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Building Cathedrals: Mission Statements in Academic Libraries

Rebecca Nous

Three people were at work on a construction site. All were doing the same job, but when each was asked what his job was, the answers varied. "Breaking rocks", replied the first. "Earning a living", answered the second. "Helping to build a cathedral", said the third.

- Peter Schultz, Porsche CEO¹

Abstract

Articulating an organization's mission using a mission statement is a common method of communicating purpose, attitude, and priorities with stakeholders. While mission statements have been widely studied and written about in business literature, mission statements in libraries have not been studied as deeply. A survey of Association of Research Libraries library directors was conducted in 2014 to determine the current state of academic library mission statements, how they are being created, how they are informing the work of the library, and library directors' satisfaction with their library's mission statement.

Introduction

A mission statement is a common tool employed by organizations to define and communicate their purpose or reason for being to a variety of audiences including management, employees, customers, investors, other organizations, or any other group that may have an interest in learning more about their business and why it exists. It is a statement of an organization's approach to, or attitude toward, its work and the nature of that work. Though a mission statement may inform an organization's programs, initiatives, or tasks, it is not a proscriptive document detailing them. For example, Google's mission statement clearly and concisely defines its mission: "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."² Google's mission statement is a succinct statement of *what* its mission is, rather than *how* it will go about achieving it. While a reader may not be able to determine the specific organization from a mission statement alone, the nature of its work and approach to that work should be clear after reading it.

A majority of companies have mission statements, and a great number of them are available online. As early as 2002, nearly two-thirds of U.S. Fortune Global 500 firms had a mission statement on their website.³ Since a company's website is a prominent public representation of itself, and mission statements are intended to communicate with the public (among other stakeholders who may refer to the company's online presence to learn more about it), it only makes sense for its mission statement to be available on its website.

Mission statements are not solely the domain of businesses and corporations, however. Nonprofit organizations, educational institutions at all levels, and even clubs and social groups all have a mission, and may choose to formally articulate that mission in a mission statement. Academic libraries are no exception. The work of academic libraries matters, and is far reaching. From students to college or university faculty to peer institutions around the nation and around the world, academic libraries serve the needs of a large and diverse group of

researchers. Academic libraries are also fundraisers seeking grants, development funds, and a share of their college's budget; stewards of endowments and large operating and collection development budgets; members of consortia or other groups to which they have defined responsibilities; and the list goes on. Given their impact, importance, and range of constituencies and responsibilities, identifying and articulating a purpose and focus deserves attention. Developing a mission statement is an effective way to do just that.

Literature Review

Mission statements have long been researched and written about in relation to the business community in popular and scholarly literature. Library mission statements, on the other hand, have not received the same research attention, though articulating a mission can be beneficial in many of the same ways for libraries. In fact, as of 2006, 78% of Association of Research Libraries members had a mission statement posted on their website.⁴ This would indicate that there is at least a perceived value in not only having a mission statement, but in making it publicly available as well.

Value of a Mission Statement

Given the evolving information landscape and its impact on libraries, evaluating an existing mission statement or creating a new one is especially important. The need for libraries to adapt to a new information environment because of the effect of the Internet on research, information accessibility, and information literacy needs, is similar to what some corporate industries, such as the music, movie, and newspaper industries, are facing as well.⁵ As libraries reexamine their operations and identity in the digital age, there are several core necessities to keep in mind. Libraries must gain an understanding of user's *current* needs, embrace continuous innovation, create a strong digital identity, connect with constituents in ways that purely online services cannot, evaluate assessment measures, and be courageous.⁶ It is essential for libraries to differentiate themselves from other resources through unique, value added services.⁷ However, rather than providing a host of flashy new and trendy services for the sake of doing so, it is vital that all proposed, and even existing, library services reflect the library's current mission, and that they be evaluated in that context.⁸ Library administrators must have a solid understanding and vision of their library's mission to make consistent, appropriate, and meaningful decisions about the services they offer.⁹

Even in less tumultuous times, articulating a mission statement is important for libraries for a number of reasons. The library mission statement defines the distinct purpose of the library and its aims.¹⁰ By defining the core purpose and identity of the library, a good mission statement helps to provide stability through changes in administration and guides resource allocation and planning across administrations.¹¹ A well-crafted mission statement also shares with constituents how a library is prioritizing and allocating its resources, as well as defining the scope of services or advancing new roles.¹² It communicates the rationale behind decisions and actions to all constituents, and provides a basis for evaluating programs, services, and progress in the library.¹³ This helps to ensure accountability and increases constituents' confidence in the efficacy of the library.¹⁴

Characteristics of a Mission Statement

A library's mission statement should clearly and concisely articulate its purpose.¹⁵ Library mission statements may also be an effective way to communicate with and address the

expectations of their users, employees, parent institutions, and other stakeholders.¹⁶ The value of a library's mission statement can be judged by whether it clearly identifies the library's purpose and goals, or whether it is merely a collection of broad generalities with little relevance to the specific institution.¹⁷ While a library's mission may include a forward looking element, it is essential that the mission statement be grounded in its current reality, and avoid unrealistic claims and goals.¹⁸ A more effective mission statement will explicitly identify success or measurable outcomes.¹⁹ To be an effective communication tool, the library's mission statement should be made widely available using a variety of outlets.²⁰ The library website, marketing materials, annual reports, presentations to faculty, assessment documents, and accreditation reports are all viable methods of sharing the mission with a variety of constituents.²¹

Of course, academic libraries do not exist as independent organizations; though they have their own mission, they must align that mission directly to that of the college or university of which they are a part.²² Academic libraries are vital to the missions of their parent institutions, so merely stating support for the broader mission of the larger institution is not enough.²³ Instead, the academic library mission statement must demonstrate a deep understanding of the college or university mission, understand how the library supports that mission, and clearly articulate that connection.²⁴ This connection between the library's mission and the parent institution's should not be assumed, and should be explicit within the library's mission statement.²⁵ Beyond the parent institution's mission statement, it is also important to identify strategic plans and objectives, vision and values statements, institutionally desired outcomes, and marketing materials to further identify the role the academic library plays in the success of constituents and the college or university.²⁶ Demonstrating how the library contributes to student and faculty success and the fulfillment of the college or university's mission and strategic plan is an important part of validating the value of the library and the significant investment the library requires.²⁷

Crafting a Mission Statement

Despite the importance of an organization's mission statement, a mere 8% of corporate senior managers believe their firm's mission statement is understood by the rest of the organization, and a great majority are dissatisfied with the process by which their mission statement was developed, which largely ignored major constituents.²⁸ Given the value of a well-articulated mission statement, the question then becomes how to develop one that is meaningful to the organization's constituents and satisfies the organization's leadership.

Creating a meaningful mission statement involves participation from a variety of constituents at all levels of an organization.²⁹ Commitment of top level management or administration is critical to developing and implementing an organizational mission statement.³⁰ Support from leadership is instrumental in ensuring that the mission is accepted throughout the organization, which enables the mission statement to truly act as a guide for the programs, initiatives, and work of that organization.³¹ Including other stakeholders outside of senior management helps to create an emotional bond between the employee and the organization, as well as instill the shared sense of mission that has been shown to enhance employee performance and commitment to the organization.³² Inviting participation from all facets of an organization ensures the mission is seen as responsibilities and values that the members of the organization themselves have identified and accepted, rather than appearing as a list of obligations or directives imposed by senior management.³³

Using an inclusive process to identify and articulate mission is also an effective strategy for ensuring the full scope of a library's efforts and impact is reflected in its mission. Therefore, in crafting an academic library's mission statement, it is not only essential that librarians be deeply involved in the process, but student and researcher input should be solicited as well.³⁴ Deep, meaningful participation by librarians in the process of developing a mission statement "will ensure that all aspects of the library's work are considered, and increase the likelihood of discovering wider connections between the library and the institutional mission."³⁵

Research Questions

The objective of this study is to ascertain some basic characteristics of the mission statements of Association of Research Libraries member academic libraries, as well as uses of and attitudes toward them. Based on the literature describing the purpose and value of a mission statement, relevant questions include:

- How old are these mission statements?
- Who was involved in creating them, and for what audience?
- Are they being made available online?
- How are library mission statements informing the work of the library?
- How satisfied are library heads with their current mission statement?

Methodology

To gain a better understanding of these characteristics, an eight-question online survey (Appendix A) was conducted in March and April, 2014. The survey was distributed directly to the heads of 114 academic libraries that are members of the Association of Research Libraries. Two academic libraries were excluded from the study due to difficulty identifying their head as their websites were available in French only. ARL member libraries were targeted because membership indicates that they espouse certain common goals and values, and reference to library mission is made explicitly in their Principles of Membership.³⁶ Heads of these libraries were contacted directly because they are likely familiar with details of their library's mission statement, and also to ensure only one response per institution. A total of 57 responses (a 50.8 percent response rate) were collected in the online survey instrument over the course of three weeks, and were subsequently analyzed.

Results and Discussion

Prevalence and Availability of Mission Statements

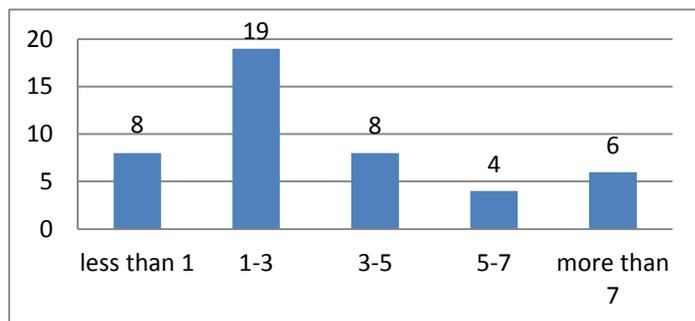
The vast majority of respondents indicated their libraries have a mission statement. Of the 57 respondents, 53 (93 percent) indicated that their library has a mission statement, while 4 (7 percent) did not.

A total of 45 respondents chose to answer the question of online availability. While all 45 respondents (100 percent) indicated that their mission statement was available online, 41 (91.1 percent) indicated that their mission statement was available on a public page and four (8.9 percent) had it available only on private, employee-only pages.

Currency

There were 45 responses relating to the age of the library’s mission statement. These results reveal that the majority (60 percent) of mission statements are less than three years old. Eight (17.8 percent) respondents indicated that their library’s mission statement was less than one year old, and an additional 19 (42.2 percent) of respondents stated their mission statement was created or revised one to three years ago. The remaining 40 percent of mission statements were created or revised more than three years ago.

Table 1: Age of Current Mission Statement (in years)

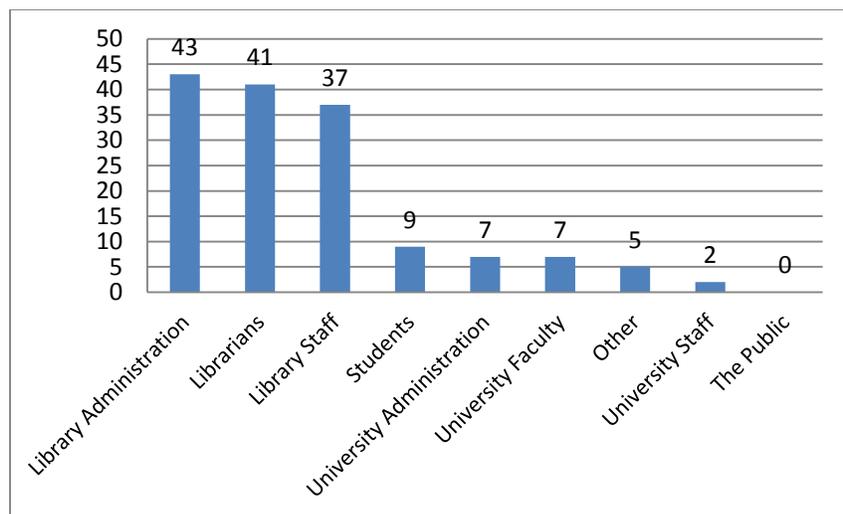


The fact that a majority of mission statements have been created or revised fairly recently implies a perceived value of having a current mission statement.

