

Educational leadership with a vision

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By answering one fundamental question—“What will success look like?”—an educational institution has begun a process of defining its vision. It is undeniable that an institution will ever be greater than its dream; therefore, what is needed first and foremost is an articulated vision to propel an educational institution into a preferred future. Unguided by a powerful vision, educational leaders are more likely to falter and therefore must have a cogent vision for their institution, for it offers a tremendous competitive advantage over others that operate without one.

Not much happens without a dream...but the dream must be there first.

—Robert Greenleaf (2001)

AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION and its leaders must know what path they are on—their mission—and where this path is taking them—their vision. When both mission and vision are clearly articulated, most day-to-day issues and challenges are seen from a higher level, which is the bigger picture, and can leverage a tremendous competitive advantage over others that operate without one.

Changes within an institution often lead to a re-assessment of its values, vision, and mission. These changes may be in the leadership, such as a new board, president, or other senior officials; in the legislation that defines its mandate; or possibly in terms of the institution’s long term sustainability, especially with its current program offerings. Re-evaluation of its values, its vision, and its purpose or mission is the foundation for any strategic planning processes. If a strategic plan is the “blueprint” for an institution, then the vision is the “artist’s rendering” of the achievement of that strategic plan. A vision points

the way to a preferred future, which can inspire a board and staff to greater educational achievements. Vision statements describe people and organizations not as they are, but as they desire to become.

Education is built on positive visions for the future. A vision answers the question of how the institution sees future possibilities for students, itself, and the community that it serves. Whether a vision is, for example, “to make learning an exciting experience, which inspires learners to reach their full potential as life-long learners” or possibly “to establish a learning community that transforms and enriches people’s lives” or perhaps “to create a positive environment for students to learn more about themselves and the world around them,” the dream behind that vision stands as a powerful institutional ideal. To be more effective, educational leaders must invest time and effort in “selling” the vision to gain buy-in. A vision must be communicated in and outside the institution in order to inspire and motivate stakeholders to willingly contribute their valuable resources to enable realization of the vision. A vision then is a mental picture of what lies at the end of a road never traveled before and conveys the future status of the institution after the journey, for example, in terms of its graduates, services to the community, customers, market share of applicants, financial sustainability, and recognition by others.

Uniqueness of a vision and mission

The assertion “words have no meaning; people do” certainly applies to any discussion about a vision. However, the term “vision” needs clarification among those individuals who use it. Even with the best of intentions, educators can easily confuse vision and mission statements. The vision is broad in its scope and not restricting in any way. For example, a vision may be “to become a community of learners.” However, when one looks at the mission, it should answer one fundamental question: “What is the institution going to do about its vision?” (Calder, 2002, p. 51). A mission and vision together provide direction for the institution by focusing attention on doing things day-to-day to accomplish the mission, while at the same time taking steps to pursue its vision—the long-term institutional intent.

Clear articulation of an institution’s vision and mission alone tells constituent groups what the institution stands for, what it believes in, and more importantly what the institution intends to do in achieving its objectives.

One measure of an institution’s readiness to embark upon a comprehensive strategic planning process is its ability to embrace the development of a new or revised vision and mission. The commitment to strategic planning needs unmistakable resolve by everyone involved in developing a cogent vision and its subsequent mission to

stakeholders. Specifically, a vision defines the long-term ideal such as what future an institution will create. It follows that the mission answers the questions, Why does an institution exist? What are the outcomes of its work? The critical question, “How does an institution act?” illustrates its values, which can include among others innovation, integrity, creativity, respect, a business enterprising spirit, unwavering determination, and unambiguous thinking. It definitely helps for an institution to examine all types of “means” issues such as values and belief systems that guide it through the visioning process.

Some institutions have developed a succinct mission; however, far fewer have a clear vision (Calder, 2002). Senge (1990) believes that developing a vision is definitely more time consuming than formulating a mission, while Pfeffer (1992) likens the vision defining process as treaty negotiations among rival groups. In many cases, a vision is the dream just beyond an institution’s grasp, something that it is constantly striving for. The mission, however, is an institution’s challenges that are achievable within a limited time frame. The mission, when well-crafted, makes obvious that the work of the institution is clearly understood, that it is focused, and that it can be articulated to others in a meaningful way.

Visions for planning and development

A vision comes first in any strategic thinking/planning process. Like all educational endeavors, a vision must create a positive difference that will inspire others to higher levels of achievement and change. Although coaxed in a dream, a vision is a powerful expression of what an institution’s destiny actually encompasses. For educational leaders, the question of “where” a vision originated should not matter. The important question is, “Can a leader effectively articulate an institution’s vision?” The articulated vision should put aside barriers, for the moment, and ask an institution’s faculty, staff, board members, and administrative team to look beyond the present to a desired future. As Greenleaf (2001) has stated, it is the idea itself or the vision that unites people towards common goals, not the charisma of the leader. It is truly a shared educational journey.

