

Institutional VVM statements on websites

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Educational leaders rely on compelling statements of institutional beliefs, strategic direction, and purpose (i.e., values, vision, and mission statements or VVM statements) as the three major pillars by which to launch new program/service initiatives, to enhance academic and administrative operations, and to chart sustainable options in building future institutional capacity for change. This study surveyed the various VVM statements found on an institution's website. Through this primary information source those statements identified were assessed as to their accuracy against established VVM definitions, and their rate of occurrence was also noted. The case is put forward that an institution that has developed and articulated informative VVM statements can assist its constituent groups in having greater confidence in its strategic direction (vision) as well as having an unambiguous sense of purpose (mission) as clearly defined by its common values.

Powerful statements around an institution's values, strategic direction, and mission can have a dramatic effect on what an institution actually does, what actions it takes, and based upon those actions what intentions can be inferred. Colleges and technical institutes have long maintained a broad mandate in terms of the educational programs offered to learners, their connection to business and industry in order to develop important training initiatives, and the variety of support services for diverse student groups whom they serve.

Not long ago, program growth and operational expansion were the main driving forces as institutions across the country responded to the education and training needs of various stakeholder groups. Basically, it was a “develop and deliver” philosophy for educational institutions. However, today fiscal issues and enrolment challenges have now forced colleges and technical institutes to seriously reconsider the outdated working philosophy of being “all things to all people” and to re-examine their beliefs, strategic direction, and sense of purpose, which is their values, vision, and mission.

An institution needs to openly develop and clearly articulate its values, vision, and mission (Calder, 2007). These cogent statements should be highly visible for all to read and embrace (Bart, 2001). An institution’s values are a basis for any strategic planning process and assist in the way an institution conducts its educational business. The vision, on the other hand, while an ideal, provides an answer to the question, “What does success look like?” And the educational mission, which is the most misunderstood statement of purpose, addresses the results of an institution’s work for its customers (e.g., learners, government).

Barr (2000) says, “A mission statement helps those who work at, teach at, contemplate attend-

ing, and support an institution, understand what the institution is attempting to accomplish” (p. 26). All too often the mission is written in such a way that reflects an institution’s activities or actions, like the acquiring of new equipment, facilities, or forging new partnerships rather than the outcomes for the customers (Calder, 2002). One way to collect data on institutional VVM statements is to see how they are communicated to various stakeholders via the Internet, which is a contemporary and very convenient medium for this expressed purpose. The belief that VVM statements need to be pervasive throughout an organization supports their strategic placement on an institution’s website.

Study Design

This study is an observational and evaluative design which came about as an applied research interest in identifying established VVM statements from colleges and institutes across Canada as recorded from their websites and how these statements met their articulated definitions as noted by writers in the field. All institutions in this study are members of a national postsecondary education association (Association of Canadian Community Colleges). Since Canada is a bilingual country, only English websites ($n = 80$) were used in this research study.

The institution's website is increasingly being used as a means of reaching out to various stakeholders and future stakeholder groups. It is often an institution's "media message" to the world beyond its region about what it is, what it offers (academically and support services), what it does (and how it does it), and as well how it helps individuals and groups achieve their educational and personal goals. Because of its increasingly extensive use by institutions, the websites were targeted for each of the association's members and scrutinized for the presence of VVM statements. Once they were located a tally was kept of the number of "mouse clicks" it took to find the information that was noted in the research report. Various institutional VVM statements were recorded on a master file so that they could be analyzed as to how true they were to the established definitions of institutional values, vision, and mission statements. While the research time period available was limited, the search for the VVM statements was completed over a period of several days during the 2009 academic year.

Study Results

The search for institutional VVM statements on websites from 80 colleges and institutes yielded some thought-provoking data (total membership is 178 but 80 are English-only institutions). The relative frequency of each type of statement is seen in Table 1. As indicated, the identification of an institution's mission dominated the websites among all the statements. From the data collected it is noted that 81% ($n = 65$) of the study's colleges and institutes had gone through some sort of planning process in order to identify and post on their website their institutional mission.

However, in assessing those identified mission statements ($n = 65$) as to their full alignment with an established definition of a mission, they seemed less than accurate. A mission is about the outcomes/results for the customer that an institution serves (the term "customer" can sometimes be defined differently by each institution). Bart (2001) believes that the presence of a mission statement is supposed to lead to a more focused and inspired organi-

Table 1. Frequency of Statements

Total Number of	Values	Vision	Mission
Institutions ($n = 80$)	$n = 44$ (55%)	$n = 56$ (70%)	$n = 65$ (81%)

zation, one that has embraced its sense of real purpose.