Who Developed the Library Mission Statement

Respondents (n=46) indicated overwhelmingly that library administration (n=43; 93.5 percent), librarians (n=41; 89.1 percent), and library staff (n=37; 80.4 percent) were primarily responsible for developing their library’s mission statement. The number of affirmative responses for library administration, librarians, and library staff indicate that many mission statements are created using a team approach. Students, university administration, university faculty, and university staff were involved in creating or modifying the library’s mission statement to a much lesser extent, and the public was not involved at all.

Table 2: Those Involved in Developing the Library’s Mission Statement

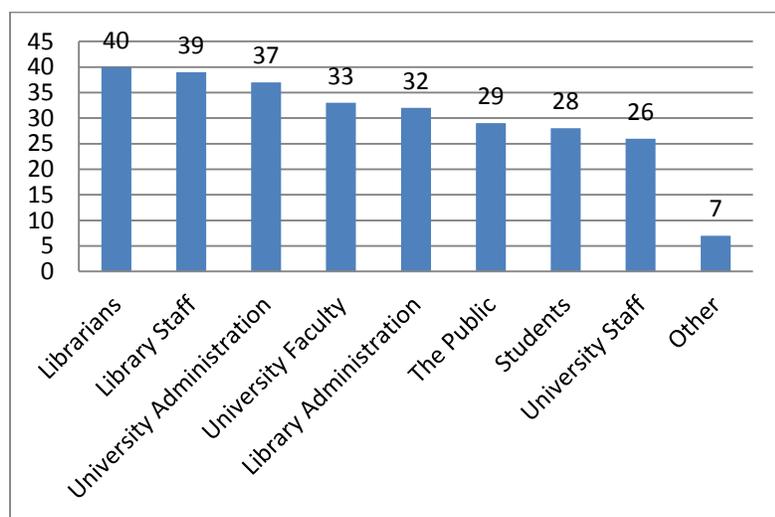


Several library directors indicated that others were part of the mission statement development process, including consultants (n=2; 4.3 percent), an external board (n=1; 2.2 percent), and a faculty advisory committee (n=1; 2.2 percent). One respondent (2.2 percent) did not know who was responsible for developing his or her library mission statement.

Target Audience

Library directors' responses (n=43) indicate that the library's mission statement is most often viewed as a document for library employees and university administration. Nearly all respondents (n=40; 93 percent) indicated that librarians were the target audience of their library's mission statement, followed by library staff (n=39; 90.7 percent) and university administration (n=37; 86 percent). Other groups identified by library directors include donors (n=3; 6.9 percent), the professional community (n=2; 4.7 percent), and visiting scholars (n=1; 2.3 percent).

Table 3: Target Audience



Though the results reveal that most often the mission statement is viewed as an internal document, the diversity of groups that library directors identify as the audience for their library's mission statement, including the public and students, may be the impetus for so often making the mission statement freely available online. Further investigation into the reasons for making the mission statement available online would be needed to confirm that.

Use of the Library's Mission Statement

Library directors were asked to rate the importance of their library's mission statement in relation to strategic planning, daily operations, evaluation of new services, assessment activities, and marketing materials. Respondents (n=46) rated their mission statement very important in only two categories: strategic planning (n=37; 80.4 percent) and the evaluation of new services (n=27; 58.7 percent). A plurality of directors (n=22; 47.8 percent) indicated that the mission statement was very important for assessment activities and marketing materials. In terms of informing daily operations, responses indicate that the mission statement is only somewhat important (n=23; 50.0 percent).