The universal rule of educational planning simply stated asserts, “You will never be greater than the vision that guides you.” No athlete ever got to a championship event by mistake. For most athletes, a winning vision of an outstanding performance inevitably channels all the years of dedicated practice. A vision should require institutional stakeholders to stretch their expectations, aspirations, and performance; for without that compelling, attractive, and valuable vision, why bother at all?

The process for creating an institution's vision

While there is much discussion on the virtues of a clear vision, there are limited suggestions how to develop one for an educational institution. One suggestion is to begin an assessment process of an institution's current beliefs and thoughts around a vision or being a visionary institution. Appendix A presents a survey (see VL Questionnaire) that can be used to begin an institutional self-assessment process. The survey enables individuals involved in developing a vision—initially board and senior administrators—to discover what perceptions different constituent groups hold within the institution concerning its current vision if one exists.

Ideally, all constituent groups complete the brief survey. Once the results are tabulated, they can form the basis of an important dialogue among constituent groups. Such discussion can be used to launch more meaning processes as the institution develops its vision statement.

Valentine (1998) has crafted a series of statements which can be answered by an institution that has embarked on a visioning process. The statements can be used to critique an existing vision or one that is under development. Those charged with developing or renewing the vision can have an institution's constituent groups provide feedback on the statements as noted here:

The institution's vision—

- is based upon and reflects its stated beliefs and values.
- is developed collaboratively by key stakeholders.
- is a broad, comprehensive statement of the future.
- provides a clear sense of direction for all staff.
- assumes that all resources necessary to reach the vision have been identified.
- is clear, concise, and devoid of professional jargon and educational "slogans."

The responses need to go beyond a simple "yes" or "no" so that they can be explored in more depth to provide a foundation for additional follow-up by those individuals leading the visioning process.

Additionally, as part of a visioning process, initiators may want to brainstorm with staff and/or the board about what the institution would like to accomplish in the future—in tangible, meaningful ways. Participants can begin by talking about and writing down common institutional values. Different values or beliefs do not have to be a problem at this stage since the dialogue can encourage others to bolder dreams and visions that individuals are willing to invest in and work hard for. Creating a vision relies heavily on intuition and dreaming. Granted the visioning process is a creative one, with out-of-the-box thinking for most individuals who engage in the process;

however, there are other approaches that can be used to develop a vision. The following methods are other ways to start an institutional visioning initiative:

Creating a metaphor

One approach is the use of meaningful metaphors by those individuals charged with developing a vision (e.g., the board of trustees). The relative value of using a metaphor approach is experimenting with different ways of looking at the institution. As a group process, its value is found in allowing multiple ideas and ways of looking at the institution. It could simply begin with a statement such as, “Our institution is like... (i.e., metaphorically speaking) ...” and then ask all participants in a meeting or retreat to complete the sentence. For example, someone might put forward the notion of a symphony as the metaphor and use the various musical sections (e.g., strings, percussion) to describe a vision for the institution. Another metaphor might be a hockey team, using the various positions on that team (e.g., forward, defense) to develop an institutional vision.

Eventually, the metaphor can be condensed to a visual picture that helps answer the question, “What will this successful educational institution look like?” A metaphor, by definition, is a symbol or image that captures the vision of an institution quickly and precisely. It can take individuals along a path of strategic direction. The metaphor itself can draw from a variety of

sources such as nature, sports, the arts, etc. From a descriptive point of view, an institutional metaphor may be a complete picture of a visually appealing country scene or garden, a successful football team, a theatrical play, a musical score, etc. The metaphor and its descriptors are only limited by the thinking of those individuals involved. Possibly a board charged with the visionary process might ask constituent groups for examples of metaphors to begin the process of defining a vision for the institution.

The end result is to find an image that helps achieve consensus around language for the visionary process. The process is often a less threatening way for those charged with the development of the institution’s vision. The metaphor can serve as an interim step towards a true educational vision. The metaphor is a tool defining a vision. A final vision statement will be created by language that encompasses the context within which the institution finds itself.

Borrow and debate

While the development of a vision through metaphor may appeal to some individuals, another way is to locate and document the “visions” of other educational institutions and debate their merits. The “borrow and debate” approach, for many task-oriented individuals, offers a quicker resolve to the whole visioning process. Its appeal is possibly seen from the perspective that others have worked through process issues themselves in devel-

oping the vision, and therefore institutions can take advantage of a vision already expressed.

In finding other institutional visions, those individuals who research the statements can ask authors a series of probing questions about their particular processes. Questions explore the driving forces behind the process, the stakeholders involved in its development, and the approaches used that can assist in an institution's quest for its procedures and processes leading to a unique institutional vision statement.

Objective consultancy

Another approach to developing a vision statement is to acquire services of a consultant to help the institution go through the stages of group process in defining an institutional vision. The consultant's objectivity can greatly assist by walking the group through development phases toward the final vision statement. As well, the consultant can help draft vision statements for the group to debate on its way to a completed vision.

Acquiring an outsider's skills for the process can sometimes be a difficult decision for individuals charged with leadership in the task. The attitude that "we can do it ourselves," while an interesting perspective for developing a vision, may actually identify an important explanation why an institution has not completed the process before. Perhaps it points to other institutional difficulties that need greater attention.

Fill-in-the-blanks approach

While many institutions struggle to capture their vision effectively in writing, with some prompting and a simple "fill in the blank" procedure the essence of a vision can be expressed in a short period of time. Nevertheless, some fundamentals of a vision may require further reflection by all those involved before a true vision can be drafted. By working interactively with staff and asking a few basic questions, leaders can elicit a vision from those involved. Each of the blanks needs to be completed in order to create the first draft of a vision.

Within the next (*time frame noted here*), our institution will develop (*use a descriptor here*) into a (*local, regional, national, international*) (*type of organization*) providing (*description of programs or services*) to (*describe target customer/learner*).

What follows are two brief but clear vision statements created using the fill-in-the-blanks template and then further edited.

1. "Within the next 7 years, Western Institute will grow into a \$100 million online education and training provider specializing in automotive manufacturing trades and technology for foreign and domestic companies and their dealerships."
2. "By 2020 Eastern College will be recognized as the premier provider of health technology programming, through full time and distance education in North America."

Such a process, used creatively, can prompt meaningful dialogue around an institutional vision. The template is a tool, a means to creating a vision.

There are certainly other valid approaches to the development of a vision. In fact, a combination of all the above techniques could be implemented. Whether they involve metaphors, rethinking other vision statements, using objective consultants, answering fundamental questions in a fill-in-the-blanks format, or using a poem written by a board member (Cummings as cited by Angelica, 2001), the reality of the visioning process has to have “buy-in” by the entire group. Such “buy-in” will result in greater acceptance of the vision itself, which ensures better end results.

Institutional competence

Not all visions are effectively realized by educational leaders even after a compelling statement has been crafted. The gap between a preferred future and current practices challenges the capacity of the entire institution to move forward in progressive, positive ways. While the vision may be set and the strategic direction well established, the human potential to take an institution towards the dream continues to be an ongoing issue and requires careful assessment.

Educational leaders need to review key issues and the capacity of stakeholders in any vision development, as part of an ongoing process (use VL Questionnaire in

Appendix A) of strategic planning. The institutional “capacity assessment” should include answers to questions such as

- How does the current management structure help or hinder realizing the vision?
- What collaborative relationships are required to reach the vision?
- How do participants want to be seen by stakeholders (e.g., graduates, community)?
- How has the dream changed (e.g., for a well-established institution in a community)?
- Who are the driving forces for a new vision (besides the leadership)?
- What human and financial resources are needed?
- When will the institution know if it has achieved the vision?

All of these questions/issues need to be answered and specific strategies put in place, yet more importantly they should not halt the visioning process itself. They can assist by adding perspective to the process without grinding the course of actions toward a vision to a sudden stop. As Henry Ford once stated, “Obstacles are those things that you see when you lose sight of the goal.” Ultimately, the goal here is for an institution to develop a clear, concise vision.

Conclusion

Leadership demands strategic thinking, and as Alfred (2001) has

stated, one of the important core competencies for educational leaders committed to strategic thinking is that of “envisioning”—that is, the ability to see future states as dramatic visual images. For educational leaders, from all parts of an institution, the challenge is to express the dream vividly enough for it to be persuasive and to guide the efforts of others. It is undeni-

ably true that an institution will never be greater than its articulated dream. The pursuit of an image formulated as a strategic vision can motivate stakeholders to work together towards a greater good. Educational leaders must build on their high expectations and work performance to create a persuasive, positive future—indeed a true vision of things to come.

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Appendix A

VL Questionnaire

Please respond to each statement by considering how well each one applies to your institution.

	①	②	③	④		
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree		
My institution has:						
1.	identified and developed a clear and concise vision.*	①	②	③	④	N/A
2.	effectively articulated a clear and concise vision.	①	②	③	④	N/A
3.	the control and capacity to overcome most obstacles in achieving the vision.	①	②	③	④	N/A
4.	the resolve to prevail over most obstacles in achieving its vision.	①	②	③	④	N/A
5.	developed an overall management structure to help realize the vision.	①	②	③	④	N/A
6.	identified the human and financial resources necessary to achieve the vision.	①	②	③	④	N/A
7.	inspired institutional members with visions of what we all may be able to accomplish by working together as a team.	①	②	③	④	N/A
8.	made institutional members feel and act like leaders in achieving the vision.	①	②	③	④	N/A
9.	the respect from all institutional members to achieve the vision.	①	②	③	④	N/A
10.	given institutional members a sense of purpose for their roles in achieving the vision.	①	②	③	④	N/A
11.	stated high expectations of institutional members for progress towards our vision.	①	②	③	④	N/A
12.	effectively articulated performance criteria to track and assess movement towards our vision.	①	②	③	④	N/A
13.	An educational institution with a vision has a competitive advantage over others that operate without one.	①	②	③	④	
14.	The foundation for any strategic planning process is a clear identification and articulation of an institution's vision.	①	②	③	④	

Indicate your position: Administration Faculty Support Staff

*Vision Definition: A description of the future that the educational institution aspires to achieve, or a description of a future state that is better in some significant way than what currently exists.

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