

Institutional Vision and Academic Advising

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Quality academic advising in higher education is the product of a multitude of elements not the least of which is institutional vision. By recognizing and embracing an institution's concept of its capabilities and the kinds of educated human beings it is attempting to cultivate, advisors gain an invaluable apparatus to guide the provision of effective educational planning to students. In a case study survey, we assessed whether and how institutional vision can be transformed into action as both vision-driven initiatives and more incidental activities reflective of an institution's vision statement.

KEY WORDS: advisor role, core values of advising, institutional development, institutional vision, mission statement

Relative emphasis: theory, research, practice

The recently posted NACADA Statement of Core Values of Academic Advising (2004) affirms the importance of advising within the academy and serves as a general framework to guide its professional practice. One of the truisms presented in this document is that “effective advising requires a holistic approach . . . [that involves] a broad understanding of an institution and a detailed understanding of student needs.” It further notes that “advisors work in many types of higher education institutions and abide by the specific policies, procedures, and values of the department and institution in which they work.” This statement clearly and succinctly reinforces the importance of synchrony between the practice of advising and the specific organizational patterns, cultural values, curricula, and other critical dimensions of the home institution. It also brings to the forefront an often ignored philosophical component of the symbiotic relationship between advising operations and the college or university that houses them: institutional vision.

As with many of Socrates's contemporaries, many people are impatient with philosophical reflection in the face of the practical demands and daily challenges of the job. Advising, first and foremost, requires pragmatic know-how. Indeed, the pages of the *NACADA Journal* are filled with sensible tools to enhance advising practices and

empirical research that verifies the effectiveness of those tools. On occasion, a philosophical approach (e.g., Borgard, 1981), working model (e.g., Habley & Morales, 1998), or specific theory (e.g., Reardon & Bullock, 2004) to guide that research is presented and ethereal concepts, such as institutional context (see Severy, Lee, & Polson, 1996) and institutional culture (see Kuhtmann, 2004), come to the surface. Both context and culture are by-products of institutional vision. In the absence of institutional vision, advising practices can be dictated by tradition, fad, or circumstance and impacted by personality or inertia. Without vision, advising outcomes may be random and inequitable. In contrast, staff of advising operations who embrace a clear institutional vision have an invaluable apparatus for deciding how best to allocate scarce resources, shape the physical and social environment of an advising unit, best engage a student, and efficiently provide effective educational planning. Borrowing from Pekarsky's (1997) and Fox's (1997) treatises on vision in education, we encourage the identification and implementation of institutional vision in the practice of academic advising.

Institutional Vision

Institutional vision is a philosophical template; it is a conception of a college or university at its very best and the kinds of educated human beings cultivated there. It reflects the nature of the learning community within the college or university and defines the perceived purpose, priorities, and promises of the institution. Institutional vision is grounded in the physical, historical, fiscal, political, and cultural contexts in which that institution exists. However, vision transcends these characteristics—many of which may be shared by other institutions—to give that institution a distinctive function, coherence, direction, and meaning. Vision separates one institution from another in an increasingly competitive marketplace (see McQuestion & Abelman, 2004; Ries & Trout, 1997). Although the term “brand” somewhat reduces the high standard envisioned when institutions of higher education are discussed, it captures the fundamental nature of institutional vision: a set of attributes that are coherent, appropriate, distinctive, protected, and appealing to consumers (Keller, 1993;

Murphy, 1987).

According to Pekarsky (1997, p. 280), a vision is not merely a statement but rather “an informing idea that is shared, clear and compelling.”¹ Institutional vision is shared by the critical stakeholders, which include the student, faculty member, and staff, and unites them with the upper administration, blue ribbon committee, or the board of trustees that conceived it. The vision must be clear and concrete enough to offer genuine guidance for making educational decisions on all levels, and as suggested by Fox (1997), places the critical stakeholder in position to identify the kinds of skills, sensibilities, attitudes, and understandings that should be cultivated. A compelling institutional vision generates an enthusiasm among the stakeholders and stimulates them to action. A vision must enlist the energies and resources at the stakeholders’ disposal through a pattern of meaningful activity. The resultant brand equity—that is, the sum of the intangible traits of the institution as reflected in its vision (see Aaker, 1991)—allows stakeholders to hold strong, favorable, and unique associations in memory. This, in turn, generates loyalty on the part of the stakeholder as well as validation and reputation on the part of the institution.

