A Content Analysis of Mission Statements in Nonprofit Education

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Abstract

Using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis, researchers analyzed the mission statements of schools that house nonprofit management programs associated with the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC). They analyzed mission statements as an aggregate and by location. When comparing keywords in the schools' mission statements to keywords in the NACC guidelines, they found that arts, science, and humanities schools' mission statements shared only one keyword with NACC Curricular Guidelines: *society*. Business schools' mission statements also shared only one common word with NACC Curricular Guidelines: *management*. However, public administration mission statements had three words in common with the NACC Curricular Guidelines: (1) *nonprofit*, (2) *public*, and (3) *effective*. The researchers conclude that there is little connection between nonprofit management programs and the mission statements of their schools. Nonprofit programs may be lost in their schools and could benefit from accreditation to ensure their integrity. This is important information for the best place debate and the accreditation debate for nonprofit management education programs.

Keywords: *mission statement; keywords; accreditation; curricular guidelines*

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Noted management theorist Peter Drucker was one of the first scholars to articulate the importance of mission statements in organizational life. Speaking specifically to the private sector, Drucker (1974) noted that a clear mission must first develop for business objectives and strategies to form. The mission statement sets the tone for the current state of the organization, and as structure follows strategies, it also affects the future state of the organization. Although this is an unambiguous and straightforward concept, most organizations do not dedicate adequate time toward this endeavor.

Over the years, scholars have supported the use and study of mission statements in higher education for a variety of reasons. The concept began to appear in the literature in the 1970s. Lenning and Micek (1976) articulated one of the first arguments regarding the importance of mission and purpose statements in higher education. They lament the variety of internal and external pressures that pushed colleges and universities into a growth mode to meet the expanding demands of society in the 1950s and 1960s. Although many university leaders did not actively resist these pressures, the outcome was an academic environment that attempted to meet the needs of too many stakeholders. Many recognized the need for a more deliberative and structured approach to strategic planning that connected institutional mission statements to the development of goals and outcome measures.

At the university level, the mission statement often focuses on communicating the institution's role in society (Lang & Lopers-Sweetman, 1991) and establishing a clear philosophy of education that articulates the standard by which the institution is measured (McKelvie, 1986). Although the literature is scarce, it is equally important to consider the mission statements that emerge from the school level and to examine the alignment between these statements and the disciplines or programs in these schools. This is especially true for nonprofit education with its many variances in areas such as degree title, department, and course requirements (Hoefer, 2003; Mirabella, 2007; Mirabella & Wish, 2000, 2001; Mottner & Wymer, 2011; O'Neill, 2005; Wilson & Larson, 2002; Wymer & Mottner, 2009). These differences can result in students receiving similarly named degrees yet having vastly different educational experiences and core knowledge. Yet, through the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC), the discipline is attempting to find some continuity regarding curriculum.

With all of the differences in nonprofit education programs, the researchers sought to examine the mission statements of schools that are NACC members to determine if there are common or varied themes in their mission statements. The researchers sought to answer these questions:

- Question 1: What are the average number of words used in NACC school mission statements? How do the average number of mission statement words vary by school location?
- Question 2: What are the most frequently used terms in NACC school mission statements?
- Question 3: How do frequently used terms in mission statements vary by school location?
- Question 4: How do these mission statements align with NACC Curricular Guidelines?

Literature Review

Mission Statement Research

The literature regarding the use of mission statements in higher education is scarce and often focuses on the university level. Much of the scholarly writing examines (a) the similarities and differences in content across similar organizations or (b) the differences between the actions of an organization and its mission. In a study comparing the content of similar entities, Atkinson (2008) used data collected from the 2006 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System to examine the language surrounding mission statements, using discursive institutionalism as a theoretical foundation. H.-D. Meyer and Rowan (2006) asserted that this type of institutional theory is more appropriate for analyzing educational organizations with the belief that mission statements influence the structure of the environment through language and operate as a cultural-cognitive indicator of the identity and shared beliefs of the organization. Thus, Atkinson examined mission statements using discourse analysis and found a variety of overlap in the language. Of note, Atkinson used the concept of community as a metaphor, referring to the interaction that occurs with internal and external actors. Further, universities have a strong tendency to utilize language that refers to the societal impact to which they aspire. This type of research is valuable and often repeated in higher education studies (Estanek, James, & Norton, 2006; Hegeman, Davies, & Banning, 2007; Morphew & Hartley, 2006) and K–12 education research (Boerema, 2006).

In a study comparing the mission versus the action, Delucchi (2000) utilizes institutional theory as a foundation for examining the mission statements of 303 liberal arts colleges in the United States. Delucchi sought to determine the connection between mission statements that reference liberal arts education and the type of degree offered by the institution. Using data from *Peterson's Guide to Four-Year Colleges 1993*, Delucchi identified the mission statements and degree types for colleges. This study revealed that 70% of the colleges with liberal arts mission statements were principally focused on professional education. The research demonstrates a distinct difference between the actions the institutions are promoting, which are often driven by societal pressures, and the actual work that is occurring to operate the organization on a day-to-day basis. According to J. Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez (1997), within institutional theory this is referred to as the concept of decoupling.

It is important to remember that higher education institutions bring distinct complexity to the concept of mission statement development. Unlike the private sector or even K–12 schools, which often operate using top-down management structures, universities have various decision-making layers that create additional internal stakeholders (McKelvie, 1986). These may include a strong faculty senate whose opinions carry significant weight or an influential board member with a large checkbook. These additional considerations make the issue of university missions particularly murky.

Mission statement research in the higher education arena is evolving beyond the university level. Research is emerging that compares the mission statements of colleges that subscribe to the same accrediting organization. Palmer and Short (2008) examined the mission statements of 408 schools accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. Using the Pearce and David (1987) eight-item mission statement typology, the authors determined that colleges of business demonstrate a

great deal of content variance. No schools articulated all eight aspects of the typology. Only 35% articulated more than half of the typology components. The authors noted that the study is limited in several ways. Notably, the Pearce and David typology was designed with corporations in mind and most business scholars are part of universities that are nonprofit; however, the typology provides a standard by which to judge variance. The lack of consistency should cause business school leaders to reexamine the process used for mission statement development and alignment with the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

Holosko, Winkel, Crandall, and Briggs (2015) examined the mission statements of the top 50 social work schools based on the 2012 *U.S. News and World Report* ranking. They considered the number of words in the mission statements, the content, and the alignment of the content with the Council on Social Work Education's 10 core competencies from 2013. Research regarding the appropriate number of words in a mission statement is nebulous. The authors grounded their approach by citing Drucker (1999), who advocated for mission statement brevity. After reviewing notable nonprofit organizations, the scholars concluded that an appropriate length of a mission statement for nonprofit and educational institutions is $n = 30$. Although this approach is informal, it provided a benchmark for these authors and for future research.

The word count analysis revealed that mission statements in social work schools range from 6 to 60 words. The content analysis revealed that 58% of mission statements use the terms *leadership* or *social justice*. The authors noted that these terms are unclear as they have traditionally carried different meanings in the profession. In addition, the authors determined that the mission statements only assimilate the 10 core competencies at a rate of one competency per school (Holosko et al., 2015).

Holosko et al. (2015) asserted that the potential impact is that colleges will gradually drift away from important components that ground the discipline and its educational structure. In addition, the lack of clarity about the mission creates problems for students and other stakeholders that depend on these colleges for an appropriate education (Holosko et al., 2015). The Council on Social Work Education (n.d.) notes on its website, "Founded in 1952, this partnership of educational and professional institutions, social welfare agencies, and private citizens is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation as the sole accrediting agency for social work education in this country" (para. 1). The issues identified in research are potentially important for this organization and for college social work programs. For nonprofit education, which currently does not have an accrediting body, a similar study would be valuable.

Evolution of Nonprofit Education

It was once commonly thought that a good business leader would be a good nonprofit leader. However, research is showing that distinct differences exist between businesses and nonprofits, and these differences result in the need for specialized training. "Every time we in nonprofits satisfy customers, we drain resources, and every time for-profits satisfy a customer, they get resources. That sounds very simple, but it has huge implications" (Silverman & Taliento, 2006, p. 37). Thus, nonprofit management requires a constant trade-off between mission, resources, and strategy. Anheier (2005) and Worth (2012) argued that the reliance on volunteers and unique missions means

nonprofits need employees with special skills to manage issues not addressed by traditional business models.

The double bottom line is a significant difference between the nonprofit manager and the for-profit manager. Businesses exist to make money and increase the wealth of their stockholders. If a business creates a worthwhile product and markets that product well, then customers will buy the product and the assets of the business will increase. This implies that a business can oftentimes be evaluated based on its market share and financials.

However, William Novelli, who worked in the for-profit world before becoming a nonprofit leader, pointed out, "It's harder to succeed in the nonprofit world . . . it may be hard to compete in [business] . . . but it's harder to achieve goals in the nonprofit world because these goals tend to be behavioral . . . and hard to measure" (Silverman & Taliento, 2006, p. 37). This difference in nonprofit and for-profit skills and requirements has led higher education facilities to offer nonprofit-focused programs designed to provide better training to today's leaders on the specifics and realities of nonprofit leadership.

It is now becoming accepted that in addition to business skills, nonprofit leaders need skills specialized to the nonprofit sector. Schools are taking up the call to help train and provide those needed skills that have been traditionally lacking in the nonprofit education system. Mirabella (2007) released a report that detailed the current state of nonprofit training in the higher education field. She found that between 1996 and 2002, undergraduate programs related to nonprofit management grew by 30% and another 36% between 2002 and 2006. Graduate programs related to nonprofit management grew by 26% between 1996 and 2006. Mirabella (n.d.) identified 238 colleges and universities that offered a total of 426 programs related to nonprofit management.

Schools are now offering training in nonprofit management, but the differences in programs are vast. There are 347 programs listed in the Nonprofit Management Education database at Seton Hall University (Mirabella, n.d.). To meet the criteria for listing, a program must have 9 credit hours of nonprofit-specific coursework. However, the programs listed have many differences. Degree name is one difference. For example, at the graduate level, a student can obtain a master's of business administration with nonprofit concentration, master's of public administration with nonprofit concentration, master's of nonprofit organizations, master's of nonprofit management, a master's of art, and a master's of social work, as well as others. Some of these degrees have only three nonprofit-specific courses and others have 36 credit hours of nonprofit coursework. Some schools offer graduate degrees and others undergraduate, whereas others offer certificates. Many schools offer different combinations of the preceding.

As a result of these differences, students can graduate with similar degree names and have vastly different educational experiences. To aid with this, the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance (NLA) and NACC have independently established curricular guidelines for nonprofit education to ensure that students are obtaining the skills to be successful in today's nonprofit sector. These standards are helpful, but currently there is no way to differentiate a program that voluntarily follows standards from those that do not. Therefore, students have a limited ability to distinguish a quality nonprofit program from a lacking one.

Method

Mission statement research deploys a variety of methodologies and sampling approaches. Hegeman et al. (2007) examined community college mission statements using non–a priori coding of information obtained from websites. Similarly, Morphew and Hartley (2006) reviewed 299 mission statements of higher education institutions using non–a priori document analysis techniques. In an example from K–12 literature, Boerema (2006) used a content analysis approach to study the vision and mission statements of private schools. The variety of methods suggests that researchers have the opportunity to explore different techniques for interrogating data. Variance in research also extends to the sample size. Some studies utilize large samples (e.g., $n = 408$, