

The Conflicted Realities of Community College Mission Statements

Taking a hard look at a staple of strategic planning.

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The mission statement has been highly revered in business and management literature for over four decades. From the early management writings of Peter Drucker (1974), widely considered to be the father of modern management theory, to those of Renato Tagiuri (2002), currently a professor at the Harvard Business School, mission statements have been thought to improve institutional performance. Over the last 40 years, the mission statement has been consistently viewed as an indispensable management tool for organizations in both the public and private sectors. In addition, there is a plethora of popular management literature that puts mission identification as the first and most important task of an organization's leadership (e.g., Brinckerhoff 2000; Bryson 2004; O'Hallaron and O'Hallaron 2000). Strategic planning theory in higher education holds the mission statement in the same high esteem (e.g., Kotler and Murphy 1981; Norris and Poulton 1991, 2008). By some estimates, mission statements have risen to the level of mythology in what they have done and can do for organizations. Even more optimistically, some contemporary writers say that mission statements have not yet reached their full potential for unifying organizations and driving them forward (Sidhu 2003).

By some estimates, mission statements have risen to the level of mythology in what they can do.

Almost in spite of this confidence, a second voice has arisen that questions whether the organizational performance promised by mission statements has actually materialized (Davis et al. 2007; Newsom and Hayes 1990–91; Sidhu 2003). Moreover, there is little empirical evidence that clearly demonstrates a relationship between mission statements and organizational performance. What does exist shows only a weak or tentative relationship (Bart and Baetz 1998; Meacham 2008; Pearce and David 1987; Sidhu 2003). A counterargument to the exuberant supporters of mission statements posits that the weak or tentative relationship to positive organizational performance is not a result of the mission statement as a strategic concept per se, but rather the result of poorly formulated or ineffectively implemented statements. To explore these issues, a number of researchers and authors have focused on the construction, content, and implementation of mission statements in a wide variety of organizational contexts (e.g., Abrahams 2007; Kreber and Mhina 2007; O’Gorman and Doran 1999; Pearce and Roth 1988).

Despite the emerging debate over their value, mission statements have now become compulsory. All six accrediting commissions include mission as a criterion for accreditation. Thus, the purpose of the study described in this article was not to affirm or refute mission statements as a management tool; for the present and into the near future, they are a required element of higher education planning. Because the rhetorical question is not “if” but “how,” higher education organizations—such as community colleges—must continue to examine the practices surrounding their mission statements and understand how these statements are used in forming strategies to improve the quality and efficacy of their institutions.

Consequently, the purpose of this study was to explore the role and efficacy of community college mission statements in the strategic planning process. Role refers to the function of the mission statement within the institution’s planning framework, both actual and desired, and efficacy refers to how well the statement fulfills the desired function.

Methodology

This qualitative study used an instrumental case study design. Nine nationally dispersed community colleges were selected for participation through a combination of purposeful and maximum variation sampling criteria.

Figure 1 Participant Community College Attributes

College	U.S. Standard Federal Region	Degree of Urbanization	Size Classification*	Annual FTE Enrollment 2007	FTE Staff
A	II	Suburb: Large	L2	10,000	1,600
B	III	Suburb: Large	VL2	15,000	2,000
C	IV	City: Midsize	VL2	21,000	1,700
D	V	City: Small	L2	8,000	500
E	VI	City: Large	L2	10,000	900
F	VII	City: Midsize	VL2	11,000	1,400
G	VIII	Suburb: Large	VL2	16,000	1,700
H	IX	City: Large	M2	5,000	400
I	X	City: Midsize	L2	9,000	900

*“Size classification” is based on the Carnegie size classification system:

- VS2=Very small two-year (Fall enrollment data show FTE enrollment of fewer than 500 students at these associate’s degree-granting institutions)
- S2=Small two-year (Fall enrollment data show FTE enrollment of 500–1,999 students at these associate’s degree-granting institutions)
- M2=Medium two-year (Fall enrollment data show FTE enrollment of 2,000–4,999 students at these associate’s degree-granting institutions)
- L2=Large two-year (Fall enrollment data show FTE enrollment of 5,000–9,999 students at these associate’s degree-granting institutions)
- VL2=Very large two-year (Fall enrollment data show FTE enrollment of at least 10,000 students at these associate’s degree-granting institutions)

The Society for College and University Planning (SCUP) assisted in identifying community colleges with a reputation for excellence and innovation in strategic planning, which fulfilled the first sample criterion. Other criteria included (1) geographical dispersion, (2) size of institution, and (3) degree of urbanization. Figure 1 presents selected attributes of the community colleges that participated in the study. Degree of urbanization, annual FTE enrollment 2007, and FTE staff were extracted from IPEDS (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System) data. Annual FTE enrollment has been rounded to the nearest thousand, and FTE staff has been rounded to the nearest hundred.

