DEVELOPING A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYZING ACADEMIC LIBRARY VISION STATEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The process of articulating a vision is crucial to shaping the direction of a library, as well as for obtaining buy-in from internal and external stakeholders. A vision statement is an aspirational statement that outlines who or what an organization wants to be in the future, and serves as a guiding force for the library and its stakeholders. While most academic libraries have a vision statement, it is debatable whether all of these statements effectively communicate the library's vision, or if they resonate with stakeholders. To address this issue, the researchers sought to answer the research question: What are the characteristics of a good/resonating academic library vision statement?

To investigate this, the researchers collected and analyzed the published vision statements of 93 university libraries in the United States that were classified as “Research-1 Doctoral Universities—Very high research activity” using the 2018 Carnegie Classifications. These universities typically have the largest and best funded university libraries, serving the most users and have the highest number of employees. Therefore, they have a strong need for clear strategic visions. The researchers used rubrics based on Fiset and Robinson’s structural and content characteristics of vision statements, with five required characteristics and three optional ones, to evaluate the 93 published vision statements.

Based on the evaluations, the researchers sought to investigate the characteristics of the high scoring vision statements, as well as to identify the gaps in existing evaluation models, in order to develop a new framework for evaluating academic library vision statements. This investigation proved to be an iterative process, and required the researchers to further tweak the evaluation framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While developing both mission and vision statements is a common part of the strategic planning process, many organizations often confuse the two statements. However, it is not just semantics; the vision statement and the mission statement serve two very different purposes. The mission statement, on one hand, is a guiding statement for the work of the organization, which “helps organizational members distinguish between activities that conform to institutional imperatives and those that do not.” Further, mission statements align with parent organizations,
help leaders articulate relationships with stakeholders, and illustrate the institution’s values and culture. Essentially, mission statements are a declaration of who the institution is.

Vision statements, on the other hand, serve a different purpose in that they are aspirational; they state clearly who or what the organization wants to be. Bryson notes that organizational vision is “a clear and succinct description of what the organization (program, collaboration, or community) should look like as it successfully implements its strategies, achieves its full potential, and creates significant and lasting public value.” Likewise, rather than remaining static, vision statements should be consistently reviewed and updated. Özdem recommends that vision statements should be regularly revised with regard to “originality, providing motivation, credibility, and being easy to remember” and should be judged based on the following additional criteria: actionable statements on the [organization’s] website; contribution to organizational performance; and predictive of future changes (not just how to improve current situations).

Another distinction to note is that mission statements are not often written in a way that both motivates employees and compels forward momentum, hence the need for a snappy, inspirational, and forward-looking vision statement. Simply put, “mission statements reflect the realities of their institutions’ environments, whereas vision statements drive these realities.” This is an especially important distinction when it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. While many libraries have been more intentional about verbalizing their DEI efforts over the last decade, these intentions are often found spread throughout libraries’ strategic documents, rather than explicitly stated in their vision statements. In order to truly reflect an organization’s ongoing and aspirational commitment to DEI, these principles should be reflected within the vision statement.

On the whole, vision statements are characterized by their succinctness, inspirational messaging, reflection of the organizational culture, and often include some sort of unified call to action. Fiset and Robinson note that vision statements are successful in articulating a leader’s (and by extension, an organization’s) vision only when they meet these criteria to “offer a unifying framework for organizational members that engender identity creation, meaning and help to align various objectives and priorities together into a succinct pronouncement.”

APPLYING AN EXISTING FRAMEWORK

A cursory review of organizational vision statements across a variety of industries shows that while some of the criteria for “effective” vision statements are present, there are certainly gaps. Knowing that vision statements are a crucial part of the library’s organizational strategy and a primary vehicle for communicating both values and aspirations, the researchers were curious how often and how efficiently academic libraries are adhering to the criteria mentioned above. While initially planning to create their own rubric for evaluating academic library vision statements, the researchers ultimately decided to begin by utilizing an existing framework for the rubric.

To facilitate the analysis of the 93 published vision statements, the researchers developed a rubric based on Fiset and Robinson’s structural and content characteristics of vision statements, with five required characteristics and three optional ones (see Appendix). The two researchers independently scored the 93 vision statements, and used the average scores to select the statements with the highest and lowest scores. The statements were further analyzed by evaluating how the concepts were presented and connected, word choices, word counts, whether the statements were externally or internally focused, and readability.

