direction, and value-based decision making are of little importance.

Values, vision, and mission statements are usually the result of several key process steps found in strategic planning. However, despite their significance, educational leaders and practitioners can sometimes have a rather skeptical outlook about them, all the while resisting their development, questioning their ability to unite stakeholders, and understanding how such statements might lead to progress in institutional change strategies? Some resistance may be the assertion that such statements are purposely too broad and deliberately too vague; therefore stakeholders cannot find any real-world meaning in them and may find them synonymous with being immeasurable. Evaluation of the achievement of VVMs, therefore, can become elusive for any meaningful measure of how close or how far away an institution is from a preferred future (its vision), sense of purpose (its mission), as well as assessing institutional values' claims. Of course, the clearer and more concise these statements are the better they can be evaluated, understood, and recognized.

Ultimately, institutional success is about upholding its values and realizing a vision and mission even through the most demanding times. It is the purpose of this article to highlight the evaluation in achieving these

critical statements. An ongoing assessment process improves an institution's ability to meet and hopefully exceed the standards set out by VVM statements, all of which helps an institution look at its own relevance, progress, and possibly determine if it is indeed the best it can be.

### Evaluating Values

*Values Defined – A statement of values (also called “convictions” and “ideals”) is the basis for what an institution considers important which usually drives how it behaves and supports those declared values overall.*

Generally values statements are found in annual reports, proposals for grant funding, promotional brochures and other marketing related material. The word value can be defined materially, as a fair return, which is getting one's money's worth. Also it is defined ethically as conduct deemed worthy of esteem for its own sake; behaviour that has intrinsic worth. Both definitions are very powerful and interconnected for institutions.

Values determine just how the institution conducts its educational business, which in turn determines whether a fair return is produced for everybody connected to that institution, its students, employees, customers, stakeholders, partners, and the greater community. A fair return is generally good business practice. Values then are deeply held ideals and priorities; their underlying assumptions influence the institution's day-to-day behaviours. Values claims include such notions as respect for individuals, accountability practices, quality programming, workplace relevance, fiscal transparency, strategic cooperation, partnerships and alliances, an unwavering commitment to student success among other convictions. Values themselves need not be unique to a particular institution since commonly held values across many institutions make inter-institutional transactions and cooperation more effective.

Before setting out on the development of a vision and a mission, it is important to identify and clarify those things that are clearly important. While value statements were found less frequently than vision or mission statements they do represent one of the critical foundational pillars in higher education (Calder, 2011). Values guide the institution's conduct to provide a fair return for all stakeholders, as it executes its strategy to achieve its mission, thereby fulfilling its vision. The environment within which these values take place is the institution's culture.

Values govern the kind of strategic initiatives the institution is either now considering or possibly changing. And when its values are deeply entrenched and widely shared by stakeholders, the institution's culture of values soon becomes a way of life in the workplace which shapes an institution's strategic intentions. Today it seems that institutions are articulating these core beliefs as a significant part of their underlying operational practices/policies and decision-making strategies. Strong values may account for why some institutions gain a system-wide reputation for such strategic qualities as leadership, educational innovation, being a top organization to work for, and high student satisfaction rates among other traits, which can help in developing an institution's branding.

### A Values Evaluation Tool

Core values are not something people "buy into" but rather are predisposed to holding them. Once an institution discovers its values (as opposed to establishing them) it should set in place processes to apply meaningful assessments of them. There are many evaluation approaches that can be used (e.g., interviews, focus groups, etc.); one of which may be initiating an evaluation process to discover their relevance to day-to-day operations. Institutional beliefs are a foundational declaration and critical in an institution's overall planning and operations. Values are intrinsic guidelines, not dependent upon a particular situation, for making strategic choices that shape longer-term behaviour, which determine what may be expected from that institution. The evaluation of their relevancy and currency in achieving or exceeding institutional expectations may be looked at by addressing several key questions, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Evaluating Values

	Strongly agree		Strongly disagree		Undecided		
1. Your institution with its expressed <b>values</b> statement has a <u>competitive advantage</u> over other institutions that operate without one.	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
2. The institution has developed a clearly <u>written values</u> statement.	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
3. The institution has effectively <u>articulated</u> its <b>values</b> to employees.	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
4. The institution has developed an overall administrative <u>structure</u> to help realize its <b>values</b> .	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
5. The institution has made all employees take <u>ownership</u> in realizing its <b>values</b> .	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
6. The institution has the <u>respect</u> from employees to address and realize its <b>values</b> .	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
7. The institution has high <u>expectations</u> of its employees for progress towards its <b>values</b> .	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
8. The institution has articulated <u>performance</u> criteria to assess movement towards achieving its <b>values</b> .	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
9. Do you recognize most of the <u>challenges</u> that could impact your institution in addressing its <b>values</b> ?		Yes	No	Undecided			