As noted, a mission refers to the results of an institution's work; however, far too many institutions indicated that they were "accessible" institutions for learners or they "facilitated learning" or they "educated and trained individuals for the world of work," or several institutions described their mission as providing an "innovative learning experience" for their customers. No doubt from just these few examples an obvious understanding of an institution's mission has been lost by the institution along the way. You can see that these statements speak to the "means" of an institution's work, not the "outcomes." The statements, therefore, have no defined "ends" to their work. They tend to focus on what they do (the "means") and not why they do things (why they exist) for learners (the "end" result for them).

With that being said, there were some colleges and institutes that did indeed capture the true spirit of a mission. Outcome-oriented mission statements from these institutions talked about developing (some indicated that they "produce" graduates) "good citizens" and "responsible citizens" in their graduates, while others looked at their graduates as being "career ready" and "educationally prepared for the world of work."

A few also highlighted that their mission resulted in "empowered communities through knowledge and skills" and "safer communities," while others couched their mission around general terms like "improved student success." All of these previous examples speak to the outcomes/results from this academic level of education.

Next in the frequency count, as noted in Table 1, were institutional vision statements representing 70% ($n = 56$) of the total number of institutions studied. A vision is accurately defined as an institution's preferred future or an ideal and sets out its strategic direction, at least for three to five years. The working environment within which institutions function is changing at an alarming pace. So too must their vision statement change.

From the data collected, the visioning task seemed most difficult for several institutions in the study. While some institutions captured their vision quite succinctly in a brief sentence or phrase (e.g., "globally valued for applied research"; "freedom through knowledge"), all too many institutions felt a need to produce a rather lengthy document to outline their strategic intent. The clarity of their vision was lost in a language sometimes referred to as "eduspeak." One institution completed several pages trying to define or redefine

its strategic direction. While the length of the document is not necessarily a negative issue, it did leave the lasting impression to this researcher that its strategic intent was somewhat directionless.

Some colleges and institutes laid claim that they were appropriately recognized by others (no institution identified whom they were recognized by). One could make an assumption here that it was other institutions or the general public or possibly accreditation bodies but this recognition is still undefined. This last point was exemplified in a vision statement that this particular institution was “nationally recognized” or in another statement that noted their vision of successful graduates “speaks for itself.” None of these institutions offered any evidence to support the visionary claims being made.

It is noteworthy that while a vision is clearly defined as a “preferred future,” many institutions seemed to indicate that they were already there. A number of institutions noted that they wanted to continue “to be successfully servicing learners” or to remain “offering a unique learning culture.” Not an understated ideal by any means but the question becomes: Can a vision stretch an institution’s efforts toward new challenges and creative viable options for its learners?

One vision statement repeated several times in various ways by institutions was that the institution would be “the first choice among learners.” When you take a hard look at this last vision you soon realize that it probably was a statement that was not thought through very well within the institution. Interestingly, being “the first choice” could be for a variety of unexpected reasons, such as low admission standards and therefore, easy access to programs. Or, in a few cases, the institution claims being “the first choice” while it was the only postsecondary choice in their region of the country. A few institutions crafted visions that spoke of being “inspirational community leaders” or visions that included being “innovative” or “committed to excellence” but did not indicate what areas they were innovative or excellent in.

Certainly, while the metrics of VVM statements should not be included in the descriptors, somewhere in the vision statement’s narrative there needs to be some evidence to back up these statements or claims—none could be found anywhere in this study. A vision statement defines what success is for an institution, as it sees it. Like other institutional statements (i.e., mission and values) there must be a way of assessing or at least tracking progress. Oth-

erwise, how does an institution know how close it is to realizing its vision? And when should it move on to other “visionary thinking” ideas? This last point is all too often lost in the development of a seemingly powerful vision statement. It seems that when institutions become so engrossed in defining their “preferred future,” this future soon can become out of reach (unrealistic) for an institution. At this point institutional personnel may react quite negatively to its very existence as a compelling statement of strategic direction.

Too lofty a vision statement may be one major reason why getting everyone on board in its development can be so difficult. Their expectations are never soon realized. Vision statements, like mission statements, should be brief and to the point. They need to have metrics—not likely in the statement itself but at least made available for further verification.

Finally, the percentage of institutions that had posted value statements on their website was just over half (55%, $n = 44$) of the total number of institutions identified in this study. A few colleges and institutes had eloquently articulated how their institutional values linked closely to the achievement of their vision and mission. These institutions saw the relationship between all the VVM statements.

A few spoke about their passions for their work, which addressed their values. However, it could be noted that several institutions simply listed what they thought their values were (e.g., learner focused, integrity) without any expansion or explanation on how they are currently practiced within their institution.

