



5-1-2006

## Mission Statements: A Thematic Analysis of Rhetoric Across International Type

Christopher C. Morpew  
*University of Georgia*

Matthew Hartley  
*University of Pennsylvania, hartley@gse.upenn.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://repository.upenn.edu/gse\\_pubs](https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Morpew, C. C., & Hartley, M. (2006). Mission Statements: A Thematic Analysis of Rhetoric Across International Type. Retrieved from [https://repository.upenn.edu/gse\\_pubs/13](https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/13)

Copyright The Ohio State University. Reprint from Journal of Higher Education, Volume 77, Issue 3, May/June 2006, pages 456-471. This material is posted here with permission of Ohio State University Press. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv or website without the copyright holder's written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [https://repository.upenn.edu/gse\\_pubs/13](https://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/13)  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

## Mission Statements: A Thematic Analysis of Rhetoric Across International Type

### Disciplines

Education

### Comments

Copyright The Ohio State University. Reprint from Journal of Higher Education, Volume 77, Issue 3, May/June 2006, pages 456-471. This material is posted here with permission of Ohio State University Press. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv or website without the copyright holder's written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

JE Christopher C. Morpew  
Matthew Hartley

---

## Mission Statements: A Thematic Analysis of Rhetoric Across Institutional Type

*They're Everywhere! They're Everywhere!*

Mission statements are ubiquitous in higher education. Accreditation agencies demand them, strategic planning is predicated on their formulation, and virtually every college and university has one available for review. Moreover, higher education institutions are constantly revisiting and revising their mission statements: as recently as the mid-1990s, the Association of American Colleges (1994), found that fully 80% of all colleges and universities were making major revisions in their mission statements, goals, curricula, and general education courses. It would seem that not having a mission statement begs the very legitimacy of a college or university. Of course, the crafting (and re-crafting) of such documents consumes considerable institutional resources, particularly that most precious resource: time. So, why bother? Some would argue that articulating a shared purpose is a requisite first step on the road to organizational success. Others are far less sanguine about such efforts and view them as rhetorical pyrotechnics—pretty to look at perhaps, but of little structural consequence. The purpose of this study is to begin an exploration of these hypotheses by first attempting to understand what institutions actually say in their missions and by exploring the relationship between these rhetorical elements and institutional type.

*Christopher C. Morpew is Associate Professor at the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia. Matthew Hartley is Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.*

*The Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (May/June 2006)  
Copyright © 2006 by The Ohio State University

*Mission Statements: Half-Full or Half-Empty?*

A furor over mission statements swept over corporate America nearly three decades ago (Drucker, 1973; Peters and Waterman, 1982). As is the case with other management trends, such ideas inevitably – and belatedly – found their way into the academy (Birnbaum, 2000). Keller (1983), for example, in his seminal book on strategic planning, argues that mission statements are a necessary part of an institution's strategic planning process. Others point to the value of mission statements in expressing a "vision" for the institution's future (Lenning & Micek, 1976; Schwerin, 1980; Caruthers & Lott, 1981; Martin, 1985; Nanus, 1992). Much of the early research on the utility of mission statements is limited because, as Davies (1986) notes, it fails to recognize "the unexamined presuppositions upon which they are grounded" (p. 85). In short, the researchers take as gospel the notion that such statements are, to quote Martha Stewart, "a good thing" and that their assertions are clothed with threadbare anecdotal evidence.

More recent research on postsecondary mission statements has produced a more nuanced understanding of the role that ideology and purpose play in organizational life. This literature suggests that the process of articulating an institution's mission has two potential benefits. First, it is instructional. A clear mission helps organizational members distinguish between activities that conform to institutional imperatives and those that do not. Second, a shared sense of purpose has the capacity to inspire and motivate those within an institution and to communicate its characteristics, values, and history to key external constituents (Drucker, 1973; Keller, 1983; Parekh, 1977; Smith, 1979; Hartley, 2002). Researchers have also described the experiences of (typically small) institutions whose discussions about institutional priorities and future direction, codified in mission statements, have guided decision making around key issues such as program creation or termination. The mission statement therefore is rightly understood as an artifact of a broader institutional discussion about its purpose.