An evaluation process would yield better quantitative and qualitative data about institutional values if various constituent groups (e.g., administration, Board members, faculty, students, etc.) were also identified along with the survey results. It is important to differentiate individual's perceptions within the institution, since each perspective is essential in defining the institution's culture of values. Feedback from employees around the institution's interest in defending its declared values in the competitive marketplace of higher education would be insightful especially if institutional outcomes were impacted by lower enrolment or reduced revenue. Evaluation of values would include the perceptions of external groups as well, such as advisory committees, funders, and community organizations. In this way the overall evaluation can be seen from both internal and external perspectives, which also addresses objectivity issues.

Discovering values is one thing; living by them in the workplace is something completely different. Having a statement of values that is all talk and no commitment undermines institutional leadership and its credibility as an employer. Institutions can claim "respect and trust" as their core values but also undermine them operationally by doing something quite different. The misalignments exist not because these values are false; but rather the misalignments possibly occur because of years of entrenched and ad hoc policies/practices. Assessing those institutional actions to determine how their values are currently practiced and institutionally supported would supplement any comprehensive evaluation process.

Values are passionate and distinctive core beliefs as to why the institution does what it does and what it stands for. Assessing values assures that all stakeholders are in agreement about what is important to the institution. These values drive the decisions about what priorities will be the focus of any strategic and operational planning. In the book *From Values to Action*, Kraemer (2011) attributes strong organizational values as going hand-in-hand with a clear strategic direction which is critical to the establishment of a strong vision.

### Evaluating a Vision

*Vision Definition – A statement of the future that the educational institution aspires to achieve, or a description of a future state that is better in some significant way than what currently exists.*

A vision is a guiding concept for what an institution is trying to do and to become. A vision answers the question "What will the institution look like five years from now?" It is a roadmap – the direction it is headed, the focus it should have, the position it should try to occupy among other institutions, the activities to be pursued, and the capabilities it plans to develop.

The idealism which is a product of visionary statements should not be confused with unrealistic expectations about the institution's future state. A visionary leader (and institutional Board) looks into the future as though it is filled with possibilities, not probabilities (Kouzes & Posner, 1996). Ultimately, visionary leadership is about increasing performance. Anticipating and influencing the future presents an institution a way to position itself in the best possible way to achieve results. The payoff comes

in satisfying institutional objectives while delivering tangible results (Kahan, 2002).

### A Vision Evaluation Tool

One approach for vision statement evaluation is the determination of its accuracy, currency, and relevancy to the institution. While the questions in Table 2 are a good starting point a retrospective approach over a 5 year period would yield better data for analysis. Like a value, a vision is a foundational pillar and critical in its long-term planning and day-to-day operations. In forecasting its future the evaluation process addresses several key questions as seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Evaluating a Vision

	Strongly agree		Strongly disagree		Undecided		
1. An institution with an expressed <b>vision</b> statement (spanning the next 5-7 years) has a <u>competitive advantage</u> over other institutions that operate without one.	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
2. The institution has developed a clearly <u>written</u> <b>vision</b> statement.	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
3. The institution has effectively <u>articulated</u> its <b>vision</b> to employees.	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
4. The institution has developed an overall administrative <u>structure</u> to help realize its <b>vision</b> .	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
5. The institution has made all employees take <u>ownership</u> in realizing its <b>vision</b> .	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
6. The institution has the <u>respect</u> from employees to address and realize its <b>vision</b> .	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
7. The institution has high <u>expectations</u> of its employees for progress towards its <b>vision</b>	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
8. The institution has articulated <u>performance</u> criteria to assess movement towards achieving its <b>vision</b> .	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
9. Do you recognize most of the <u>challenges</u> that could impact your institution in addressing its <b>vision</b> ?			Yes	No	Undecided		

Once the responses by internal and external constituent groups have

been received, as stated in the evaluation process of a values statement, a "team" would be tasked with analyzing various group responses. Additionally questions could be created to explore how the institution's vision builds on the historical context of its students, its operational strengths, HR capabilities, financial resources, and institutional assets. As well, questions would need to be explored as to how the vision statement clarifies operationally institutional initiatives that need to be pursued in order to achieve its vision. By using this type of survey one can see that institutions might be more inclined to evaluate internal constituent groups' perceptions of its vision rather than that of external groups; however, the perceptions of advisory groups, funders, and other community organizations can provide important data. Therefore both of these perspectives are useful in further refining the institution's vision.

### **Evaluating a Mission**

*Mission Definition – A brief statement describing the reason an institution exists, and what it wants to accomplish (results or outcomes).*

For higher education a mission statement reflects the clarity of its central purpose; why institutions do what they do, not the means by which they do it. A mission is about results for the institution's customers (for example, learners, stakeholders, and the greater community). An effective mission reflects a match of opportunities, competence, and commitment by the institution to these customers. Educational institutions are about change – not only for individuals who use their services (e.g., programs, courses) but also the communities themselves. Changing lives and communities is the starting and ending point embodied in the institutional mission.

The entire mission development process allows the institution to discover its strengths (to build on) and weaknesses (to discard or correct). Whatever a mission statement says it lays another valuable foundational pillar for a further definition of purpose, that being the ultimate result of its work. The difficulty in assessing mission statements is that they generally speak to the "means" of an institution's work with no defined "ends". The focus is on what is done (the "means", e.g., teaching, research, service) and not why things are done (why they exist) for learners, which is the "end" result (Calder, 2013).

Bart and Baetz (1998) summarized that a mission has become recognized as one of the most critical cornerstones of any organization. They stated that the conclusion of most commentaries is that a strong mission is an essential factor contributing to an organization's enduring success. Of course, the ultimate test of the institution's mission is in its performance – the outcomes from the experiences that learners receive by attending and graduating from that institution.

### **A Mission Evaluation Tool**

All mission statements can be assessed with varying degrees of success especially when realistic baseline outcomes are established. For the institution with weak platitudes, success is often elusive for it fails to raise mission-based outcomes for those who are the institution's "customers" (generally defined as stakeholders). It is critical that mission

outcomes and identified customers are agreed upon within the institution since every move, every decision, every policy needs to start with the question – will this action advance the institution's capacity to carry out its mission? Mingle and Norris (1981) stated "one way in which institutions have discovered their mission is through a systematic evaluation of the quality, costs, and importance of their programs" (p.55). Institutional leaders who do not know what their primary mission is will eventually venture in too many directions. It is important then to understand why consensus is critical on the outcomes and identified customers. Any misunderstanding can lead to financial problems as well. Ambiguous mission statements of the past have offered little assistance to institutions addressing their diminished fiscal realities.

Assessing the mission can be assisted by exploring several questions about how it is perceived by various constituent groups. Colleagues, associates, and employees, for example, whose judgment and insight are respected, need to be approached to see how they view the institution's statement of purpose and capture their thoughts. Building on the previously described Tables for values and vision statements a further evaluation tool can be found in Table 3.

Table 3: Evaluating a Mission

	Strongly agree			Strongly disagree			Undecided
1. An institution with an expressed <b>mission</b> statement has a <u>competitive advantage</u> over other institutions that operate without one.	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
2. The institution has developed a clearly <u>written mission</u> statement.	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
3. The institution has effectively <u>articulated</u> its <b>mission</b> to employees.	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
4. The institution has developed an overall administrative <u>structure</u> to help realize its <b>mission</b> .	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
5. The institution has made all employees take <u>ownership</u> in realizing its <b>mission</b> .	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
6. The institution has the <u>respect</u> from employees to address and realize its <b>mission</b> .	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
7. The institution has high <u>expectations</u> of its employees for progress towards its <b>mission</b> .	6	5	4	3	2	1	U
8. The institution has articulated <u>performance</u> criteria to assess	6	5	4	3	2	1	U

movement towards achieving its  
**mission.**

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- |   |     |    |           |
|---|-----|----|-----------|
| 9. Do you recognize most of the <u>challenges</u> that could impact your institution in addressing its <b>mission</b> ? | Yes | No | Undecided |
|---|-----|----|-----------|
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Table 3 survey questions can be supplemented and modified by a team tasked with the response analysis. Questions that address the alignment of institutional programs/services with the mission would add to the understanding in the institution achieving its mission. If these questions were used by a number of institutions across a higher educational system there would be improved validation of them and subsequently improved analysis. The indication of responses from various internal and external constituent groups provides additional commentary on how close or far away an institution is in defining its sense of purpose (mission).

### **An Inescapable Reality**

Institutions will only sustain success if groups work together, respecting each other's roles and understanding what their true values, vision, and mission are. Therefore, what the institution needs first and foremost is a strong and well-articulated vision and mission with robust value-based initiatives (Calder. 2013). The evaluation of these three foundational pillars offers insightful assessments into their relevance and furthers their meaning as statements which define how the institution is achieving or possibly exceeding its VVM statements.

Educational institutions are agents of social and economic development and are being asked by shareholder and stakeholder groups to assess how well they are performing, that is, are they achieving a desired future and subsequent results?. Therefore, an inescapable reality for most institutions is an ongoing examination of its VVM statements. While institutions have improved accountability measures for improved funding (e.g., cost containment) it seems imperative that these measures be matched with a realistic evaluation of institutional purpose, ideals and vision-based actions.

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