Data were collected from each participant community college through a pre-interview questionnaire, an interview with the executive-level person responsible for strategic planning, and a review of the college's strategic plan. Institutional planners were identified at each of the selected colleges and asked to complete the questionnaire, participate in the interview, and serve as an institutional contact for obtaining planning documents.

The pre-interview questionnaire (i.e., survey) gathered preliminary data on the participant college's strategic planning process and the role and function of its mission statement. The survey also gathered basic demographic information on the participant planner. Data from the survey informed the interview with the planner, served as a triangulation source, and provided contextual information.

Data analysis included a priori theming and coding of interview transcripts and planning documents. In the data analysis process, Lang and Lopers-Sweetman's (1991) roles of mission statements were used as a priori codes. Additionally, NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to assist with the data analysis process.

Mission Statement Defined

The study findings revealed a clear understanding among the participants of the common definition of a mission statement (i.e., the purpose of the institution). However, a great deal of ambiguity existed when participants compared their institution's mission and vision statements. This ambiguity presents a conundrum, as some functions of the mission statement must be relinquished when it describes a vision of the future (such as in a vision statement). For example, it is difficult for a mission statement crafted with visionary elements to also serve as a benchmark for measuring mission fulfillment. One statement (the vision) is meant to stretch the institution and make it grow, while the other

(the mission) is a measure of the institution's daily functioning or a statement of its purpose.

Mission Statement Roles

The use of a priori themes as a framework for data analysis resulted in the identification of five a priori roles and two emergent roles of mission statements. The a priori roles were (1) goal clarification, (2) smokescreen for opportunism, (3) description of things as they are, (4) aspirations, and (5) mission statement as marketing tool. The emergent roles were (1) accreditation requirement and (2) teambuilding tool. The roles most often identified by participants were goal clarification, mission statement as marketing tool, and accreditation requirement.

Goal clarification. In this traditional role, the mission statement brings clarity to the planning process by assisting with strategy formation, priority setting, and, ultimately, resource allocation. This role becomes particularly important in a period of declining resources. When fewer resources are available, important and often difficult decisions must be made regarding just what is the core work of the college. Mission statements help to make those decisions. They serve as a litmus test for planned and emergent strategies. A mission statement may even be applied as a test to well-established programs and services that may have evolved over many years and now possibly stand outside the institution's mission.

Mission statement as marketing tool. In this era of increased marketing in higher education, marketing professionals are seeking succinct ways of communicating the essence of an institution to its current and prospective students, their parents, and other stakeholders. The mission statement appears to be an effective tool for accomplishing this. However, most mission statements were not conceived with a marketing function in mind and consequently may be ill-suited to such efforts because of their length, style, and other factors. This role, more than any other, has placed the greatest stress on the traditional functions of the mission statement (e.g., to clarify goals and strategies).

Accreditation requirement. Clearly, mission statements fill a vital role in the accreditation process. They are a required aspect of accreditation for higher education institutions in the United States. However, the extent to which this role has affected the construction and function of mission statements is not clearly understood. If a mission statement originally created as a planning tool is later borrowed for use in the accreditation process, then certain

issues and challenges may result. Because accreditation commissions wield such immense power, community colleges may find themselves focusing more resources (time, effort, and money) on creating and updating mission statements that can contribute to a successful accreditation process. It is important to consider how this influence might affect the structure and content of these statements.

The Conflicting Roles of Mission Statements

The study participants provided examples of the apparent conflict between some of these roles. For example, several participants articulated the need to have a short, terse statement that is memorable and easy to communicate to stakeholders. This is a clear expression of mission statement as marketing tool. At the same time, mission statements must continue to clarify goals. A mission statement can be one way to guide and validate decisions. However, a brief, visionary mission statement that fulfills a marketing role often does not contain the specificity required to help with decision making.