Of course, other practitioners and scholars see the mission statement glass as half-empty. They view mission statements as a collection of stock phrases that are either excessively vague or unrealistically aspirational or both. From this perspective, mission statements ultimately fail to follow through on or convey any noteworthy sense of an institution's current identity (Davies, 1986; Chait, 1979; Delucchi, 1997). A majority of those who have conducted what little empirical analysis exists of college and university mission statements reside squarely in this camp. They argue that mission statements, rather than providing focus to colleges and universities, offer precisely the opposite. Instead of

direction and constraint, college and university mission statements provide a means to an uncertain end. More specifically, the language in mission statements is intended to evoke an all-purpose purpose. Or, as Gordon Davies (1986) puts it, mission statements tend to demonstrate “The importance of being general.” In other words, rather than surfacing values that might guide everyday decision making, colleges and universities fashion mission statements that maximize institutional flexibility. They communicate that nothing is beyond the reach of the organization in question. In doing so, they ignore institutional limitations and sidestep any effort at prioritizing current activities or future initiatives.

Even so, sociologists that use institutional theory to explain organizational behavior (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Meyer, Deal and Scott, 1981) would argue that an “all-purpose” mission statement nevertheless fulfills an important function for a college or university. From this point of view, the utility and general nature of mission statements go hand in hand. Mission statements are normative—they exist because they are expected to exist, much the same way that students expect colleges and universities to award credit in the form of hours and persons inside and outside higher education expect college campuses to include “quads,” well-landscaped gardens, and football stadiums. Institutional theorists point to organizational artifacts like mission statements and knowingly describe them as ritualistic or mythological. From this point of view, mission statements are certainly important but not for the direction they provide. Rather, they serve a legitimating function. Mission statements are valuable because they – and the elements within them – show that the organization in question understands the “rules of the game.” And, one of the rules of the higher education game is that you have to have a mission statement if you want to be considered a legitimate college or university by, among others, accrediting agencies and board members.

This theoretical proposition assumes that there are some processes and structures that organizations must incorporate because they are normatively prescribed. This is one of the primary points of institutional theory, which argues that an organization such as a university succeeds when everyone inside and outside the organization agrees that it is a university (Meyer & Scott, 1980; Meyer & Rowan, 1977)! According to this theory, colleges and universities would be wise to develop mission statements so that those within the organization (students, faculty) and outside (accreditors, Regents, prospective students) see that such a statement exists, in proper form and verbiage. Moreover, the mission statement developed should incorporate the elements commonly understood to form the basis for a higher education mission (e.g., search for knowledge, teaching, service to the community).

Circumstantial evidence supporting this hypothesis is not hard to find. College and university mission statements are steeped in symbolism and many of their pronouncements cannot be objectively measured. For example, Chait (1979) examined dozens of mission statements and concluded that they all looked the same in part because of a tendency to include “vague and vapid goals.” The advantage in including this kind of verbiage in mission statements is that it is impossible to prove that the institution is failing to progress towards its goals. Further, they are difficult to contest. After all, Chait asked, “Who cannot rally around ‘the pursuit of excellence’ or ‘the discovery and transmission of knowledge?’” (p. 36). Similarly, mission statements provide an opportunity for schools to lay claim to important terrain. For example, Delucchi (1997) found that the mission statements of schools dominated by enrollment in professional fields extolled their institutions’ “liberal arts focus.” Although institutional theorists would concede that mission statements may inform some universities’ strategic plans, they would argue that the primary purpose is to serve normative rather than utilitarian purposes.<sup>1</sup>

### *Our study*

Whether mission statements are a) strategic expressions of institutional distinctiveness; or b) organizational window dressings that are normative necessities is, we believe, an important question that can be answered only with empirical data. Our research study is a first step on the road to answering this larger question. Our study examines hundreds of mission statements in an attempt to identify patterns of difference within these statements. Our goal is analyze these patterns and to make judgments regarding whether these patterns are consistent with a) recognized differences among institutional types (e.g., Carnegie classifications, control, etc.); or b) the aforementioned institutional explanations about why mission statements are so ever-present within higher education.

