



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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INSTITUTIONAL WOBBLE: AN AVOIDABLE CONDITION

Many colleges use mascots to create a sense of community and identity. Typically they encapsulate real or desired attributes, such as intensity or tenacity, for their athletic teams. If you were to select a symbol that captures the essence of your college (sans the athletic component), would you choose your current one? Do the qualities attributed to your athletic teams apply to the rest of your institution? What if we asked a detached third-party to choose our non-athletic mascot for us? After careful observation I'm afraid the mascot they would choose more often than not would be a Pushmi-Pullyu—the two-headed animal of *Dr. Doolittle* fame. How is that possible? To many people outside the college community, it appears by our actions that we are headed in different, sometimes opposing, directions—often at the same time. A new idea or incentive comes along, and we move off in that direction often at the expense of institutional self-interest. Then a different initiative appears, and we move off in that direction. It's no wonder that we are seen as having trouble making consistent progress in fulfilling our purpose when we continually change direction on what is most important to us or at least what is important enough to take action. With all these fits and starts it is easy to see why some might think a Pushmi-Pullyu is a good symbol for the college.

Let's look a little more closely at the influences that cause us to wobble. Sometimes we wobble because we're just not certain in which direction we should go. More frequently, however, we find ourselves pushed and pulled in various directions by external forces. Sometimes these take the forms of legislative mandate or accountability requirements, but mostly they are the result of the growth of grant-funded initiatives from philanthropic organizations intended to influence, if not change, the course of higher education. The resources, recognition, or rewards they offer for the college's participation are hard to resist—especially when the goals of those initiatives fall loosely within the general mission of participating colleges.

Whose Interests are Being Served?

When was the last time a foundation asked how it could help your college fulfill its mission? I suspect those offers are few and far between. Typically, grantors and benefactors have objectives they want to achieve, and they enlist the college to help them. While those intentions may be worthwhile or even noble, they do not always align closely with institutional purpose or culture. The danger in wholesale participation in these

programs—many of which have distinct but similar goals—is a reduction of focus or loss of intentionality in fulfilling the institution's purpose. Focus can shift from pursuing the college's own interests to pursuing the interests of the grantor or benefactor. Over time and through participation in a multitude of such initiatives, the college slowly loses a sense of its own destiny and, thus, wobbles with each new initiative.

This isn't to suggest that participating in externally driven initiatives is always problematic. There are certainly occasions when grantor or benefactor objectives and institutional purpose are tightly aligned. In these cases, there is a greater depth and degree of persistence of institutional engagement in the project. That's not a surprise, since the sense of institutional self-interest is more evident to the college community when achieving the project's objectives is seen as helping the institution fulfill its own mission. Dissonance occurs when the objectives of the special initiative directly or indirectly, purposefully or innocently, supersede the institution's sense of itself and its purpose. An institution that lacks a deep understanding of its purpose is especially vulnerable to a loss of identity and/or a sense of self-interest. When that happens, the objectives of the external initiative become a proxy for the fulfillment of institutional purpose.

Of Mission and Meaning

All colleges have mission statements. In most cases the words used have been carefully honed. Over time they have become abstract, noble, and overarching statements of broadly stated intentions. Corresponding with the enhanced eloquence of mission statements is a lack of understanding of what those statements mean in practical terms to guide the direction and efforts of the institution. In effect, anything that remotely smacks of student success or intellectual development can be rationalized as consistent with the institution's mission. Given that just about all external initiatives deal with these topics in one form or another, is it any wonder that little time is spent questioning whether participating in a new external initiative is in the college's best interest? If the external initiative is not critically evaluated and confirmed to be tightly and deeply aligned with the college's purpose, institutional enthusiasm and momentum wane over time. The result of this behavior is that a lot of initiatives are undertaken with gusto only to languish as institutions delve beyond the rhetoric to impact practice. Too often mediocrity is the product of such misalignments. Project initiatives are partially met, at best, and fulfillment of institutional purpose is only marginally advanced. Neither is a satisfactory outcome for the amount of hope, resources, and efforts invested by all parties.

What can be done to increase the levels of effectiveness for all concerned? The solution is surprisingly easy to comprehend and surprisingly hard to accomplish.