A mission statement cast as a *smokescreen for opportunism* creates similar challenges. Such a statement allows for multiple futures and by definition does not delimit the college in some important strategic way. This function can be in conflict with accreditation needs and the goal clarification role. For example, the more broad the mission statement, the more difficult it is to demonstrate to accrediting commissions that it is being fulfilled. One solution is to create key performance indicators (KPIs) linked directly to various facets of the mission statement. The KPIs make it easier to demonstrate mission fulfillment by making the outcomes of the college more tangible and quantifiable.

Finally, colleges attempting to use their mission statement to serve an *aspirations* role blur their purpose (mission) with their vision. Indeed, when aspirations are joined with the marketing tool function, the statement can be inspiring and forward-looking. However, such a statement may make it difficult to demonstrate mission fulfillment. By definition, the vision statement describes a point in the future to which to aspire. So, when is one's mission being fulfilled? When the college *reaches* the future vision, or must the college only make progress *toward* the future vision? As mission statements are required to fill multiple roles, such questions will need to be more overtly addressed.

By arranging the roles and functions of mission statements thematically, a figure can be constructed that contributes to an understanding of how a mission statement functions within one of Mintzberg's (2007) strategy continuums. One of the continuums that Mintzberg uses to describe strategy illustrates planning that ranges from a tangible position to a broad perspective. These descriptors are helpful when considering mission statements that facilitate strategy formation. For example, it can be assumed that mission statements that facilitate strategy as a tangible position would look, feel, and function quite differently from mission statements that facilitate strategy as a broad perspective.

In figure 2, Mintzberg's continuum lies on the vertical axis with broad perspective at the top and tangible position at the bottom. The roles and functions of mission statements were first categorized into two large functional groups: communication and definition. These groups were developed based on a categorical aggregation of the themes that emerged from the data. The communication group functions to communicate various messages to stakeholders (both internal and external to the college), while the definition group serves to describe the work of the college (i.e., the more traditional definition and function of a mission statement). Roles and functions have been aggregated accordingly under these two functional groups. The communication group lies at the top of the figure and the definition group lies at the bottom.

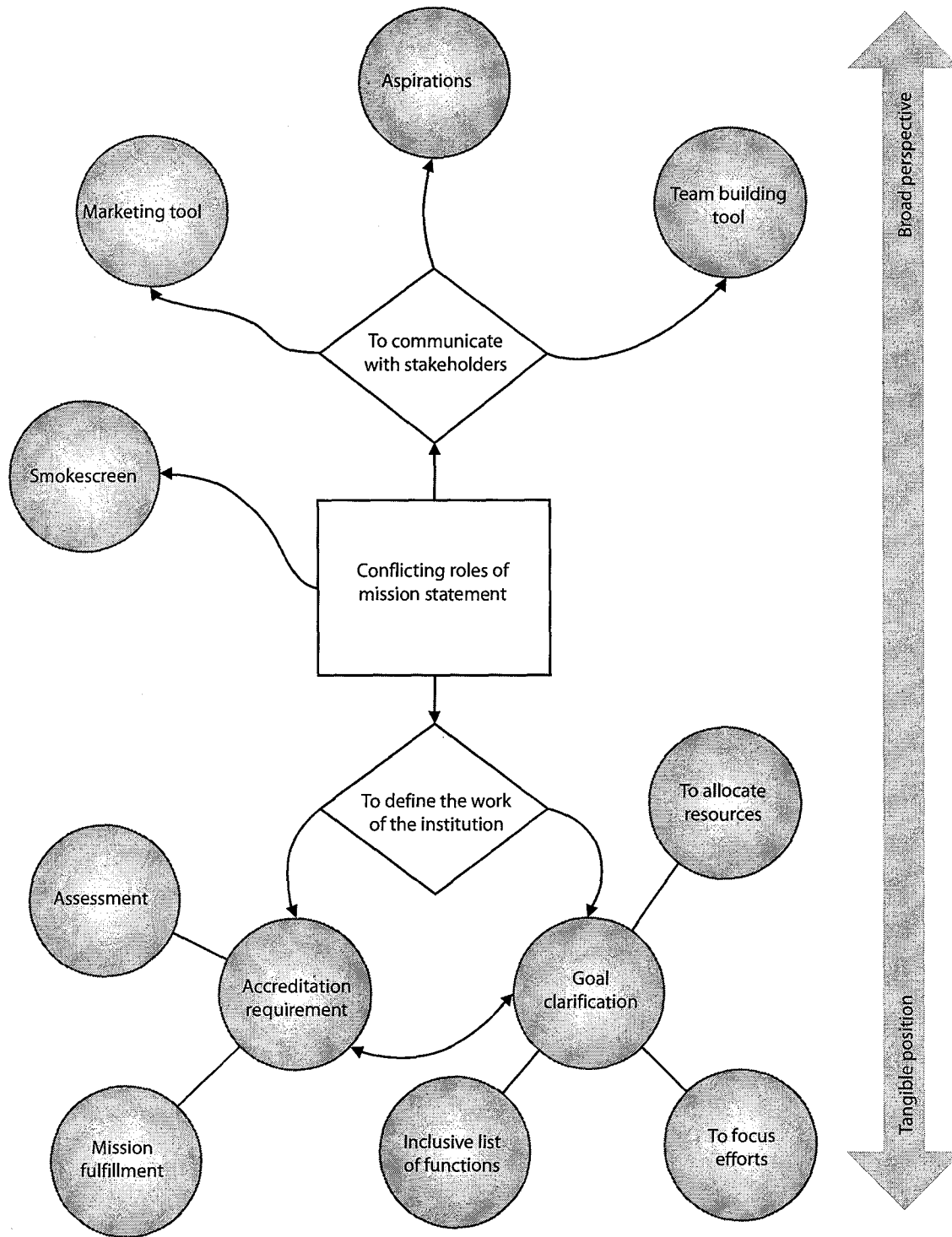
To illustrate these two groupings on the continuum, mission statements of two institutions not included in the study are presented using pseudonyms. Pleasant Valley College's mission statement clearly represents a more traditional format. Most importantly, it clearly represents the ideals and roles of the *tangible position group*:

Pleasant Valley College is a comprehensive community college dedicated to providing excellent education at an affordable cost, promoting personal growth, enriching the local community, and meeting the challenges of a global society. The specific purposes of the college are:

- To provide the first two years of baccalaureate education in the liberal and fine arts, the natural and social sciences, and pre-professional curricula designed to prepare students to transfer to four-year colleges and universities;
- To provide educational opportunities that enable students to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to enter a specific career;

Conflicted Realities of Mission Statements

Figure 2 The Roles and Functions of Mission Statements Placed Along Mintzberg's (2007) Strategy Continuum



- To provide continuing educational opportunities for professional job training, retraining, and upgrading of skills and for personal enrichment and wellness;
- To provide developmental instruction for underprepared students and educational opportunities for those who wish to improve their academic abilities and skills;
- To provide co-curricular opportunities that enhance the learning environment and develop the whole person. Essential to achieving these purposes are all of the college's resources, support programs, and services.

While this statement provides a detailed functional description that aids in planning, outcomes assessment, and performance measurement, its length precludes it from being communicated effectively. No doubt, only portions of the statement can be used in marketing and communications efforts. Additionally, visionary elements are absent with the exception of some tonal features in the preamble.

It is important to note that Pleasant Valley College's current statement limits it in significant ways. The college's nimbleness and flexibility is severely curtailed. Baccalaureate degrees, for example, are not listed. The statement's rigidity also discourages entrepreneurial and innovative approaches and programs since they fall outside the well-articulated mission.

In contrast, the mission statement from Summersvale Community College clearly represents many of the ideals and roles represented in the *broad perspective* group. The statement reads "The mission of Summersvale Community College is to improve people's lives through learning." This statement is short, which facilitates both internal and external communication and promotes the marketing role. The breadth of the statement is reminiscent of visionary, presidential declarations. However, the statement does not delimit the college in any significant way with regard to the scope of educational endeavors. For example, it neither describes the two-year mission or other traditional functions of the community college, nor defines the audience or stakeholders served.

While this artificially bifurcated model implies that tangible positions and related roles cannot coexist with broad perspectives, such models can exist in the center of the continuum. However, the centrist position must necessarily compromise the effectiveness found at both ends. Depending on what is expected of their mission statement, the majority of community colleges will find it most effective to create a balanced statement that lies in

the center of the continuum. Colleges with desired roles at opposite ends of the continuum will find it difficult to create a satisfactory mission statement.