Table 4: Importance of Library Mission Statement with Regard to Specific Functions

Please rate the importance of your mission statement in your library's:				
	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Very important	I don't know
Strategic planning	3 (6.5%)	6 (13.0%)	37 (80.4%)	0 (0.0%)
Daily operations	4 (8.7%)	23 (50.0%)	19 (41.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Evaluation of new services	4 (8.7%)	14 (30.4%)	27 (58.7%)	1 (2.2%)
Assessment activities	4 (8.7%)	17 (37.0%)	22 (47.8%)	3 (6.5%)
Marketing materials	5 (10.9%)	17 (37.0%)	22 (47.8%)	2 (4.3%)

A great majority of respondents rate the library's mission statement as somewhat important or very important in all five of these areas, with very few indicating that the library's mission statement was not at all important with respect to each of those areas. This is another indication that the mission statement is valued by library administrators.

Satisfaction with the Library's Mission Statement

A majority of library directors reported being very satisfied with their library's mission statement in relation to: clarity, communicating library's value, stating the library's current purpose and goals, and relating the work of the library to the mission of the parent institution.

Table 5: Satisfaction with the Mission Statement with Regard to Specific Criteria

Please rate your satisfaction with your library's mission statement with regard to:				
	Not at all satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Very satisfied	I don't know
Clarity	2 (4.3%)	12 (26.1%)	31 (67.4%)	0 (0.0%)
Communicating your library's value	3 (6.5%)	16 (34.8%)	25 (54.3%)	1 (2.2%)
Stating your library's current purpose and goals	4 (8.7%)	14 (30.4%)	26 (56.5%)	1 (2.2%)
Relating the library to the mission of your College/University	4 (8.7%)	14 (30.4%)	28 (60.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Identifying measurable outcomes for assessment	9 (19.6%)	24 (52.2%)	10 (21.7%)	3 (6.5%)

The only area where a majority of respondents indicated being only somewhat satisfied with their mission statement was related to identifying measurable outcomes for assessment. Some directors commented that they did not believe that to be a function of a mission statement, which may explain that result. This result is particularly interesting given that the mission statement was rated very important with regard to assessment activities by nearly half of respondents and very important for evaluating new services by more than half of respondents (as shown in Table 4). While the mission statement is deemed important for assessment, the majority of library directors (n=24; 52.2 percent) are only somewhat satisfied with how the mission statement defines outcomes for assessment.

Small minorities of library heads reported being not at all satisfied with their library's mission statement in relation to each category, except, again, for identifying opportunities for assessment.

Conclusions

The results of this survey reflect much of what is in the literature on mission statements. Most respondents' libraries have codified their mission with a mission statement, and a fairly current one at that. Making the mission statement available online validates the idea of its use as a method of communication, while making it publicly available reflects the diversity of its target audience. Responses also indicate that often, input from several stakeholder groups was used to articulate the library's mission, and, as suggested in the literature, this results in ARL library heads being generally satisfied with the mission statement (the exception being in terms of identifying assessment metrics).

There are numerous opportunities for further research related to mission statements in academic libraries. While this survey reflects library directors' views of their library's mission statement, the attitudes of other stakeholders toward the mission statement and its reflection of the library are valuable as well. Groups to consider include donors, patrons, librarians and library staff, and university administrators, faculty and staff. Does a change in mission result in a real change in services, expectations, and assessment metrics? Does a well-articulated mission statement affect patron satisfaction? Library usage? Library employees' attitudes toward their work? Investigation into the relationship between the library's mission statement, services offered, and the effect on stakeholder attitudes and behavior would be of interest.

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² "Google Company Overview," <http://www.google.com/about/company/> (accessed March 13, 2014).

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¹⁵ Nicholas Spillios, "Mission Statements," last modified May 2013, <http://www.ala.org/united/sites/ala.org.united/files/content/trustees/tipsheets/Unitedtt3.pdf>

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¹⁷ Maggie Gallup Kopp, "Academic Libraries, Institutional Missions, and New Student Recruitment: A Case Study," *Reference Services Review* 41, 2 (2013): 192-200.

