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Mission Critical? The Presence of Information Literacy in Academic Library Mission Statements

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INTRODUCTION:

We now live in an era of "fake news" and it has become more important than ever for people to have the skills and knowledge to apply critical thinking to the information they interact with. On college campuses, librarians have traditionally been the champions and conveyers of information literacy. At the same time it seems that mission and vision statements have risen to primacy as guiding documents for academic institutions. So, it seemed appropriate to investigate whether the latter reflected the former. That is, does information literacy, at least as a concept, appear in academic library vision and mission statements?

LITERATURE REVIEW:

While it may seem that library vision and mission statements have risen to prominence in the last few years, they were being discussed in the literature as early as 2002. In an editorial entitled "Promises You Can't Keep", Professor Gary Hartzell warns, "Vision and mission statements are intuitively attractive, generally boring, and potentially dangerous." (p. 31) He argues that libraries often overpromise in such documents, noting that doctors don't promise to cure every patient, lawyers don't promise to win every case, and yet librarians often to promise to transform every student into knowledgeable researchers. "The simple truth is that [librarians] don't have that power," he concludes. (p. 31) In an examination of law library mission statements Virginia J. Kelse makes an argument for the importance of such statements. "The mission statement may also justify and explain library activities that might be questioned by other parts of the institution." (p. 324) Further, "it serves to reflect the actions, goals, and beliefs of its drafters and serves to act as a road map for future action." (p. 327) Kimmo Tuominen, examining how institutions talk about users, notes that even documents that are meant to communicate externally, such as mission statements, inevitably reinforce institutional thinking. (p. 353) In the article "Deconstructing the Mission" Shannon Crawford Barniskis goes even further, declaring, "The activities and assumptions of those holding the power in these statements constrains the possible actions of those who do not." (p. 138)

A broad look at library mission statements is made in the poetically-named paper "Following the Phosphorous Trail of Research Library Mission Statements into Present and Future Harbors" by Alan W. Aldrich. He notes that mission statements are produced in a top-down process and thus reflect the thinking of organizational leaders, identify activities the organization considers important, and offer organizational trajectories. (p. 304) His study also looked for the phrase "information literacy" and found it in 27% of the statements examined. (p. 306) That number is consistent with the current study a decade later.

METHODOLOGY:

The *American Library Directory* (R. R. Bowker) was utilized to identify the largest academic library in each state in the United States. The assumption was made that the largest libraries would have the greatest capacity to have developed a mission or vision statement, and would also be most likely to have an information literacy program to refer to. While this approach may be simplistic, the National Center for Education Statistics estimates that there are 3,689 academic libraries in the United States, and parsing the documentation of that many institutions was beyond the scope of this project. The website for each institution's library was identified, and then was searched for an explicit Mission or Vision statement. This information was usually found under an About link from the library's homepage. (See Appendix A for urls.) Occasionally it was necessary to search for a Strategic Plan or other similar document. In the event that no Mission or Vision statement could be identified the author contacted the Reference Desk of that library to ask for a copy. Either Mission or Vision was allowed because the terminology is often used interchangeably, depending on the organization. Some institutions also have Goals but these were disallowed because these documents are tertiary and do not demonstrate a top-level commitment to information literacy.

RESULTS:

TABLE 1. RESULT BY INSTITUTION

Library	Mentions Y/N	Terms
Auburn University	N	
University of Alaska Fairbanks	Y	"promoting information literacy"
University of Arizona	N	
University of Arkansas	N	
UC Berkeley	Y	Evaluate
University of Colorado	N	
Yale	N	
University of Delaware	N	
University of Florida	N	
University of Georgia	N	
University of Hawaii	N	
University of Idaho	N	

University of Illinois	N	
Indiana University	N	
University of Iowa	Y	Support and promote critical inquiry
University of Kansas	N	
University of Kentucky	N	
Louisiana State University	N	
University of Maine	Y	Instruct and assist in the use of library resources
University of Maryland	Y	Intellectual inquiry
Harvard	N	
University of Michigan	N	
University of Minnesota	N	
Mississippi State University	Y	Facilitating analysis and use of scholarly information
University of Missouri	N	
University of Montana	N	
University of Nebraska	Y	Reflection
UNLV	N	
University of New Hampshire	N	
Princeton	N/A	
University of New Mexico	Y	Enabling students in the use of information and informatics
Columbia University	N/A	
University of North Carolina	N	
North Dakota State University	N	
The Ohio State University	Y	Academic inquiry
University of Oklahoma	N	
University of Oregon	N	
University of Pennsylvania	N	
Brown University	N	
University of South Carolina	Y	Integrate information literacy skills
South Dakota State University	N	
Vanderbilt	N/A	
University of Texas Austin	Y	Develop critical thinkers
University of Utah	N	
University of Vermont	Y	Education in their [information resources] use, the formation and

		promulgation of sound information practices and policies
University of Virginia	N/A	
University of Washington	N	
West Virginia University	N	
University of Wisconsin Madison	N	
University of Wyoming	N/A	

DISCUSSION:

Only 12 institutions, or 24%, mention information literacy in their Mission or Vision. As can be seen in the table of results generous latitude was allowed in the terminology, with terms like evaluation, critical inquiry, analysis, reflection, and critical thinking being deemed affirmative results. Across the 12 schools deemed to mention information literacy in these primary statements, only two actually use the term "information literacy." The most common term was "use", which was deemed in context to mean appropriate or thoughtful use.

TABLE 2. FREQUENCY OF TERMS

Term	Frequency
use	4
Inquiry	3
Information literacy	2
Critical thinking	2
Analysis	1
Evaluate	1
Practice	1
Reflection	1

This admittedly miniscule dataset still suggests that there may be an issue of non-standard terminology. Or to put it another way, is information literacy as a practice getting lost under a plethora of synonyms?

The University of Vermont was by far the most positive, mentioning both "education in [information resources] use" and "the formation and promulgation of sound information practices."

It is difficult to draw trends from a relatively small sample. All of the libraries that did mention information literacy are part of public institutions, but overall 43 of 50 schools examined are public schools. It may be a fairer observation to note that none of the private schools mention information literacy in their Mission or Vision statements.

Also of note is that five libraries, or 10%, do not have Mission or Vision Statements at all.

CONCLUSION

Teaching information literacy is arguably one of the most important responsibilities of the 21st century academic library, so it is disheartening to see that it is only mentioned as a primary activity in the mission and vision statements of 24% of the institutions examined. In fact, if one was to really be a stickler for the explicit phrase "information literacy" that only appears at two institutions.

This matters because in an age of strategic plans and exhaustive assessment the mission and vision statements are truly guiding documents. All organizational activities need to be justified by being anchored in these kind of documents. Omission at this level can lead to a devaluing and de-emphasis of the actual practice. It is incumbent upon administrators, librarians, and particularly instruction librarians to include information literacy at the very heart of their library's guiding philosophy. Information literacy should be mission critical.

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