Of course, an institutional vision must also be reasonable. Institutional vision is a conception of an institution at its best. Therefore, it implies goals and aspirations that are obtainable and anchored in reality. As Fullan (1993) noted, an institution needs to be in a particular state of readiness to tackle the vision explicitly and frontally. It must possess a set of cultural norms, an infrastructure, and a support system that, over time, renders the vision feasible and tangible. Herein lies the difference between an institutional and an existential vision. Existential vision reflects educational ideals, utopian values, and blue-sky aspirations that, while attractive and marketable, may not be obtainable. These are the ideas for which Socrates was chastised by his colleagues in early Platonic dialogues. Institutional vision must be grounded in true potential. If it is, it can be acted upon by critical stakeholders.

Where to Find Institutional Vision

Most institutions of higher education have explicitly and eloquently generated an institutional vision for public consumption. However, these visions are not always systematically articulated. They typ-

ically take the form of a mission statement or vision statement that can be found in institutional admissions documents or Web sites. These statements are often incorporated into a president’s inaugural or keynote address. Mission and vision statements tend to have a long shelf life, serving as perpetual reminders of an institution’s unique identity and legacy. They are also living documents, occasionally being revisited or revised to reflect an ever-changing world and the new challenges and opportunities facing higher education in general or that institution in particular.

To demonstrate the significance and diversity of institutional vision, several excerpts from randomly gathered vision statements are provided:

- [Our] central purpose . . . is to enrich the mind by stimulating and sustaining a spirit of free inquiry directed to understanding the nature of the universe and the role of mankind in it. Activities designed to quicken, discipline, and enlarge the intellectual and creative capacities, as well as the aesthetic and ethical awareness, of the members of the University and to record, preserve, and disseminate the results of intellectual discovery and creative endeavor serve this purpose (University of Virginia, 2006).
- We are a unified . . . family that fosters moral integrity, spiritual growth and personal values. We are collectively dedicating our legacy to serving, inspiring and leading the World Community with passion, humility and dignity (University of Notre Dame, 2006).
- [We] will be a leading educational institution in the City of Chicago recognized for its accessibility, quality instruction, student-friendly services and innovative technology. The college will be a primary choice of downtown residents and workers seeking to transfer to baccalaureate granting institutions, preparing for the job market, pursuing career advancement opportunities, and taking courses for personal enrichment (Harold Washington College, 2006).
- [We are] committed to the highest standards of academic excellence and Christian values, where students are strengthened for lives of purpose, service, and leadership (Pepperdine University, 2006).

¹ Not all institutional visions are created equal. The more heterogeneous or multitiered the constituencies that articulate the vision, the more difficult it is to communicate a lucid common vision. Often, clarity and concreteness are sacrificed to achieve a vision that can be shared.

- [We are] committed to the liberal arts as the foundation of all higher education. The main objective of liberal education is understanding, a goal pursued in an atmosphere of freedom by faculty and students alike, seeking to become familiar with the breadth of human experience and to render it intelligible. In pursuit of this goal, liberal education develops skills in learning, thinking and communicating but makes no claim to develop additional technical abilities. [We are] also committed to the development of pre-professional and professional programs . . . that support the career aspirations of students and meet the needs of society (Hofstra University, 2006).

Some schools offer a motto in the place of or as prelude to a vision statement (e.g., Yale University's "lux et veritas" ["light and truth"]). Others offer a slogan (e.g., DeVry University's "Where Success Stories Begin"). While reflective of a general institutional mission or key institutional aspiration, mottos and slogans fail to provide the level of values clarification, direction, and meaning included in an institutional vision. At best, they are rose-colored capsule summaries of visions and are difficult for stakeholders to transform into action. They represent existential vision. Many institutions offer strategic plans in the place of a vision or mission statement. Entrenched within these documents, a statement typically gives this plan scope, direction, and energy: the institutional vision. A strategic plan includes a timetable and the articulation of specific modes of process and operationalization toward the realization of that vision. According to Bryson (2004, p. 6), a strategic plan is "more important as a guide to implementing strategy than it is to formulating it." It represents vision in use.

Transforming Vision to Action

A vision-driven college or university is not systematically organized down to its very details around a particular conception of important elements. Few academic institutions can be so totalitarian and survive.² Rather, visions are intended to

inspire action and guide activity. Institutions are also not without pragmatically articulated vision statements or elaborate strategic plans that cannot be put into practice. Vision statements are, by their very nature and in their various manifestations, highly directive. They also tend to be familiar. Rarely is there a significant disconnect between an institutional vision and existing, normal, operating procedures at a college or university. Rarely are vision statements overtly paradigm shifting; they do not transport day-to-day operations and transfigure normative educational activities and goals to the realm of something foreign or exotic.

The transformation from vision to action is typically a matter of newfound refinement and prioritizing. Vision statements are, according to Pekarsky (1997, p. 277), "a tool for *enhancing* the quality of education" not for redefining or overhauling it. The success of their implementation depends on existing understandings and distinctions, which are often ignored or assumed. Institutional vision yields clarity amidst skepticism, blind ambition, or other circumstances that have narrowed the focus of students, faculty members, and staff. Although it sets stakeholder sights on future possibilities, institutional vision often arises from and is inspired by past successes. Consequently, turning vision into academic advising practices is more of an enterprise of self-reflection and adjustment—of checks and balances—than one of transformation. Applying vision to advising could include the following processes: comparing potential accomplishments with current and past successes, undertaking assessments, and fine-tuning existing initiatives.

Comparing Potential with Current Accomplishments

An examination of institutional goals should be compared to specific college or departmental goals that have previously guided advising operations. Most likely the two are not in opposition and are probably highly complementary (see White, 2000). However, without purposeful reflection by advisors, students may not be cultivating the broader set of skills, sensibilities, attitudes, and understandings that go beyond declared majors and that embrace insti-

² Exceptions are military- and religion-affiliated educational institutions. For example, The U.S. Military Academy at West Point (2006) has the following vision statement: "To educate, train, and inspire the Corps of Cadets so that each graduate is a commissioned leader of character committed to the values of Duty, Honor, Country; professional growth throughout a career as an officer in the United States Army; and a lifetime of selfless service to the nation." See also, the vision statement of Oral Roberts University (2006): "To transform students by the power of the Holy Spirit into whole, competent, servant-leaders through liberal-arts and professional education that is fully Christian. Within a Spirit-filled, healing community, administration, faculty and staff love and serve students by helping them grow in knowledge, skills, wisdom, character, and spirit."

tutional aspirations, priorities, and promises. University personnel have created vision statements for their own colleges or academic programs, but they have not always consulted the current institutional vision in the process. A simple overlaying of both texts will identify functional commonalities. It will also identify key differences in prioritized educational outcomes that can be easily compromised by an academic advisor through elective course selection.

Comparing Potential Accomplishments to Past Successes

Advising operations are infamous for being bombarded with more demands than the personnel can reasonably accommodate. Advisors face so many daily challenges that embracing institutional vision and transforming it into action seems a daunting task. However, by responding to the challenge, they have the opportunity to revisit responsive practices and procedures enacted to meet those demands, and in the process, they can see where a hodge-podge approach to meeting challenges would put actions at cross-purposes or redundant with each other. By incorporating the big picture into daily routine and allowing institutional vision to frame everyday priorities, advisors can reassign or consolidate their practices, and the advising unit can be given balance and broader purpose (Dickeson, 1999).

Furthermore, vision statements can help resolve many of the controversies associated with the proper organization and operation of advising units that have long faced advising practitioners. An institution's general approach to students and educational outcomes, as reflected in its vision statement, can serve to advocate the adoption of one type of advising structure (e.g., centralized or departmentalized; see Habley & McCauley, 1987), approach (e.g., prescriptive or developmental; see Creamer & Creamer, 1994), delivery system (e.g., faculty, professional, or peer delivered; see Reinartz, 2000), or procedure (e.g., intrusive or nonintrusive; see Earl, 1988) over another. As an institution evolves in its vision, so too should its advising operations. As Gordon (2004, p. 17) noted, "The history of advising reflects the history of higher education."

Conducting Assessments and Being Accountable

Institutional vision incorporates but transcends core requirements. The set of skills, sensibilities, attitudes, and understandings associated with institutional vision may be implied in but not specifically tied to curricular decisions, nor will it be explicitly laid out in general education require-

ments. It may not be reflected in degree completion forms and graduation check sheets. Furthermore, an assessment of the acquisition of these critical dimensions will likely go undone unless the task is undertaken by an academic advisor. This situation is particularly disturbing because a significant amount of research suggests that an accurate assessment of student learning in higher education is dependent on a clear and functional institutional mission or vision (Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1995; Beattie, 1995; Cohen, 1994; Maki, 2004).