Through this process, the researchers identified several additional criteria and components that should or could be included in a new framework for evaluating academic library vision statements. These include: clarity, relevance, specificity, DEI language, and inspiring and motivating employees. The researchers found that lower scoring statements tended to lack specificity, and often mentioned the lengthy core mission of libraries without distinguishing what or how their organizations were unique. In order to effectively communicate the distinctive characteristics or ideals of the organization’s future, a vision statement must go beyond the general mission of libraries and outline the unique characteristics or ideals that set the library apart. Likewise, the forward-looking component was found to be missing in these more lengthy vision statements.

The researchers also found that many of the lower scoring vision statements were written in a way that was likely not inspiring or motivating for employees. As noted by Kantabutra and Avery, Özdem, and others, a vision statement that is not inspiring or motivating for employees may not be effective in fostering a positive and
engaged work culture. To address this issue, library leaders should focus on using clear and specific language in their vision statements, and strive to create statements that are both inspirational and motivational in nature. This could include using language that reflects the library and employees’ culture and identity, and that speaks to the values and goals of the organization.

Another important consideration identified by the researchers, especially when considering communication of the library’s values and goals, is the inclusion of DEI language in library vision statements. A vision statement that does not address DEI issues may not be relevant or resonant with stakeholders (both internal and external), and may not effectively guide the library's efforts in this area. To address this gap, library professionals should ensure that their vision statements include language that demonstrates the library’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion presently and in the future. This could include specific goals or initiatives related to DEI, or language that reflects the library’s values and priorities in this area.

Overall, the researchers found that the rubrics provided a general sense of the overall “success” or effectiveness of the vision statements, but that further qualitative analysis was needed to uncover the nuances of the individual statements. By incorporating additional criteria and components into the existing framework, modeled off Fiset and Robinson, the researchers developed a more comprehensive rubric for evaluating academic library vision statements (see Appendix). This initial framework will be useful for library professionals looking to develop or revise their own vision statements, and will help to ensure that these statements truly reflect the values and goals of the library and its stakeholders. It will also help to ensure that the vision statement is effective in inspiring and motivating employees, in concisely communicating the values of the organization, and in guiding the direction of the library towards a shared and compelling vision of the future.

DEVELOPING A NEW FRAMEWORK

The study found that existing rubrics, including the researchers’ modified version, for evaluating library vision statements are insufficiently comprehensive. To fill this gap, the researchers identified several additional criteria and components that should be included in a new framework for evaluating academic library vision statements. The four key areas in the new framework that will provide evaluators with a more nuanced framework for evaluating vision statements include: clarity; relevance; DEI language; and inspiring and motivating employees.

Clarity

All stakeholders must be able to understand the library’s vision statement. A clear vision statement outlines the distinctive characteristics or future objectives of the firm. Professionals working in libraries can assess a vision statement’s clarity using the following criteria:

- Conciseness: A concise vision statement should be able to sum up the library’s objectives and aspirations in a few short sentences.
- Clarity of language: A clear vision statement should employ straightforward language. It should refrain from technical or jargon terms that some readers, especially non-librarians, might not comprehend.
- Clarity of purpose: The vision statement should express the library’s objectives without using words that are vague or abstract.

Relevance

A relevant vision statement should address the library’s and its stakeholders’ needs and goals, and it should be compatible with the current and future environments in which the library operates. The following factors can help library professionals determine the relevance of a vision statement:

- To the library and its users: The vision statement should communicate the library’s needs and goals as well as those of its users, and it should fit with how the library is used both currently and in the future.
- To the library’s mission: the vision statement should lay out a plan for how the library can reach its goals and fulfill its stated mission.
• To the external environment: The vision statement should take into account the external environment in which the library operates, as well as trends, opportunities, and problems that could affect the library’s mission and goals.