If community colleges must satisfy the needs of both communication and definition within the same mission statement, then important decisions must be made regarding which functions are primary and which are secondary. There must be a clear understanding on the part of all stakeholders that one statement most likely cannot fill all roles in an equally effective manner and that subsequent decisions regarding these functions must be deliberate and well-considered.

One solution to the problem of competing roles is to have multiple statement types that accomplish different purposes. If a college requires a mission statement with a strong marketing function, then a more descriptive adjunct statement could be devised to assist with mission fulfillment and goal clarification. Many colleges have accomplished this through the development of KPIs and other similar planning methodologies. Likewise, if a college requires a definition-type mission statement to strengthen prescriptive planning and assessment, then an adjunct statement that performs a marketing function can be developed (e.g., marketing slogan, market position statement).

Finally, it is important to understand that many of the functions within the communication group were traditionally filled by vision statements. How and why vision statements have seemingly become merged with mission statements is not clear. Ultimately, it may be that the traditional model and terminology of the mission and vision statement has become an impediment to the evolving planning needs of community colleges. Perhaps some community colleges are still trying to fit emerging roles and functions into statements that were designed to accomplish different ends several decades ago. If this is so, colleges must not be so wedded to the planning literature's traditional terminology and forms; rather, they must be flexible in order to respond to the emerging functions and roles required of today's mission statements and to the evolving contextual elements of their planning environments.

Community college presidents, governing boards, and strategic planning professionals must be clear about the purpose of their institution's mission statement. If the mission statement is to fill multiple roles (as is likely), then it is important for all involved in the planning process to acknowledge those roles. Once written and disseminated, it may be difficult to force a mission statement into a role

for which it was not intended. If multiple and possibly conflicting roles are required, then planners must consider multiple types of statements to fill those needs.

Another alternative is to construct a mission statement with multiple sections or parts more suited to the various roles required. For example, the parts could include a marketing (or “spirit”) statement, a purpose statement, a legacy statement (which contains historical information about the institution), and KPIs. Whichever alternative is selected, the institution will benefit from having knowledge of and agreement on all of the desired roles of its mission statement.

The Role of the Mission Statement in the Strategic Planning Process

Most study participants clearly and intentionally placed the mission statement within the strategic planning process. This placement implies a function with regard to strategy formation and delimitation, the mission statement’s traditional role. Indeed, strategy delimitation was strongly represented in the interview data. Several colleges are taking this delimitation one step further by linking goals and strategies directly to the mission statement. This finding demonstrates the desire of planners to more tightly integrate the mission statement throughout the multiple phases of the planning process—from the pre-planning phase through plan evaluation—rather than using it solely in its traditional role at the beginning of the process.

Because of the mission statement’s inherent power to communicate important messages, strategic planners are also exploring various integration strategies in their efforts to respond to stakeholders and mandates. This abandonment of the traditional planning models will accelerate as planners seek to create frameworks that respond to the decentralized structure and emergent nature of strategy formation in higher education. Such “professional organizations,” as defined by Mintzberg (2007), will continue to look for creative ways to balance prescriptive planning processes with the evolving organization and the diffused power structure implicit in shared governance. The mission statement may be one way to provide a broad rudder to guide the emergent strategy of academe.

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The Efficacy of the Mission Statement as a Planning Tool

Participants expressed varying levels of satisfaction with their current mission statements: three participants expressed satisfaction, three expressed dissatisfaction, and three expressed mixed satisfaction. All of those who were satisfied had recently revised their mission statement. Among those who were dissatisfied, the most common criticism was that the current statement was too long. This implies a need for the statement to fill the *mission statement as marketing tool* role, which typically relies on a short, memorable statement. Participants expressing mixed satisfaction noted the need to have the statement meet the expectations of multiple stakeholders. This may imply a need for the statement to fill multiple roles and point to its marginal effectiveness in actually doing so.

Overall, participants felt that having a mission statement as a planning tool was worth the effort and resources invested to construct and maintain it. In general, participants endorsed the concept of a mission statement and its traditional role in the planning process. However, a few participants added the caveat that the role of the mission statement in the planning process must be clear, deliberate, and focused. Otherwise, efforts surrounding the mission statement may be, in the words of one participant, little more than “an exercise to satisfy an accreditation body.” It was apparent that planners felt that mission statements serve an important purpose for the betterment of the organization.