Academic advising serves as quality control for the realization and implementation of institutional vision. Therefore, advising staff are best positioned to monitor the kind of human beings that the institution is cultivating as a result of the education it is providing. Advising staff should accept that responsibility and put into play mechanisms (i.e., evaluation forms, exit interviews) that tap into the key elements of institutional vision and help guide students to their satisfactory acquisition. Alternatively, they can encourage and help facilitate assessments performed through academic programs.

Tweaking Orientation and First-Year Experience Programs

In their handbook on the first-year student experience, Upcraft, Gardner, Barefoot, and Associates (2005, p. 117) asked: "What do the all-too-common outdoor campus scenes of tanned students sitting under leafy trees on sunny days communicate about expectations for intellectual engagement?" The answer, they suggest, is "everything." Institutional vision can and should be instilled from day one as incoming students adapt their lifestyles, life choices, self-perceptions, and aspirations to match those of their choice institutions. As freshmen become ingrained in the institution's culture, so too should they be introduced to institutional vision. Orientation and Introduction to University Life courses are appropriate vehicles for reflection upon the nature of the learning community within the college or university and the identification of the institution's perceived purpose, priorities, and promises. Vision statements are intended to be instructive and motivational. If they are ignored or revered as inaccessible historical documents, they serve no practical purpose.

A Case Study in Institutional Vision and Academic Advising

Of course, incorporating institutional vision into the daily routine of advising is easier said than done. Clearly, the first step in better implementing

institutional vision is an initial assessment of the extent to which academic advisors are aware of the institution vision statement and its key components. The second step involves an assessment of whether and how the vision has been implemented to date. The assessment should include both purposeful vision-driven initiatives as well as more incidental activities reflective of or in line with the key vision-statement components. Finally, adjustments can be made to bring advising operations in closer step with institutional vision.

To demonstrate these measures, a survey was performed among the advising staff at our home institution. Representatives from each college- and university-level advising unit ($N = 18$) were randomly selected. Because academic institutions and their advising operations are highly diverse and their institutional visions are truly unique, survey results per se are not highly generalizable. Rather, this case study is intended to demonstrate the process of transforming vision to action and inspire similar initiatives.

Cleveland State University (CSU) is an urban institution located in downtown Cleveland, Ohio, with approximately 17,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Academic advising is provided through a relatively decentralized organizational structure made up of numerous advising departments at the university, college, and departmental level. The University Advising unit provides academic advising to all new freshmen for their first year of enrollment and the Office of Transfer Recruitment & Advising Services provides academic advising to prospective and continuing transfer students. In addition to these two offices, most of the colleges within the university maintain their own academic advising operations, and they provide major-field advising through faculty members in the student's major-field department.

In 2002, the faculty and administrators of CSU reformulated its mission statement to complement the slogan "The City is our Campus" and added a vision statement in an effort to provide a framework to guide college and departmental strategic planning. The new vision statement [emphasis of key components added] reads:

We will be recognized as a *student-focused* center of scholarly excellence that provides an *accessible and exceptional education* to all. We will be a place of opportunity for those who seek truth, strive toward excellence and seek a better life for themselves and for their fellow citizens. As a leader in *innovative collaboration*—both internally and externally—

with business, industry, government, educational institutions and the community, the University will be a critical force in the region's economic development. We will be at the forefront of *moral, ethical, social, artistic and economic leadership* for the future and embrace the vitality that comes with risk. We will be the strongest public university in the region and be known for our scholarship in service to students and to our community.

The survey instrument was comprised of items on a 5-point scale: *strongly agree* (5) to *strongly disagree* (1). Open-ended items were used to assess academic advisors' awareness of the institutional vision statement and its key components, whether and how the vision had been implemented to date, and adjustments that can be made in the future to bring advising operations in closer step with the vision.

