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College Mission Statements

Committees and commissions are at work everywhere on declarations of goals and statements of purpose for colleges and universities. Campus groups with different names are pondering the same questions: What is our mission? Who are our clients? Where are we headed? We are on the verge of mission madness. Mission statements are not so much valueless as overvalued. We make too much of the process and the product. Why?

First, governing boards are keen on mission statements. As the traditional guardians of the college's mission, trustees naturally worry about the state of the statement. Most board members can recite the college's mission for the next 5 years. Unfortunately, only a handful can suggest whether the goals set 5 years earlier have now been achieved. No matter; the college has an up-to-date mission statement.

Second, presidents are keen on mission statements. No one accepts a presidency to maintain the status quo. Presidents intend to be leaders, change agents. And what better way to initiate change than to reexamine the college's mission. Thus, almost as a ritualistic sequel to investiture, the new president convenes a committee to rethink the university's future.

Third, regional accrediting associations are keen on mission statements. To gain or maintain accreditation, a college needs a mission statement. No statement means no accreditation, and no accreditation means no future.

Of course the statements remain sufficiently global and rhetorical to accommodate the widest range of current and conceivable activities. No matter; accreditors have a yardstick to assess the college.

Trustees, presidents, and accreditors are likely to exaggerate the importance of mission statements; an enrollment problem guarantees excessive concern. As enrollments start to dwindle, an institutional identity crisis ensues. The campus community frets until suddenly everyone recognizes the obvious: we need a new mission statement. Inevitably, the notion of a new, clearer, and singular statement gathers momentum and assumes a quality larger than life, almost as if its very appearance will solve all problems. When the document finally returns from the printer, everyone feels greatly relieved. A mission in print is a mission in fact. The crisis has passed.

In *Leadership and Ambiguity*, Michael Cohen and James March offer an alternative to the mission statement. They propose that universities infer goals from actions. Actions can inform goals as easily as goals can inform action. In other words, we might ask what deeds (or outcomes) suggest about words and what actions (or decisions) suggest about aspirations.

No campus constituency should worry a great deal about an ordinary mission statement. Nor should a college feel compelled, even as the student market weakens, to fabricate significant differences in mission where none exist. Secret formulas and special ingredients should be left to the manufacturers of aspirin and soap powders.

Distinctiveness is a quality far more important than uniqueness, and a college need not be different to be distinctive, only better. Distinctiveness derives more from execution than from mission, more from what a college does and less from what it purports to be.

In the final analysis, the mission will always be, in some sense, survival. Missions will be adapted to the market to ensure the organization's continuation. But I am less troubled by responsiveness to the marketplace than by the linguistic and philosophical gymnastics undertaken to merge the "new thrust" with the old mission.

The best way to survive, even flourish, may be to worry a little less about mission statements and a little more about actions. Of course the two are related, but we have overworked the former, perhaps because it is not as easy to attend to the latter.—RICHARD CHAIT, *Institute for Educational Management, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138*

Adapted from the article "Mission Madness Strikes Our Colleges," which appeared in the 16 July 1979 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.