The findings of this study have immensely practical implications. First, those charged with constructing or refining mission statements will benefit from a greater understanding of the purpose of these documents. We believe that there is genuine disagreement among many in higher education currently regarding the appropriate use and purpose of mission statements. Irrespective of which camp is correct, given the amount of time and resources colleges and universities spend in planning and constructing mission statements for audiences like accreditors and prospective students, mission statements are important documents.

If it can be shown that mission statements reflect the institutional diversity of American higher education then the proponents of mission statements may be right—mission statements may be a way of establishing institutional uniqueness and therefore are a potentially useful tool in institutional decision-making. If, however, the same analysis reveals that these formal documents do not speak to recognized institutional differences, it would seem more likely that mission statements exist for other (either aspirational or normative) purposes. In either case, empirical analysis is likely to produce results useful for those inside and outside higher education. From a practical perspective, a better understanding of the use(s) of these documents would allow those involved in their construction to decide what information to include or not include and what kinds of organizational actors should be involved in the construction process.

### *Study Methods and Rationale*

Though mission statements are ubiquitous in higher education, there is precious little empirical research on the content of these statements. One well-known empirical study of 114 mission statements conducted over a decade ago merely concluded that these statements were “amazingly vague, vapid, evasive, or rhetorical, lacking specificity or clear purpose...full of honorable verbiage signifying nothing” (Newsom and Hayes, 1991, p. 29). No researcher has sought to determine whether college and university mission statements are, in fact, accurate depictions of organizational reality or whether the differences among mission statements are the products of recognized differences or aspirations. Our goal, then, is to construct a more systematic and comprehensive exploration of mission statements in an attempt to contribute to the beginnings of an empirical literature on mission statements in higher education.

We randomly selected more than 300 mission statements from a representative sample of U.S. four-year colleges and universities. Each statement was obtained via the World Wide Web and printed for analysis. The goal of the study was to determine whether the mission statements in this representative group of institutions were as varied as the institutions themselves. The research question guiding this study was:

- *How do college and university mission statements differ in content, and are any differences reflective of recognized differences between institutional types?*

After the institutions were randomly chosen from a list of 1,106 four-year institutions listed in the 2000 Carnegie Classification list,<sup>2</sup> each col-

lege and university mission statement was identified and printed out by a graduate student.<sup>3</sup> The study's co-authors initially divided the statements into two groups and coded them separately. In an effort to ensure reliability, the co-authors discussed and renamed the elements identified in the mission statements and separately coded several of the same institutional mission statements. In the latter case, an examination of the separately coded mission statements showed that each of the authors coded the sample mission statements similarly. We coded each mission statement in its entirety. In the end, we identified 118 distinct elements that appeared in the mission statements. Beyond our analysis of each entire mission statement, we also gave unique codes to those elements appearing in the first 2–3 sentences of each mission. We paid special attention to these elements because of our assumption that this placement at the “top” of the mission statement reflected an organizational emphasis on these particular elements.