Enhanced Identity

The solution boils down to the resolution of one primary issue—a lack of deep and rich understanding of institutional purpose, which may sound like nonsense given the amount of time invested in crafting mission statements. However, institutional mission statements, regardless of how well articulated, are one dimensional with regard to institutional purpose. While we may have a general concept of the words used to articulate the mission, we may not have a clear and common understanding of how those words set institutional direction or guide practice. What is needed is a deep three-dimensional understanding of the college mission (i.e., a clear sense of meaning of the college's mission). Where does one begin to do that?

It starts with the alpha of institutional purpose—the college's mission statement. As the first step, the mission statement should be reviewed and reaffirmed or revised to establish a current point of reference for subsequent work. This does not need to be a protracted effort, but it is an essential one. Since the development of meaning for the mission statement is an iterative process, one should expect the mission statement to be refined over time to articulate the deeper understanding of institutional purpose developed during this process.

Formulating a mission statement is the easy part. Extending that image to two dimensions is the hard part. The second dimension is created through the formulation of a statement of mission fulfillment—the omega of institutional purpose. That is, a statement that defines or characterizes the fulfillment of the institution's mission in the context of its purpose, characteristics, and expectations. Huh? If we publish our intentions, isn't it obvious what fulfillment of those intentions looks like? Not so much. Fulfillment can mean a lot of things to a lot of people. What does it mean to the institution itself? If it's all that obvious, we should have no trouble writing it down. Try it! It's not a trivial exercise. While we are quite comfortable with an articulation of purpose that captures institutional intentions, very few—if any—colleges offer a statement that reflects accomplishments or outcomes that embody fulfillment of that purpose. Yet, a statement of mission fulfillment is as important, if not more important, than the mission statement itself in developing a deep meaningful sense of purpose.

Crafting a 3-Dimensional Image

Together, an authentic mission statement and meaningful statement of mission fulfillment create a two-dimensional image of institutional purpose. We now turn attention to extending the two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional image of institutional purpose. To do that we return to the mission statement, remaining mindful of our statement of mission fulfillment, to enrich the meaning of institutional purpose. The first step is to list the essential elements, or core themes, embedded in the mission. The core themes can be as perfunctory (e.g., provide transfer education or offer continuing

education) or ethereal (e.g., fulfill dreams or enrich lives) as your comfort dictates. For institutions that envision their purpose as being special, this is a way to codify the special nature of their missions. The idea is not to merely jot down key words from the mission statement, but to identify essential elements of the mission that provide direction for institutional practice and collectively encompass the college's unique mission. Typically, the college's unique mission can be distilled into three to five core themes or essential elements.

More benefit is derived from continuing to drill down. For each of the core themes of the mission, what are the objectives the institution is trying to achieve? Drilling further, what are the indicators by which the college will know whether or not it was successful in achieving each of those objectives? Working through each successive level of detail gets easier as a result of the context established at higher levels of the framework. More importantly, each successive level of detail provides greater meaning to the levels above. When completed, the mission statement, core themes of the mission (along with their objectives and indicators of achievement), and statement of mission fulfillment form a robust three-dimensional projection of institutional purpose that guides decisions on institutional directions and practice.

Is it Worth the Effort?

Does this process reduce institutional wobble when new initiatives tempt us? Does it help maintain institutional focus on what's in its best interest in fulfilling its purpose? Without equivocation the answer is a resounding "yes!" As evidence in support of this conclusion, this framework of deep self-reflection is embedded in the standards of a regional accrediting agency. The major benefit that comes from this mission-centric effort is the creation of a three-dimensional image of itself that enables the college to develop a deeper understanding and a sharper focus on its unique purpose. That, in turn, leads to better and more consistent planning, actions, and assessment of results by the college. When considering new initiatives, it is better prepared to evaluate initiative objectives with respect to the institution's own self-interest. The more that self-interest aligns with the interests of the external initiative, the more the college can wholeheartedly commit its energy and resources to the project knowing that by doing so it will produce a positive return on investment in terms of fulfillment of its purpose. Without that grounding the institution runs the risk of simply contracting itself to serve others' interests. While this institutional purpose enrichment process may not completely eliminate institutional wobble, it certainly provides a basis to determine how much wobble the institution is willing to tolerate to take part in grant-funded initiatives.

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