



Faculty Forum

From the Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

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Our Mission Statement is Boring

This summer the Chancellor asked me to help develop a strategic plan for Educational Technology and to co-chair the strategic planning process for the university. I am to bring to this work a fresh and sensitive faculty perspective.

I started by looking at mission statements—ours and those of other universities. Talk about dull; they are worse than reading dissertations. They are timid, conventional, filled with educational jargon, and deserve to gather the dust that most of them do. Rather than state what their institutions are going to do for the world, they set about stating what they are already mandated to do by the state. I thought mission statements were supposed to be challenging. A mission statement should be a bold step forwards not a settling back onto a worn couch. You ought to at least sound like you are going to do something special even if you never intend to do anything new. At least that is what I think.

I may be in trouble already, but why go to the bother of writing a new strategic plan if you are just going to add a line or two about what you are already doing? So, at the end of this year, with your help, I intend to push for a strategic plan that has life in it, that thrusts us out in front of our peers, that declares that we are taking on big things and deserve watching, that makes us ask each other how well we are doing. Why not? If we have to have a strategic plan, why not have fun writing it together?

So here is my plan. I want to visit each department to hear what you would really like to be doing for our students, for your discipline, for our region, and for our world. We cannot make people believe that a strategic plan is theirs if they hear about it only after it has been adopted. So you can expect to see me in your department asking what you value, what you envision, and what you think Western's mission should be.

I want to begin with values. If you don't know where you stand, you're lost and any direction will do. I think a lot of businesses and organizations fail because they did not define or stick to their values. Enron had a great values statement, but the guys at the top thought they were just words on a page. What do we stand for? What are those things that make us feel that our work makes a difference and is worthwhile? Face it, for most of us becoming a professor was not an economic decision but one based on our values. If we are a values driven organization, then making decisions about whether to undertake new programs becomes easier. My wife's organization, Region A Partnership for Children, decides which projects they will undertake for children based on these core values: what they do must be research-based, strength-based, community-based, family-centered, inclusive, and of high quality. They reject any project that does not fit those values. Surely, we should be able to agree on the core values of our university. Vice Chancellor Vartabedian told me about one university that has its core values on the back of

everyone's business card. What should be on the back of our cards? Forget the clichés we march out when we are trying to impress. Be real. Take out your card right now and write your version of the university's values. When I come round, or when you see me next, give me your card.

Next comes our vision statement. It answers this question: What will our world look like when Western's work is completed generations from now? Vision statements are idealistic but respond to a deeply felt human need. Habitat for Humanity has a famous vision statement: "No more shacks." North Carolina's Smart Start has another well-recognized vision: "Every child will enter school healthy and ready to succeed." GE says, "We bring good things to life." Visions are intentionally idealistic. They require a generation or more to realize. They are the messages we put into the bottle or the time capsule. They focus our attention. They declare, "This is the part of the world we want to change." If all our efforts at Western are successful, how will our region and the people in it be changed?

Our vision should motivate us. It should be memorable and have a ring to it. It is usually a very short sentence or phrase, but it can be longer. Martin Luther King changed America with his vision that began, "I have a dream. . . ." Vision statements picture the future for us in images or metaphors that we can see in our mind's eye. They are the work of individuals not committees. Try it. Write yours down on the back of another card. I will collect your suggestions as we work on our strategic plan. Then let's pick one that soars for us all.

If the vision statement is idealistic, a mission statement should be pragmatic. It is what we are going to do to bring our vision into being. Our mission should describe in broad, measurable terms what we are committing ourselves to do. And it should always have a social value built in. Apple's first mission statement still drives that company, "We will build the most personal computer." We all remember Star Trek's, "To seek out new life; to boldly go where no one has gone before." What do we want to do about our vision? What challenges and opportunities do we face? What do we do well or even better than our competitors? And finally, what can we commit ourselves to do? Those are the key parts of a successful mission: opportunities, competence, and commitment.