While value statements were found less frequently than the vision or mission on the websites, they do represent an important “foundational pillar” which helps to define how an institution conducts its business (i.e., decision-making, working relationships). Defining values for an institution can be an arduous task; however, several values were commonly identified across a number of colleges and institutes, such as respect for individuals, accountability practices, quality programming, workplace relevance, fiscal transparency, strategic cooperation and alliances, and most of all, their commitment to student success.

Values, as we define them, shape much of the work processes and as such influence how an institution and its various units move forward in positive ways. It should be noted that a few institutions did post statements of their “guiding principles.” For the most part these principles closely aligned to value sets (e.g., “the student is first,” “conduct busi-

ness in a sustainable manner”) and a small number of them were included in the final tally for all value statements.

Overall, the data collection from the websites presented many remarkable challenges. Initial public access to an institution’s website proved useful with minimal number of mouse clicks needed to find various VVM statements, when available (on average four clicks away from finding them). While most statements were easily accessible, some institutions did choose to outline them in the “President’s Message” section of their website or were available in their posted Strategic Plan or displayed in the “About Us” section of the website. The institution’s own search engine was used about 43% of the time to complete the search for all statements, which generally added another click to the search process.

Unquestionably, not every educational leader (e.g., president, board chair) would necessarily agree with the need for VVM statements to be posted on their website. Granted, one could argue that for some leaders their absence on the Internet does not mean they do not exist. However, the argument for or against their posting should center more around their value and their strategic nature for various stakehold-

ers to view and use in an institution’s operations.

Some VVM statements are quite pronounced on Internet websites while for others they do not exist at all. Generally speaking, it is recognized that these statements add important value to an institution with tangible and intangible benefits being derived from their creation and continuous use (Cole, 2002; Calder, 2007).

Conclusions

The Internet is an ever-expanding communications phenomenon that allows individuals and organizations to explore unique opportunities and to seek out pertinent information in a variety of topical areas. It has become yet another research tool in our mass-mediated society.

This study is a benchmark of sorts into the role that the Internet plays for an institution in communicating and disseminating its values, vision, and mission to its various customers (e.g., learners, business and industry partners, government, funders). Many institutions strategically place their VVM statements for all to see as definitive statements about its beliefs, preferred future, and its reason to exist. However, other institutions either do not produce these statements, or possibly pro-

duce a few, or they may bury them deep within their institutional websites.

It is clear from data collected from Canadian institutions that some may not fully understand the appropriate definition for these statements or may not value their usage in contemporary management practices. For example, in reading some posted mission statements it seems that the mission is too often defined as being all about the institution rather than the planned outcomes for its students. Of the institutions surveyed, 65 of them ($n = 81\%$) had indicated their mission statement on their website. From this number only 22 institutions (approximately 34%) had firmed up a mission statement that was “ends” directed. As seen on the websites, many institutions create language that seems to highlight the “means” of their existence rather than the “results” of their work.

On the other hand, vision statements seem to be far too unrealistic and attaching any sort of metrics to them would be nearly an impossible task. As well, posted value statements seem to be identified for some institutions as just a list of value-laden words without any attempt to show how the institution is using these beliefs in their day-to-day work. Of the 70% ($n = 56$) who had recorded their vision, over half of them ($n = 29$)

had aligned their statement with a truly viable vision or at least one that moved beyond their current state of operations. While the vision metrics may have come up short for most of them, they did indicate a lofty preferred future.

Values drive institutional behavior and they must be relevant and obvious in an institution's operations; otherwise, why take the time to produce them anyway? Of course there are no similar comparisons for an institution's values as found for the vision and mission; their values are, of course, their values. However, it should be noted that out of the 55% that identified their values, only a few institutions clearly noted evidence as to how they would be manifested within the organization.

Further study is certainly required for this important management tool to determine just when VVM statements were last developed at an institution. Generally, there was no date found on the website as to when these statements were last created by a Board or institutional personnel. Possibly by contacting the institution's webmaster this date could be determined or at least some guidance offered in finding the date. Further to this point, it would be significant to note just what were the circumstances that led to their redevelopment by the institution

(e.g., leadership changes, institutional crisis, or renewal)?

In addition, this study needs to be replicated for francophone institutions in Canada, as well as in the United States, including the above-mentioned additional suggestions. As an organizational imperative it is important to assess how these three statements, when properly developed, used, dissemi-

nated, and articulated can impact institutional success.

Exploring and discovering their use by educational leaders can significantly add to our knowledge base of how these vital institutional statements of educational beliefs, strategic direction, and purpose are impacted on all stakeholder groups.

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