

Why Go Here?
Evaluating Community College Mission Statements
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Abstract

Mission statements for community colleges inspire enrollment, set expectations and shape organizational legitimacy. They represent an integral element of all post-secondary educational institutions. Their mission is to inform, inspire, and potentially shape positive student trajectories, post degree completion. The purpose of this practice brief is to review the literature on the importance of mission statements and their impact on community colleges, most notably: are they misleading the students they hope to attract?

This brief is also meant to guide college executives who help craft mission statements if/when they undertake this goal. Recommendations are offered that utilize a transformational leadership approach, showing that mission statements can be created or re-evaluated to not only represent the goals of the institution, but the needs of the students who are enrolled in them as well. By utilizing this process, the institution can project a more wholesome meaning of self-empowerment through new mission statements, while building student success that theoretically leads to higher retention, degree completion and enrollment rates over time.

Keywords: *Mission statements, Community college, Empowerment, Transformational leadership*

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Community college is one of the most viable, affordable, and logical choices for students who are working towards degree completion or skills advancement. With the added benefit of an educational degree, coupled with the self-empowerment that new ideologies & skill sets give, post graduate students vastly improved their chances for success. However, one of the most crucial elements of the decision to enroll or even to consider, involves answering just one question: Why go here? According to a recent report from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), nearly half (46%) of all students who completed a degree at a four-year institution in 2013-14 had enrolled at a two-year institution at some point in the previous 10 years. These enrollment patterns are not just picking up the occasional community college course taken by students; of those students who had attended a two-year institution, 47% had enrolled in that sector for five or more terms (NSC, spring 2015).

With current enrollment rates lower than in years past, community colleges must routinely evaluate their mission statements to remain competitive in the local and global marketplace. Mission statements matter because they shape initial perceptions, attract and repel students, and lend character to an institution's legacy. The issue with crafting strong, effective mission statements lies in the fact that there is no exact science or process for crafting them. Without a focused, goal oriented direction, mission statements or colleges by extension, can be interpreted incorrectly or passed over without proper consideration and review. This brief looks at the importance of what a mission statement can imply and the overlapping effects it can have on enrollment, retention, and performance.

Approaches to Crafting New Statements

I argue that utilizing a transformational leadership approach is the key to new and reformed mission statements. This approach shows us that mission statements can be created or re-evaluated to not only represent the goals of the institution, but the needs of the students who are enrolled in them as well. To offer evidence that this approach will yield widespread, long term results on many fronts, data presented by Spangler & Arthur (2001) states that “most community colleges no longer exist simply in their local communities. External and global agencies impact almost every aspect of the operation, from computers to textbooks, from procurement to tax rates. If community colleges are to be competitive in the global marketplace, they must not just cope with but excel under these new complex and conflicting conditions.

While they began as local institutions, community colleges are not necessarily constrained only to act locally. A tax supported institution must be able to transcend its physical, place-bound limitations to embrace the world beyond the local community and become an entrepreneurial enterprise”. With so many options of educational pursuit in an ever increasing global and international world, mission statements along with community colleges themselves inevitably must keep up to remain successful. Transformational Leadership is defined by Nevarez, Wood and Penrose (2013) as “a two-phase process. First, followers are guided and encouraged to meet expectations as identified by formal performance agreements (transactional). Second, because of the leader’s ability to increase the motivation, morality, and shared meaning of institutional affiliates, achievement beyond expectation is reached, or the (transformational) process.

This process is distinguished as the act of empowering people to fulfill their contractual obligations, meet the needs of the organization, and go above and beyond the call of duty for betterment of the institution. Transformational leaders are primarily driven by an astute awareness of individual and group psychology. Further, these leaders guide institutional affiliates with a sense of care and support and are truly committed to the self-actualization of institutional affiliates in order to accomplish the institutional mission; serving the community, teaching and learning, student success, and lifelong learning” (pg. 115). In addition, leadership that uses the principles as defined in transformational leadership theory is one that is devoted, lifelong, always growing and self-actualizing, much like the institution itself. One could arguably describe transformational leadership as “a means to meet an end”. By utilizing this leadership style, the evaluation of a community college mission statement, remains honest, accurate, & goal driven.

Simple, goal oriented, and inspiring mission statements appeal to potential students, but also give them a realistic ideology that helps drive their aspirations in the classroom and hopefully beyond graduation. Misassumptions of what a community college degree can get you and where it may take you are on the rise as well. One argument in particular that is compelling is made by Eddy (2014), “when speaking about the general attitudes that can be affiliated with what a community college is and what its mission statement promotes it to be. Equally as important as leadership tactics, patience, and experience “community college leaders, scholars, and policy makers need to ask questions differently, but they also emphasize the need to offer critique of often spouted and accepted claims.”

For example, the current rhetoric of college completion emphasizes the need for a degree, however the "the Bureau of Labor Statistics says that 31 percent of Americans hold a bachelor's degree even though only 14 percent of jobs require one. Thus, a valuable perspective

presented is the need to push back against assumptions of what the community college is or should be (Eddy, 2014, as cited by Cohen & Kishner, 2014, p. 443). When crafting mission statements, it is important to understand how utilizing a conceptual framework can be useful. In addition, other factors of importance are geographic location of the college itself and meeting accrediting, legislative, & local government regulations.