In summary, to increase satisfaction with an institution’s mission statement and improve its subsequent efficacy, strategic planners must clearly and intentionally identify the roles required of the statement. This intentionality will clarify expectations for all stakeholders with regard to the statement’s function. It will also provide a framework for the construction, review, or revision of subsequent mission statements.

A New Mission Statement Development Process

A mission statement is not an optional component of strategic planning since its usage is required for accreditation purposes. Given that, and knowing that the mission statement’s efficacy can be facilitated or hindered by the various functions and roles into which it is thrust, how can governing boards, presidents, and planners be more

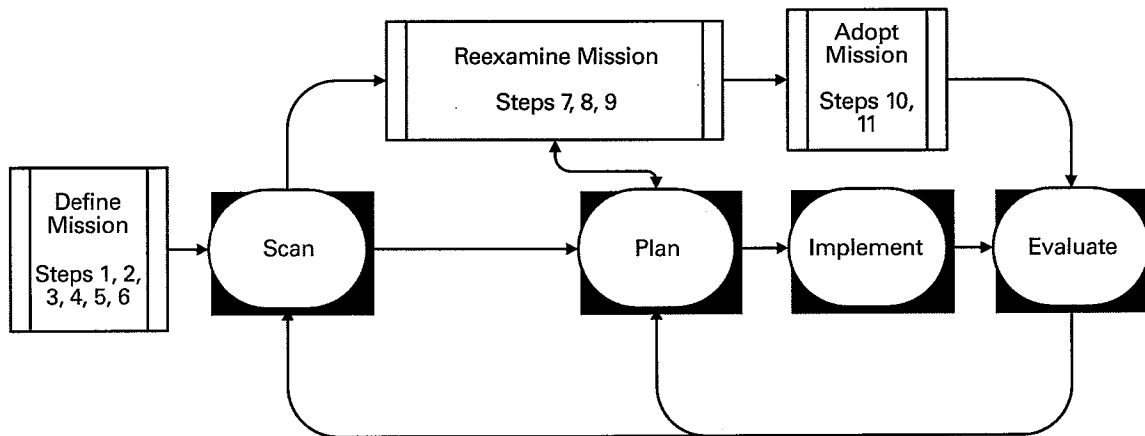
Figure 3 **Phase A of the Mission Statement Development Process**

Phase A: Define Mission Statement	<p>Step 1. Compile a list of outcomes for the mission statement development process, including specific roles that will be required of the statement. It is important to specifically note those roles that may conflict and clearly understand where areas of compromise may be possible. The following steps will help identify and understand the competing forces that may be present:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Identify the roles and functions desired or required.b. Observe the placement of the roles and functions on the Mintzberg continuum (see figure 2).c. Place any new desired roles or functions on the continuum.d. Approximate an average placement for the final statement on the continuum.e. Develop a set of characteristics that describe the final statement (e.g., statement length, tone, language, content elements, any adjunct statements that may be used in parallel) based on its desired roles, functions, and placement on the Mintzberg continuum. <p>Step 2. Formally identify how the statement will be used within the strategic planning process (e.g., placement within the planning framework, linked KPIs, matrices).</p> <p>Step 3. Compile formal and informal mandates. Make a list of required institutional purposes and functions and those imposed by local, state, regional, and national stakeholders.*</p> <p>Step 4. Complete stakeholder analysis. Bryson has developed an exhaustive stakeholder analysis process that may be helpful to community colleges in identifying key stakeholders and understanding what level of engagement may be required while developing the mission statement (see Bryson 2004, pp. 107–113).*</p> <p>Step 5. Answer six key organizational questions (Bryson 2004; Drucker 1974)*:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a. Who are we?b. What is our social and political basis, mandate, or need?c. How do we respond to this basis?d. How do respond to stakeholders?e. What do we value?f. How are we distinctive? <p>Step 6. Draft mission statement.</p>
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Figure 4 **Phases B and C of the Mission Statement Development**