Using the World Wide Web had at least two advantages. First, because the data were available electronically, it could be analyzed and categorized more easily. Second, this method allowed us to quickly and easily gather a representative sample of colleges and universities. We selected institutions across the range of four-year Carnegie classifications and collected statements from both publics and privates within each group. We used document analysis techniques to identify elements that were embedded in these mission statements (Merriam, 1998). We use the term “element” rather than the more often used “theme,” because we want to convey two things. First, our analysis of these mission statements sometimes focused on significant single words, as well as phrases. Second, our goal in this analysis was to identify the integral pieces of each mission statement in such a way so that, if necessary, each statement could be reconstructed using only the pieces (or “elements”) that we identified. An apt analogy would be a jigsaw puzzle where the pieces of the puzzle are of different shapes and sizes and these specific pieces (or elements) are required to reconstruct the puzzle. This analysis of mission statements by Carnegie Classification ultimately allowed a determination of whether these institutions are similar or dissimilar in the type of students they serve, the kinds of degree programs they offer, or their historical mission. The method is similar to one employed in a smaller study of liberal arts college mission statements (Delucchi, 1997).

While we had no *a priori* standards in place that would help us designate when a particular argument concerning the usefulness of mission statements was carried, we did discuss what we might find and how those findings might be related to the conceptual and empirical literature on mission statements prior to our analysis of these documents. In short, we arrived at following quasi-hypotheses.



1. Consistent use of elements within Carnegie Classification would indicate that mission statements express recognized organizational differences.
2. Consistent use of elements across Carnegie Classifications would indicate that mission statements discount recognized organizational differences.
3. Consistent use of elements by institutional control (public or private) would indicate that mission statements are used to communicate with different constituent groups.
4. Frequent use of normative or aspirational elements would be evidence that mission statements are used as legitimating tools.

Finally, to arrive at a more valid analysis of the mission statements, we conducted our analysis using only those documents formally labeled as "mission statements." This reduced our larger sample of institutional documents to 299.

### *Findings*

Our analysis of mission statement elements revealed several findings worthy of discussion. These are identified below in brief with a lengthy discussion appearing later.

1. Institutional control (public vs. private) is more important in predicting mission statement elements than is Carnegie Classification.
2. A few elements (e.g. the notion that the institution is committed to diversity or to providing a liberal arts education) appear frequently across institutional types and control groups.
3. There is a prevalence of elements related specifically to "service" either by the institution or through the inculcation of civic values in students, although the definition of "service" differs somewhat between public and private institutions.

As a premise to our discussion of common elements, it is important to note that there was, among the mission statements we reviewed, a surprising variety. As stated earlier, we ultimately identified 118 distinct elements across all statements. Some institutions used very few elements and some used many. No two institutions had precisely the same configuration of elements. Nevertheless, an examination of the most common elements by institutional control and by Carnegie Classification (Tables 1–5) reveals some intriguing patterns.

TABLE 1

Three most common elements among mission statements of Baccalaureate Institutions. N=97.

	Baccalaureate—General		Baccalaureate—Liberal Arts	
	Public (26 of 50)*	Private (16 of 271)	Public (20 of 25)	Private (35 of 98)
#1	Serves local area (18)	Religious affiliation (14)	Serves local area (11)	Liberal arts (27)
#2	Commitment to diversity (15)	Liberal arts (13)	Commitment to diversity (11)	Student development (25)
#3	Liberal arts (14)	Prepare for world (10) Civic duty/service (10)	Liberal arts (11)	Commitment to diversity (21)

\*Numbers in parentheses describe our sample size and total number of institutions within group. For example, we examined mission statements for 26 of the 50 Public Baccalaureate—General Institutions.

TABLE 2

Three most common elements among mission statements of Master's Institutions. N=102.

	Master's I		Master's II	
	Public (29 of 251)*	Private (28 of 46)	Public (17 of 23)	Private (28 of 83)
#1	Serves local area (23)	Religious affiliation (15)	Liberal arts (12)	Religious affiliation (23)
#2	Teaching centered (20)	Liberal arts (15)	Prepare for world (12)	Liberal arts (16)
#3	Access (19)	A sense of community (13)	Commitment to diversity (10)	Values (10)

\*Numbers in parentheses describe our sample size and total number of institutions within group. For example, we examined mission statements for 29 of the 251 Public Master's I Institutions.

TABLE 3

Three most common elements among mission statements of Doctoral/Research Institutions. N=100.

	Doctoral/Research Intensive		Doctoral/Research Extensive	
	Public (42 of 64)*	Private (21 of 44)	Public (24 of 102)	Private (13 of 49)
#1	Civic duty/service (33)	Student development (12)	Research (19)	Research (10)
#2	Serves local area (33)	Religious affiliation (8)	Serves local area (17)	Civic duty/service (9)
#3	Research (28)	Service (8)	Commitment to diversity (12)	Leadership (7)

\*Numbers in parentheses describe our sample size and total number of institutions within group. For example, we examined mission statements for 42 of the 64 Public Doctoral/Research Intensive Institutions.

To begin our analysis, we identified the three most frequently cited elements within each Carnegie Classification.<sup>4</sup> The potential existed for us to identify up to 18 frequently used elements (that is, if the three top elements for each of the six Carnegie classifications had all been different). Instead, we found some striking commonalities across the groups. Among public baccalaureate colleges, master's universities and doctoral universities, we found only eight common elements. The notion of serving the local area is an element common to five of the six classifications and is the top element for public Baccalaureate institutions (general and liberal arts) and Master's I institutions. "Commitment to diversity" is also an oft-used element and is found across 4 of the 6 public institutional types.

The prevalence of certain elements is also striking among private colleges and universities with 10 shared elements among a possible 19. (Note: Because of a tie score, private, Baccalaureate-General institutions have four elements instead of three.) Like their public counterparts, private institutions had elements that were common across Carnegie Classifications. "Liberal arts," for example, appears for four of the six institutional types, as did an affiliation (historical or current) with a religious denomination.

These three tables also illustrate the relative popularity of the liberal arts, diversity, and service elements across both institutional type and control group. For example, if viewed by the six Carnegie Classifications and by institutional control, there are 12 distinct groups of colleges and universities. The diversity element appears in 5 of 12 groups; the liberal arts element in seven; and the civic duty/service (student level) or serves local area (institutional level) element appears in eight.

As was noted in the methods section, our analysis also identified those elements that appeared in the first 2–3 sentences. We reasoned that these elements had greater institutional emphasis. Here again we found commonalities. For example, Tables 4 and 5 below indicate that both public and private universities call attention to the importance of instilling civic duty in their students, as well as the importance of a broad, liberal arts education. However, the elements that public and private institutions choose to emphasize differ significantly. Public universities heavily emphasize service—both as institutions within a region and through instilling in students a sense of civic duty. Several other emphasized elements are largely descriptive in nature and rather pedestrian—"we're a public institution and we have undergraduate and graduate programs." Private universities, by contrast, focus more on the formative aspects of education—promoting "student development" and helping prepare students for the "real world" through programs that are academically rigorous.

TABLE 4

Most common elements in first 2–3 sentences. Public colleges and universities. N=158. Institutional types are not equally represented.

Element	# of Times appearing in first 2–3 sentences
Serves local area	43
Four year/undergraduate	32
Public	31
Liberal arts	31
Civic duty/service	28
Teaching centered	26
Graduate	26
Prepare for world	26

TABLE 5

Most common elements in first 2–3 sentences. Private colleges and universities. N=141. Institutional types are not equally represented.

Element	# of Times appearing in first 2–3 sentences
Liberal arts	65
Civic duty/service	39
Diversity	34
Student development	26
Prepare for world	20
Rigorous academically	19

A textual analysis of the various ways that elements are articulated suggests some interesting disparities between public and private institutions. An example is the language around “civic duty” and “service.” There is a clear tendency for public institutions to describe this work as preparing “citizens” or “promoting civic engagement.” The implication is clearly that graduates will stay in-state, vote, and pay taxes or that the institution contributes in other ways to the local or state economy. The rhetoric around service for private institutions was substantially different. Below are excerpts from the mission statements of three private colleges whose goals are to encourage students to

- “...engage in the intellectual and social challenges of their times.”
- “Fulfill the edict of Horace Mann who said: ‘be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.’”

- "... enable men and women of diverse backgrounds to engage and transform the world."

Obviously there is a substantial difference in promoting "civic duty" and preparing students to "transform the world!" We might briefly note the desire of the public group to link their work to serving the state (a principal patron) and of the latter to cast themselves as an elite training ground for the next generation of leaders (a theme we will return to later); however, our purpose here is simply to observe that the disparate emphases in a particular element. Suffice it to say that what "service" means in one context is clearly not what "service" means in another.

### *Discussion*

Taken together, what do these findings tell us about the utility of mission statements? Do they support the claim that mission statements provide focus and direction to institutions? Or, do they bear out the arguments of those who criticize mission statements for their formless generalities? Finally, do the data suggest that mission statements are primarily normative documents, designed to provide internal and external audiences with evidence of legitimacy? We do not propose to be able to fully answer these questions with this study. But, our exploration of the differences in mission statement rhetoric across institutional type is a necessary first step in any attempt to get at the value and utility of mission statements and suggests several hypotheses.

### *Signaling Constituents and Reflecting Distinctive Values*

First, as discussed earlier, there are discernable patterns of the elements in mission statements by institutional control. The discussion of tables one through three (above) vividly illustrates this point. Public colleges and universities construct their mission statements with combinations of elements more similar to one another than to their private peers of similar focus and institutional type. This finding invites several interpretations. First, given these patterns, one might find support for the arguments of the institutional theorists, who view mission statements as symbolic artifacts. From this perspective, the use of like elements (e.g. civic duty/service or a commitment to diversity) by unlike – but similarly funded – institutions leads to the conclusions that mission statements are not used to provide direction or vision, but rather as icons to signal key external constituencies that the institution in question shares these groups' values and goals. Or, more simply, public colleges include

mention of public service because, to ignore this element, might call into question their very “publicness.”

Alternately, this first finding of common elements by institutional control may reflect substantial differences that are not captured by Carnegie Classification. From this viewpoint, the finding that public colleges’ and universities’ mission statements contain elements different from those of their private brethren is explained by a flipping of the cause and effect relationship that we (and others) assume. That is, these mission statements may reflect, rather than drive, the realities of these institutions’ environments. These environments include the desires of their students and alumni (and taxpayers). As a result, it should come as no surprise that the mission statements of colleges attended and supported by persons who support progressive notions of multiculturalism and diversity include elements that speak to these values. Concurrently, the fact that public universities’ mission statements speak to the service that these institutions provide is a reflection of their environmental reality and, perhaps, their unwillingness to associate themselves with more progressive ideas that may or may not find support in state capitols. In short, institutions include in their mission what their benefactors value. It is, then, these differences in values – rather than Carnegie-like differences in degrees conferred – that are the self-defining characteristics for postsecondary institutions.

However, one can discern amidst the rhetorical flourishes a mindfulness of multiple external audiences and their associated desires/biases. For example, we observed that statements about offering a liberal arts education are in many instances immediately followed by phrases such as “...and professional training.” The message? Our education is formative *and* useful. (Something both prospective students and hard-nosed state legislators would appreciate.) Many Master’s institutions described their desire to provide students with greater analytic abilities, better communication skills, and to help them develop an appreciation for learning, and yet they never used the term “liberal arts.” This cannot be accidental. Either the authors actively avoided the term “liberal” for fear its implication would be misconstrued or there was a concern that the institution might be mistaken for a liberal arts college rather than a comprehensive university. The point is that if institutions are using these statements to legitimate themselves, they are doing far more than creating a symbolic document that they can point to—they are using these statements in an effort to communicate particular messages, likely to specific and multiple audiences.

There is also variability in how particular elements (the example used in the findings section was “civic duty/service”) are construed. Critics

have argued that mission statements use phrases that are interchangeable. Though much of the language is superficially similar (that is, the mission statements share certain elements) it is also the case that some institutions take great care to explicate these elements and they do so in decidedly different ways. Often this results in these elements having decidedly different “flavors” at different institutions. It also should be noted that though some language may appear generic to an outsider, it may well be charged with meaning within a particular academic community (Hartley, 2002). The mission statements of an urban HBCU that draws a majority of its students regionally and boasts an Afro-Centric curriculum and an innovative partnership with a public housing project next door and a highly-selective private university that draws its students nationally and has a well-recognized service-learning program may both indicate a desire to instill in their students a sense of “public service,” but what is meant by “service” within those two academic communities may be sharply divergent.

Taken together, our findings do not disconfirm the institutional theorists. However, they do suggest that the signaling is more complex than current theory suggests. The distinctive elements emphasized by public and private universities suggest that their use of mission statements speak to the distinct challenges faced by public and private colleges and universities. Each occupies different referential worlds. Public institutions are cognizant of their need to show their relevance to important external constituent groups, including taxpayers and legislators, as they compete for public funding with groups whose service to the local region is much more conspicuous. Prisons and social service agencies, for example, compete for funding at the state level with colleges and universities and do not share the burden of proving their relevance to the state. Unlike these other agencies, it is often easy for citizens who are not attending college or do not have dependents enrolled at public universities to forget or lose sight of the economic development or social service role that public higher education institutions play. Mission statements, it would seem, have important legitimizing roles, both normatively and politically.

#### *What Wasn't Evident: Aspiration*

The statements we analyzed, in general, did not aggrandize their institutions. We had expected to see greater usage of elements whose purpose was to convey prestige or status on the college or university in question. Instead, aspirational elements (e.g. pronouncements about being or becoming the “best”) were comparatively rare. Therefore, it would seem that arguments that such statements are primarily intended for legitimating purposes are overblown.

We did identify certain aspirational elements among the 118 coded. Some mission statements, for example, extolled the specific institution's ranking within the last *US News* report. Others spoke of prizewinning faculty members. Such elements are particularly easy to spot and label as purely aspirational. However, they are not operationally substantive. They provide no direction for strategic planning nor do they help an institution focus its mission or decide which programs to add or terminate. Instead, they are symbols used to bolster the status of the institution in question. However, when aggregated, the mission statements displayed relatively few of these elements. This is important, because critics of mission statements would have predicted that our analysis would reveal the popularity of such elements.

This lack of evident aspiration in the mission statements was surprising, but may be related to our earlier discussion of the ways regarding the utility with which these institutions fashioned their mission statements. In total, these findings suggest that mission statements may legitimately be viewed as statements for communication with external audiences that have specific expectations of colleges and universities. That is, colleges and universities may be using mission statements not for planning or cultural purposes, but as means of telling important stakeholders outside the institution that "we understand what you want and we're going to deliver it to you." This would be consistent with a lack of aspirational language that these kinds of audiences would either eschew as inappropriate (and inconsistent with the realities of the institution) or unimportant. From this perspective, such use of mission statements represents a maturation on the part of colleges and universities who are getting better at recognizing their patrons and prospective consumers and focusing their attention on what these folks want.

Finally, our study of the elements that make up college and university mission statements suggests that our thinking may need to be updated. Simple assumptions about mission statements (e.g., they are meaningless, self-aggrandizing documents; they are essential to the planning process, etc.) may need to be rethought. While there is evidence that mission statements are used to signal and symbolize, it seems more likely that the subject of college and university mission statements is more complex and that institutions are using these documents to communicate their utility and willingness to serve in terms that are both normative and politically apt.

### *Future Research*

Although this initial analysis reveals some intriguing patterns, it may also be useful to examine the data using other criteria than Carnegie



classification and control. For example, common elements may be revealed among institutions such as urban colleges and universities, women's colleges, HBCUs, or Catholic institutions. There may be important regional differences. It may even be possible to identify institutions that have substantially similar clusters of elements. Revealing such commonalities of purpose could potentially provide an alternative means of categorizing institutions along the dimension of institutional ideology. However, thus far we have examined only the surface level of institutional purpose. We do not know to what degree various elements in the statements are expressed programmatically or operationally. Our analysis provides only an overview of how various institutions are representing themselves. We cannot extrapolate behaviors from espoused values. Of course, there are credible reasons to believe that institutions are not engaged in wholesale deception. To the extent that such statements are viewed by multiple constituencies—internal and external—those drafting statements of purpose would be unlikely to submit elements that others find patently offensive. Targeted site visits may be the best means of confirming to what degree these statements are congruent with institutional behavior and exploring the disparate ways that academic communities define key values.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup>More importantly, they would argue that those strategic plans are more important for their symbolic and normative purposes than for any structural utility.

<sup>2</sup>We selected institutions from the following six categories: Doctoral Universities—Extensive; Doctoral Universities—Intensive; Masters Colleges and Universities I and II; Baccalaureate Colleges—Liberal Arts; Baccalaureate Colleges—General.

<sup>3</sup>In some cases, “vision statements” or other such documents were the only documents found on the institution’s website. These were not used for this study.

<sup>4</sup>Our initial decision to list the three most frequently cited elements was somewhat arbitrary, though subsequent analysis revealed that the frequency of elements cited decreased rather precipitously after the top three.

### *References*

- American Association of Colleges. (1994). *Strong Foundations: Twelve Principles for Effective General Education Programs*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges.
- Berdahl, R.O. (1985). Strategy and government: U.S. state systems and institutional role and mission. *International Journal of Institutional Management in Higher Education*, 9 (November), 301–307.
- Birnbaum, R. (2000). *Management Fads in Higher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Carruthers, J.K. & Lott, G.B. (1981). *Mission review: Foundation for strategic planning*. Boulder, Colorado: National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

- Chait, R. (1979). Mission madness strikes our colleges. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 18, 36.
- Davies, G. K. (1986). The importance of being general: Philosophy, politics and institutional mission statements. In J. C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*. New York: Agathon Press.
- Delucchi, M. (1997). "Liberal arts" colleges and the myth of uniqueness. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68(4), 414–426.
- DiMaggio, P. J. & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(April), 147–160.
- Drucker, P. (1973). *Management: Tasks, responsibilities, practices*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Hartley, M. (2002). *A call to purpose: Mission-centered change at three liberal arts colleges*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Keller, G. (1983). *Academic strategy: The management revolution in american higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lang, D.W. & Lopers-Sweetman, A.R. (1991). The role of statements of institutional purpose. *Research in Higher Education*, 32.
- Lenning, O.T. & Micek, S.S. (1976). Defining and communicating institutional mission/role/scope and priorities: The needs of different types of postsecondary institutions. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association, San Francisco.
- Martin, W. B. (1985). Mission: A statement of identity and direction. In Green, J. S. and A. Levine (Eds.), *Opportunity in adversity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- McKelvie, B. D. (1986). The university's statement of goals: An idea whose time has come. *Higher Education*, 15, 151–163.
- Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Meyer, J.W. & Scott, W.R. (1980). Institutional and technical sources of organizational structure: Explaining the structure of educational organizations. Stanford, California: Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Governance. No. 79–A9.
- Meyer, J.W. & Rowan, B.R. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(2), 340–363.
- Newsom, W.A. & Hayes, C.R. (1991). Are mission statements worthwhile? *Planning for Higher Education*, 19(Winter 1990–91).
- Peters, T. & Waterman R. (1982). *In search of excellence*. New York: Random House.
- Schwerin, U. (1980). Institutional mission in an era of retrenchment. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges, Phoenix.