Advisor Awareness

Survey results revealed a high level of familiarity with the vision statement ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.09$) among academic advisors, a high level of agreement that the vision was feasible and realistic ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.60$), and the general perception that the statement was only moderately clear and compelling ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.02$). Respondents also believed that academic advisors were more aware of the vision statement and its key components than were staff in other offices that provided student support services ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 0.50$), who were perceived to be more aware than faculty ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.94$) who, in turn, were perceived to be more aware than students ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 0.97$). Advisors overwhelmingly supported the belief that effective advising requires a broad understanding of institutional vision and institutional goals ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.43$) and that their units were student focused ($M = 4.61$, $SD = 0.61$) and facilitated the provision of an exceptional education ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.61$). To a lesser degree they believed that their units contributed to the provision of moral, ethical, social, artistic, and economic leadership ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.80$) or engaged in innovative collaborations ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.92$).

Vision Implementation to Date

Respondents were able to identify several vision-driven initiatives that purposefully identified, embraced, and enacted key components of the vision statement. One example on the institutional level was the development of the Campus411 pro-

gram, where all students are effectively and efficiently provided information and assistance with registration, academic records, student billing, and financial aid at a central location. The one-stop approach is a dramatic shift from the “CSU shuffle” (students moving from one office to another) that existed prior to the articulated vision. It defies the decentralized organizational structure that had been previously embraced at the institution and is a direct response to the vision that the institution “will be recognized as a student-focused center . . . that provides an accessible and exceptional education to all.” Campus411 introduced a concierge service for general information, offers an express service for guidance on the go, and provides an extended service for more complex advising from cross-trained specialists. Following suit, several advising offices compared potential accomplishments to previous procedures and incorporated a triage advising service to complement assignment loads for individual advisors. They found that this allowed them to cater better to student needs, better resolve specific concerns, and as one respondent noted, “further support educational goals.”

More incidental activities reflective of the vision statement’s key components were evidenced in the survey. Several respondents identified the creation of the collaborative Advising Consortium as the best example of putting the vision into practice. In the consortium, members of all student support service operations joined forces and resources to provide students with consistent information and efficient academic advising.

Other respondents called attention to the influx in courses offered by most colleges that are aligned with the goal of providing “moral, ethical, social, artistic and economic leadership.” Several courses have been approved to satisfy general education requirements, and knowledgeable advisors are able to steer students to course work that recognizes the broad set of skills, sensibilities, attitudes, and understandings associated with the institutional vision. Still others noted recent changes in admission and academic standards and policies as an effort to improve “scholarly excellence” and the provision of an “exceptional education.”

Transformation to Action

Additional adjustments can be made to bring advising operations in closer step with institutional vision. Recognizing that institutional vision can and should be instilled from day one, respondents identified plans for CSU to revamp its Introduction to University Life course to better match incoming

students’ educational goals and aspirations to those of the institution. To “provide an accessible and exceptional education to all,” the university is to engage in an innovative collaboration with local inner-city high schools that calls for faculty members and advisors to work with high school students to better prepare them for the university experience. Part public service, part recruitment initiative, the program is proof that the university is attempting to “be a place of opportunity for those who seek truth, strive toward excellence and seek a better life for themselves.”

Conclusion

To a large extent, the ability to recognize fully and embrace an institution’s conception of its capabilities and the kinds of educated human beings it is attempting to cultivate is contingent on many factors. Budget, facilities, staffing, the nature of the current student body, and the nature and penetration of an existing and potentially conflicting or contrary institutional culture can impact on the process of transforming vision to action. As Pekarsky (1997, p. 278) observed, “Limited energy and skepticism often conspire to make educators far less eager to step back and reflect on the basic aims of the enterprise they are engaged in.” Similarly, those who penned the vision are often too removed from the trenches to oversee or directly intervene in the process.

Advisors, however, are well positioned to spearhead and champion the effort. Their high degree of interaction with students, faculty members, staff, and administrators enables them to make sure the vision is shared by critical stakeholders. Their broad-based, pragmatic knowledge of the institution and its policies and procedures brings clarity to components of institutional vision that might be more existential in their presentation. As is noted in the Statement of Core Values of Academic Advising (NACADA, 2004), “Advisors work to strengthen the importance, dignity, potential, and unique nature of each individual within the academic setting.” These activities address and serve to satisfy the priorities and promises that comprise the very core of institutional vision.

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Authors' Note

This is the first of a series of articles on institutional vision. The second article, which reports on a national survey of NACADA-member advising supervisors and the extent to which vision is known by personnel, reflected in the governing models of

advising operations, and transformed into day-to-day student advising activities, will appear in the next issue of this journal.

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