Phase B: Reexamine Mission Statement	<p>Step 7. Reexamine and redraft mission statement as planning group moves through the planning cycle based on input from the Scan and Plan stages.*</p> <p>Step 8. Assess final draft of mission statement in light of the outcomes identified in Phase A, Step 1. Adjust or redraft mission statement to address gaps in outcomes.</p> <p>Step 9. Gather feedback on the mission statement draft from key stakeholders. Edit the statement in response to feedback.</p> <p>Step 10. Formally adopt the mission statement.</p> <p>Step 11. Communicate the mission statement widely to all stakeholders.</p>
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Figure 5 The Mission Statement Development Process Mapped onto the Strategic Planning Cycle



strategic and intentional in their use of the mission statement as a planning tool? In short, what can be done to increase the efficacy of community college mission statements?

While some planning processes include a step to review stakeholder mandates and expectations, that step does not typically lead to an examination of the anticipated roles and functions that the mission statement must fill. The process described in the next section of this article merges Bryson's (2004) mission statement development framework with findings distilled from this study in order to craft specific steps aimed at addressing the various roles of the mission statement. This process advances the efficacy of the mission statement by (1) specifically recognizing and addressing the multiple roles played by the statement at the beginning of the planning process and (2) providing multiple integration points for the mission statement throughout the planning process. Governing boards, presidents, and strategic planners can use this process as a model that can be overlaid on a college's current planning process or as a template to create a new planning process. Either option retains the intended benefits and will lead to a more effective use of the mission statement in the community college.

Purpose. The purpose of this process is to develop an institutional mission statement that acknowledges the various complementary and conflicting roles and functions desired and creates the best possible configuration of these roles and functions to meet the needs of the community college.

Key innovations. This process facilitates the integration of the mission statement's multiple roles in order to increase its efficacy, incorporates mission statement development at multiple points in the planning process for greater cohesion and continuity, and creates a framework for assessing the statement's efficacy (i.e., how well it accomplished its desired functions).

Prospective users. Users include governing boards, presidents, strategic planners, and strategic planning committees at community colleges.

Process. The process is divided into three phases: (A) define mission, (B) reexamine mission, and (C) adopt mission. Phase A is described in figure 3, while Phases B and C are described in figure 4. Corresponding steps are listed for each phase of the process. Steps adapted from Bryson's (2004) mission statement development framework are marked with an asterisk (*). Phase A is executed prior to the environmental scanning stage ("Scan") of the strategic planning cycle. Phase B is executed upon completion of the environmental scan and concurrent with the planning stage ("Plan"). Finally, Phase C is executed during the implementation stage. Figure 5 illustrates the placement of these phases within the prototypical strategic planning cycle.

Conclusions

The larger question of mission statement efficacy must be considered in light of the study findings, the literature, and

the common understanding of the community college mission. Are mission statements worth the effort? Are they worth the resources dedicated to their development and maintenance?

If mission statements need not restate the greater mission of the community college (which is already well understood), then perhaps those roles and functions that represent tangible positions (e.g., *goal clarification*, *description of things as they are*) can be reduced in importance or eliminated altogether. It may be time in the evolution of mission statements for a shift toward Mintzberg's broad perspectives. While such statements may not provide the tangibility that guides resource allocation, they might be better at enabling other functions. Such a shift would allow mission statements to focus on those things that make the institution distinctive (e.g., "branding"), rather than on restating those elements that are common to most community colleges in the United States.

Ultimately, the efficacy of community college mission statements depends on the clarity of purpose for which they are created. If those purposes are clear and clearly articulated to stakeholders, efficacy is likely. Without this clarity, efficacy will seem nebulous and elusive. Traditional measures of efficacy, such as those established in the strategic planning literature, will be assumed and confusion will result. The assessment of efficacy can only truly begin once expectations and purposes are clear.

Ultimately, the efficacy of mission statements depends on the clarity of purpose for which they are created.

Community colleges invest significant resources in the development and maintenance of their mission statements. It is important to ascertain the return on that investment, and planners must lay the groundwork that makes the evidence of return on investment possible. In the absence of such evidence, their efforts in advocating for costly, time-consuming mission statement development processes seem charlatanistic. A careful analysis of the statement's desired roles and clarity regarding its functions will provide planners with the first steps in establishing a framework for mission statement development that can infuse the planning cycle with cohesion and evidence of efficacy. ■

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