¹⁸ John Carver, "Managing Your Mission: Advice on Where to Begin," *About Campus* 4, 6 (2000): 19-23.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Spillios.

²¹ Janet R. Cottrell, "What Are We Doing Here, Anyway? Tying Academic Library Goals to Institutional Mission," *College & Research Libraries News* 72, 9 (2011): 516-520.

²² Andrew Dillon, "Accelerating Learning and Discovery: Refining the Role of Academic Libraries," in *No Brief Candle: Reconceiving Research Libraries for the 21st Century*: 57.

²³ Janet R. Cottrell, "What Are We Doing Here, Anyway? Tying Academic Library Goals to Institutional Mission" *College & Research Libraries News* 72, 9 (2011): 516-520.; Maggie Gallup Kopp, "Academic Libraries, Institutional Missions, and New Student Recruitment: A Case Study," *Reference Services Review* 41, 2 (2013): 192-200.

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³¹ Mullane.

³² Andrew Campbell and Sally Yeung, "Creating a Sense of Mission," *Long Range Planning* 24, 4 (1991): 10-20.

³³ Meacham.

³⁴ J. K. Haynes, "Linking Departmental and Institutional Mission," *New Directions for Higher Education* 119 (2002): 65-68.

³⁵ Cottrell, 518.

³⁶ Association of Research Libraries, "Principles of Membership in the Association of Research Libraries," (2013) <http://www.arl.org/storage/documents/publications/membership-principles-2013revision-final.pdf>

Appendix: Mission statement Survey

Mission statement survey

Agreement to Participate

You are being asked to participate in a study designed to gather data on your library's mission statement. The study consists of completing a short online survey, which will take approximately 5 minutes. This study has been approved by the University at Albany Institutional Review Board.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty. All information provided will be kept completely confidential and the data will be secured. All responses are accessed solely by the researcher, and your responses will only be used for purposes directly pertaining to this study. Your responses are not accessible by other participants in the study. Responses from individual institutions will be reported anonymously and/or as part of the aggregated data. There is no compensation to you for participating in the study. There is no direct benefit to individual subjects. There are no anticipated physical, psychological or economic risks or benefits associated with participation in this study. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, please call the Office of Regulatory Research Compliance at (518) 442-9050.

If you have read the disclaimer and voluntarily agree to participate in this study, you may continue to complete the survey by clicking on the "NEXT" link below.

Clicking the "NEXT" link below means that you have given your consent to participate in the study.

I have read the procedure described above, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

1. Does your library have a mission statement?
 - Yes
 - No
2. When was your library's mission statement created or last updated?
 - Less than 1 year ago
 - 1-3 years ago
 - 3-5 years ago
 - 5-7 years ago
 - More than 7 years ago
3. Who was involved in developing the library's mission statement? (check all that apply)
 - Library administration
 - College/University administration
 - Librarians
 - Library staff

-
- College/University faculty
 - College/University staff
 - Students
 - The public
 - Other (please specify)
4. Who do you view as the target audience for your library's mission statement? (check all that apply)
- Library administration
 - College/University administration
 - Librarians
 - Library staff
 - College/University faculty
 - College/University staff
 - Students
 - The public
 - Other (please specify)
5. Is your library's mission statement available online?
- Yes
 - No
6. Please rate the importance of your mission statement in your library's:
(not at all important, somewhat important, very important, I don't know)
- Strategic planning
 - Daily operations
 - Evaluation of new services
 - Assessment activities
 - Marketing materials
7. Please rate your satisfaction with your library's mission statement with regard to:
(not at all satisfied, somewhat satisfied, very satisfied, I don't know)
- Clarity
 - Communicating your library's value
 - Stating your library's current purpose and goals
 - Relating the library to the mission of your college/university
 - Identifying measurable outcomes for assessment
8. Additional comments