**DEI Language**

Including DEI rhetoric into a vision statement displays the library’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion and ensures that it can successfully meet and support the needs of various communities. The vision statement should indicate the organization’s commitment to being receptive to novel ideas and points of view. This may involve displaying an openness to variety and a dedication to serving a varied range of individuals through language. The mission statement should represent the organization’s dedication to equity and its efforts to guarantee that all individuals have equal access to information and services. Also, the vision statement must express a commitment to diversity and community representation.

**Inspiring and Motivating Employees**

A vision statement that is inspiring and motivating shows a clear and compelling picture of the future that fits with the organization’s values and goals. It should serve as a rallying point for employees to work toward the shared vision while also providing a sense of purpose and direction for their daily work.

• Emotional language: An inspiring and motivating vision statement may include language that evokes emotions and feelings of positivity, such as hope, optimism, and excitement.
• Aspiration: An inspiring and motivating vision statement for employees should outline ambitious goals and aspirations that inspire employees to strive for excellence and make a positive impact.
• Motivating language: An inspiring and motivating vision statement may use language that inspires and motivates employees to take action and make a difference.
• Positive tone: Instead of being negative or demotivating, a vision statement that is inspiring and motivating for employees should have a positive and uplifting tone.

Overall, the new framework for evaluating library vision statements aims to fill identified gaps in vision statement construction. The researchers hope to provide a more comprehensive and effective tool for evaluating the effectiveness of library vision statements by focusing on the additional criteria of clarity, relevance, DEI language, and inspiring and motivating employees.

**CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

This framework is intended to serve as a resource for library professionals as they create or revise their own vision statements. It is important to note that not all criteria will be equally relevant for every library, and the emphasis on each criterion may vary depending on the library’s and its stakeholders’ unique needs and goals. Furthermore, the framework is not intended to be a rigid formula for developing vision statements, but rather a set of guidelines for evaluating the effectiveness of existing statements or guiding the development of new ones. Library professionals may find it useful to start with the framework and then adapt it to their specific context.

A well-crafted vision statement can be an effective tool for guiding a library’s direction, inspiring and motivating employees, and gaining support from internal and external stakeholders. The new framework for evaluating library vision statements focuses on the key areas of clarity, relevance, specificity, DEI language, and inspiring and motivating employees, and can be used to develop or revise vision statements. Library professionals can create vision statements that are effective, meaningful, and impactful for their organization and its stakeholders by focusing on these key areas.

Just as the process of developing this framework has been iterative, so too is the authors’ plan for extending this research. As mentioned, the new framework is still missing several components that allow for the nuance of evaluating academic library vision statements. As a next step, the authors plan to create a further revised version of the current rubric (see Appendix) and test it against the same library vision statements that were evaluated
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in the first study. This will allow them to compare the results and determine if the new rubric provides an even better and more nuanced framework for evaluating statements for clarity, relevance, DEI language, and inspiring and motivating employees, among the other established criteria. Beyond finessing the rubric for evaluating vision statements, the authors also aim to develop a complementary framework to assist academic library leaders in constructing new vision statements as part of the strategic planning process.

APPENDIX: INITIAL FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING ACADEMIC LIBRARY VISION STATEMENTS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria – Required</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific*/Clear</td>
<td>Easy to interpret and understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Focused</td>
<td>Long-term in scope and describes the organization’s desired end state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High in Imagery*/Abstractness</td>
<td>Intangible and hypothetical. Describes an end state using words that one can easily construct a mental image of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>Desirable and motivating for followers to attempt to achieve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convincing in terms of its Core Values*/Idealistic</td>
<td>Persuasive in terms of outlining the organization’s core values and connecting followers around an idealistic common identity</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Criteria – Optional</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brief</td>
<td>A succinct message that is easy for organizational members to remember (35 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique</td>
<td>Distinct in such a way as to be visibly unlike any other organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievable*/has a definition of success</td>
<td>Clear in its outline of an achievable standard of excellence to help followers measure their progress toward the desired end state</td>
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Scoring
Use the following scoring key to assign a score to each vision statement.
2 = Fully characteristic of the vision.
1 = Partially characteristic of the vision.
0 = Not at all characteristic of the vision
Maximum total of points for each vision statement = 16.
*Adapted from: Fiset & Robinson (2020)

NOTES
6. Özdem, 1892.
7. Özdem, 1893.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