Since each department developed a mission statement and strategic plan last semester, we should already have a start. But, do these statements really represent the faculty in the department? Are they innovative? Do they engage with the region or other departments? How committed is the department to these statements? If they are just words written by the department head or some committee without much participation, they won't mean much. If there was no commitment going in, there won't be much coming out. Perhaps it is time to look them over.

We will collect your departmental strategic plans and suggestions and then ask a lot of prodding questions. Then, working with the Chancellor, we hope to prepare a strategic plan that is succinct, that is memorable and distinctive, that challenges and unites us, that is innovative, that boldly declares what we are committed to, and that defines how we will measure our success. After that, watch out for us. We will have a roadmap for the future and know where we are going. It's in the cards.

Newton Smith, English (and Chair of the Faculty)

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching & Learning

Responses to "Our Mission Statement is Boring" by Newton Smith, 9/1/04

I just read your article in the Faculty Forum concerning Mission Statements. I once worked for an institution whose mission was printed on the back of my business card. You talk about a sense of community--everyone at that institution KNEW in a succinct way what we were about. In addition, we all felt a part of a vital community. We were all a small part of the greater good. Furthermore, each time we gave someone a card, the opportunity arose to reiterate and dialogue concerning the mission. I've always kept an old, stained and tattered version of that business card, just to remind me how powerful a simple mission statement can be. Rare is the mission statement that can fit on the back of a business card. Powerful is one that can. Thanks for encouraging our community to converse on this issue.

Brett Woods, Director, Annual and Special Gifts

Since an organization's mission sets the stage for its corporate culture, when writing the new statement, please do not forget to include the business administrative support side to it. In today's university setting, competition is fierce. Quality education and the accompanying services provided to students are distinct; however, one without the other does nothing to advance and "complete" our organization. Quality and expedient services are very important pieces to the student/faculty retention and attraction puzzle—e.g. administrative computing. . .our current mission only hints at such; thus there is no "cultural" emphasis placed on it. We know it should be emphasized, yet if we don't write it down for all the world to see, how much easier does it become to push it into the background? Without administrative computing services receiving priority attention and focus, the service/maintenance/business side of the equation grinds to a halt. . .resultantly bringing irate and dissatisfied students, faculty, and staff out of the woodwork.

Administrative computing is just the tip of the iceberg. Nonetheless, without our mission also giving adequate attention to the support side/infrastructure of the university, we will still be culturally challenged to achieve a balanced and "complete" organization.

Mike Stewart, Facilities Management

Our mission statement is staid but not unworthy--it's just hard to find. At least on our university Website. Perhaps Western could begin this (re)visionary quest by moving our existing mission and vision statements from the "Potpourri" category (see University Planning) and on to a more prominent and dignified location. Once (re)discovered, the statement seems to read pretty well. Together, the mission and aspiration statements declare a commitment to scholarship, service, and creative endeavor. There is an emphasis on regional contribution. Critical thinking, integrity, sensitivity to diversity, lifelong learning, and "commitment to stewardship of the natural and cultural environment" are all duly and appropriately highlighted. And more. I think we could go forth and examine the Websites of AAC&U, AAHE, AASCU, CIC, NASULGC, Rotary, Carnegie, Ford and Pew and then (re)evaluate our own guiding principles without embarrassment. That said, it is true that some (re)formatting is in order. And perhaps we could include a notion of interdisciplinary inquiry; maybe a nod to healthy lifestyles (somebody's got to be around to pay our

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Medicare). Tangentially but along these lines, Kent State's program of coherent visual identity is certainly worth a gander. And finally, if Chancellor Bardo is willing to risk a summons to the O'Reilly Factor, we could look at the Jesuit schools' humanistic ideal of social justice. But otherwise, perhaps we can use what we have as a solid and respectable foundation and not run around in circles this year (re)inventing the wheel.

Gary H. Jones, Business Computer Information Systems and Economics