Gary Henrickson who was the dean of academic affairs at the Fergus Falls campus of Minnesota State Community and Technical College in 2010. He has written that neglecting a mission statement can be detrimental to a college's perceptions and success as well. He was formerly a senior program officer at the National Endowment for the Humanities. He has taught American literature in Yemen, Syria, Poland, Russia, Taiwan, and North Dakota. Henrickson wrote about the importance of mission statements drawn from his experience at an international programming conference.

According to Henrickson, the standard for mission statements focused on updating or re-creating them to remain focused on the goals of not only the college, but the outside world as well. He wrote while attending a pre-conference session at the conference on globalization, "the few other pre-conference goers and I were informed that to be successful in globalizing our colleges, we would need to bring the entire campus on board, and that the most effective way to do so was to change our mission statement. I felt a shudder go through the pre-conference group. Was that really necessary, someone quavered? The response was unequivocal: you must change your mission statement" (Henrickson, 2010).

Reviewing this as executives of complex institutions, questions of concern will arise in regards to changing a mission statement. According to Ayers (2015), "as key organizational documents, mission statements are not produced flippantly by community college leaders

(Vaughan, 1997). Even minor alterations to a mission statement must garner board approval, abide within legislated institutional purposes, and conform to accreditation standards.

Community college mission statements, in other words, are subject to constraints of the institutional environment. These constraints are complex, contradictory, evolving, and difficult to manage.

Discourse theorists contend that choices made in the production of a text such as a mission statement are conditioned by fields of power (Fairclough, 2015; Halliday & Webster, 2009). If this is true, mission statements can be taken as evidence of how organizations negotiate societal power dynamics and—central to this analysis—competing institutional logics (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). There are numerous factors that must be given due consideration in order to change or implement a mission statement. It is not meant to be a process that is easy, nor taken lightly. As representation of the institutions goals of expected success, it can easily become unclear if mission statements are meeting their true directive or if they are becoming misleading to the point of falsehoods.

Community colleges are subject to their immediate institutional environment. However, what they are projecting in their mission statements can sometimes be construed as misleading to the point of being confusing. Wilson, Meyer & McNeal (2012) state that “an institution’s mission statement may provide insight into whether or not it truly values diversity (Meacham and Barrett 2003). According to Meacham and Barrett (2003), “An institution’s mission statement represents a consensus on campus-wide values, expectations for student learning and development, and a statement of campus priorities for many years ahead” (p. 6). This raises fundamental issues that should always be kept in mind by college leadership and executives.

For instance, can an institution claim it values diversity if there is no mention of diversity in its official statement of values, expectations, and priorities? How then do college and university official statements on mission or diversity communicate the institution's commitment to diversity? More specifically, what do mission or diversity statements actually say about the level of commitment to diversity at the institution?" (pg. 126). It is also important to consider financial complexities that students are deciding/not deciding to take on in terms of their commitments and obligation to higher education.

Community college students are less likely to borrow than other students, and those who do borrow accumulate lower amounts of debt on average. Although this is primarily a result of the lower prices they face, it is also possible that students in this sector choose to work more instead of borrowing more. Community college students are more likely to work full time and be enrolled part time, which makes it difficult for them to complete their studies and earn credentials in a timely fashion (Ma & Baum, 2016). However, reduced financial opportunities to fund schooling, coupled with increasing competition among other schools has put enormous pressure on these institutions.

Woven into all of these issue is the threat of outdated programs & services that lack relevance or connection to post graduation goals. In review, financial considerations, geographic location of the college, and meeting accrediting, legislative, & local government regulations all ties back to the original question: why go here? After looking at the research that was collected and analyzed by Wilson, Meyer & McNeal (2012), "data was taken across institutional web sites to examine the mission statements of 80 higher education institutions for messages about diversity. Of the 80 institutions, 59 (75%) referenced diversity in their mission statements; but only 19% defined diversity in racial or ethnic terms. In addition to mission statements, 52 (or

65%) of the 80 institutions had a separate diversity statement; but only 18 of these were an official institutional statement. These treatments of diversity are interesting in light of the changing demographics of the incoming college student population and the recognized need for greater cultural development or awareness on campuses. If mission & diversity statements reflect the priorities of the institution, 35% of the institutions in sample said nothing about diversity.”

Building upon the concerns of accurate diversity portrayal in community college mission statements, Abelman & Dalessandro (2008) immediately show the influences of the past and the future on mission statement reformation and its relevance to a globalist world. They suggest that “community colleges must think of reform in terms of broad institutional policy that changes the fundamental way a college operates, rather than pursuing discrete, small-scale programmatic changes. Without a strategic mission,” notes Ayers (2002b, p. 12), “there exists the possibility that community colleges may continue to focus their resources on programs and services that have outlived their relevance.” In fact, the most successful community colleges are “those that have developed a well-defined mission and a shared vision of the future” (Boggs, 1995, p. 71). “A clear mission,” notes Morphew and Hartley (2002, p. 457), “helps distinguish between activities that conform to institutional imperatives and those that do not. A shared sense of purpose has the capacity to inspire and motivate those within an institution and to communicate to external constituents.”

Conclusion

Community college mission statements vary in size, origin, ideology and character. They can sometimes be misleading to the bigger picture of what they offer people versus what may actually happen because of a complex, interconnected world. Their ultimate goal is to inform, inspire, and potentially shape positive student trajectories in both an academic and post graduation world. By combining transformational leadership principles with data driven research, future mission statements will represent the individuality of a unique organization while respecting the complexities of competing in a globalist world. Misinterpretations will become less and less as time passes and the transformation of the process completes and continues to reset.

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