

Mission Statement vs. Guiding Principles

Randall Schroeder, Wartburg College

The literature is filled with advice on the writing of a library program's mission statement (Hastreiter, Cornelius, & Henderson, 1999). Even with these resources, well-written mission statements can be time consuming, frustrating, and difficult to write if librarians write only to satisfy outside audiences such as accrediting agencies and academic deans. Additional challenges occur when programs or departments nested within a library are required to write their own mission statement. Again, frustration occurs if a program mission statement is written only to satisfy an outside agent. However, if the library or department lays the foundation of guiding principles before sitting down to write a mission statement, there is a natural flow that makes the writing a much simpler task.

The mission statement of the Wartburg College Information Literacy Across the Curriculum (ILAC) Program is an example of a statement that flowed from previously standing guiding principles. When Wartburg's Robert and Sally Vogel Library applied for ACRL's Best Practices in Information Literacy Programming Invitational Conference in Atlanta (June 2002), one of the requirements was a mission statement not just for the library as whole, but also for the ILAC program. What became a successful experience with the writing of a departmental mission statement was due to an explicit attempt to record internal guiding principles that informed the department's activities. While it is true that the writing was commissioned by an outside agency, the guiding principles were already in place at our institution. The writing of the ILAC mission statement was quite easy since it was the simple codification of what had been practice for almost a decade.

The ILAC team decided early on not to perfunctorily write a mission statement, but to write one that is useful. What makes a mission statement useful is that it will define the organization and communicate why it exists while providing guiding principles to assist in providing direction (Kelly & Kross, 2002). Linda Wallace (2004) claims that bad mission statements are off-target "when it doesn't communicate why an organization exists or what difference it makes." Further, a departmental mission statement should also state what difference it makes to the larger organization.

Wartburg College is a mission-driven school. The

college mission statement is held in unusual high regard by administration, students, and faculty. One will find it posted in classrooms, administration buildings, printed material, and even the packaging material to official "Wartburg College Water" bottles and "Trail Mix" wrappers. Intentionally and unintentionally the college mission statement has provided guiding principles for major decisions at the college. When it became time for a "Vogel Library Mission Statement," it seemed elegant to the authors to write a library mission statement that would refer back to the college mission statement. It logically followed that the ILAC mission statement should also refer back to the college and library mission statements.

It should be noted that the ILAC mission statement clearly states its goals and foundational theory in the opening paragraph:

Vogel Library's mission is to educate information-literate lifelong learners. Our information literacy program is the flagship of that effort, but other library operations also contribute toward this goal. The information literacy program is designed to embody leadership and visibility in promoting the library's mission of educating students. As such, our information literacy mission closely reflects that of the Library. We embrace the national Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education: (<http://www.acrl.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm>) and that document's definition of information literacy: "... a set of abilities requiring individuals to 'recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.'"

The points make it clear to the reader what ILAC is at Wartburg and how its goals and objectives are accomplished. The statement refers back to the Vogel Library mission statement, which also refers back to the college's mission statement.

An effective mission statement as outlined by Kross reflects the unique culture of the library and of the parent institution, addressing their purposes, values and beliefs. The benefit is that an effective mission statement becomes the guiding principles by which one can manage. This year, for instance, student life administrators at Wartburg College are creating an extended orientation week for first-year students that will include some academic work. An early draft had a "library session" placed

on Saturday with no further explanation other than that the administrators needed something for the students to do at that time. The librarians referred all concerned to the ILAC mission statement, “We believe course-integrated instruction connected with a real academic need is more effective than stand-alone information literacy courses or disconnected tours and library orientations.” The academic dean agreed and the library was dropped as part of the Saturday program. This is not to say the librarians were unwilling to be part of the Saturday program, but, in light of the guiding principles, it had to be “connected with a real need.” The orientation team was not forthcoming with the real need. Thus, the library will not be involved until that need is articulated. This transaction reflected the values of the college, the library, and the ILAC program.

Kross also indicates that a mission statement should be believable, achievable, and honest. The librarians and staff involved at the Vogel Library believed in the guiding principles that led to the mission statement. The team approach to writing the mission statement based on guiding principles proved effective with very little disagreement. It was to Wartburg’s advantage that the ILAC team is small, three librarians at the time the mission statement was written. Two of the librarians had previously operated under the guiding principles that would eventually be listed in the bullets for seven years but had not written them down. The guiding principles were firmly imprinted into the ILAC program’s culture. The mission statement is achievable and honest. It reflects what the ILAC program is, not what is wished it was.

As Alan Aldrich pointed out in his presentation at the 2007 ACRL Conference in Baltimore, mission statements can be long or short. Some writers feel a need to go into great detail outlining the many functions of a library or a department. This has the advantage of covering all bases. Other missions statements go for what Barbara Doyle-Wilch, Dean of Library and Information Services at Middlebury College, called the “Star Trek” approach: short and memorable just like the opening sequence to the original Star Trek television series - “its five year mission - to explore strange new worlds... to boldly go where no man has gone before” (B. Doyle-Wilch, personal communication). If the mission statement is short and memorable, just like the college’s mission statement at Wartburg, it is easier for stakeholders to keep it at the forefront of decision-making. It has been Wartburg’s experience that either approach is defensible as long as several fundamental issues remain at the core of the writing process.

A useful tool to identify what is fundamental and unique about an organization is to have the stakeholders address a few simple questions. Doyle-Wilch used a worksheet with three basic questions to identify what made her library unique at that time:

- who are we?
- what do we do?
- what is our style of operation?

Answering these questions will help an organization get and its core beliefs and reflect its guiding principles if that had been done in the past. The organization then will have to answer if the guiding principles are observable for assessment. In other words, can the organization prove that it is doing what it claims to be doing? Assessment then can be done for the best reason: to learn things and not merely, again, to satisfy an outside audience. This allows a library or library department to close the loop. An organization creates guiding principles that reflect its value and unique contribution to the parent organization. Those principles are assessed for validity. From those the steps flow the mission statement which should be as natural and easy as a downhill stream.

References

- Aldrich, A. (2007). *Following the phosphorous trail of research library mission statements into present and future harbors*. Contributed paper at ACRL 13th National Conference, Baltimore, MD.
- Hastreiter, J.A., Cornelius, M., & Henderson, D.W. (1999). *CLIP Note #28: Mission Statements for College Libraries*, 2nd Edition. College Libraries Section: ACRL.
- Kelly, M. C., & Kross, A. (2002). *Making the grade: academic libraries and student success*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.
- Vogel Library. (2002). *Information Literacy Mission Statement*. Waverly, IA: Wartburg College.
- Wallace, L. K. (2004). *Libraries, mission & marketing writing mission statements that work*. Chicago: American Library Association.

Appendix: Wartburg Mission Statements

Information Literacy Across the Curriculum Mission Statement

Vogel Library’s mission is to educate information-literate lifelong learners. Our information literacy program is the flagship of that effort, but other library operations also contribute toward this goal. The information literacy program is designed to embody leadership and visibility in promoting the library’s mission of educating students. As such, our information literacy mission closely reflects that of the Library. We embrace the national Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education and that document’s definition of information literacy: “...a set of abilities requiring individuals to ‘recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information.’”

(Mission Statement...Continued on page 12)

serious. Some wore designer knock-offs, scrubs from work, spike heels, and bedroom slippers. Twenty-five individuals brought together, artificially, to my classroom at this time completely against their will, but allegedly, for some inherent good. For the next fifty minutes I needed to talk to them in a language common to them all. Sacre bleu!

The play goes on. I do my shtick. Blab, blab, demo, your turn, blab, demo, your turn, blab, blab, demo, demo, your turn, blab, blab, bye. It's like a tap lesson. I notice, as I walk about interacting with the groups, several students ask me how to find a journal.

"It's easy," I say. "Remember, I showed you how to blah, blah, blah."

"Yeah, but our teacher said we can only use journals, otherwise we get docked 10 points for the speech."

"Well, what she means is, you need to use articles that are in journals," I say. "So, tonight, when you are working on this from home, go online, click to one of the databases, like I showed you this morning, type in the keywords for your topic, and you'll get a list of articles in journals, magazines, newspaper, periodicals. All kinds of sources."

"Can't you just show us how to get to the journals on immigration?" one student asks.

"Besides," another one says, "the teacher says we can't use the internet."

As the say in Texas - Don't worry 'bout the mule son, just load the wagon

(Mission Statement...Continued from page 9)

- We believe that information literacy is so fundamental that it is an integral part of the academic experience in and out of the classroom.
- We believe course-integrated instruction connected with a real academic need is more effective than stand-alone information literacy courses or disconnected tours and library orientations.
- We believe in a planned curriculum with distinct, sequenced information literacy content that allows practice and reinforcement without duplication.
- We believe that our information literacy instruction and any subsequent activity must help to achieve a faculty member's course objectives.
- We believe that professors and students must be guided toward the understanding that the librarians' goals are interconnected with their own course goals and curricular needs.
- Above all, we emphasize the teaching of concepts over skills as a means to achieve our information literacy mission of educating information-literate lifelong learners.

We also educate individual students and faculty at the reference desk and in individualized consultations by appointment. We strive to make each of these encounters an educational experience. In these settings we reinforce information literacy concepts from prior instruction and give students further opportunities for guided practice.

Vogel Library Mission Statement

Vogel Library's mission is to educate information-literate lifelong learners.

This means:

1. Educating students is our priority. It is the focus of all we do. While our information literacy program is the flagship, our more traditional library operations also contribute toward this goal:
 - Information literacy instruction provides an opportunity to make appropriate information choices and to evaluate the quality of information.

- Reference service reinforces classroom learning in the context of answering individual questions and providing one-on-one guidance to students and staff.
- Interlibrary loan gives students access to a world of materials and ideas.
- Acquisitions / cataloging develops the collection which supports student and faculty learning.

Wartburg librarians are partners with classroom faculty in the college's educational enterprise. Our information literacy expertise complements the subject specializations of classroom faculty to create an integrated learning environment for students.

2. Information literacy is our foundation. We embrace the national Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education (<http://www.ala.org/acrl/ilcomstan.html>) and that document's definition of information literacy: *"...a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information."*

In keeping with the standards, we emphasize the teaching of enduring concepts, not skills that obsolesce with changes in the next version of familiar software.

3. Producing lifelong learners is our objective. We intend to instill and reinforce in our students the abilities and habits of information-literate lifelong learning. To evaluate and improve our performance, we continually create assessments that measure the capability of our alumni and current students in this area.

The skills and knowledge we teach make Wartburg College graduates the future leaders and responsible citizens our country needs. This is the library's contribution to the college's mission as expressed in the Wartburg College Catalog: challenging and nurturing students for lives of leadership and service as a spirited expression of their faith and learning.
Copyright: September 2000

Wartburg College Mission Statement

Wartburg College is dedicated to **challenging and nurturing** students for lives of **leadership and service** as a spirited expression of their **faith and learning**.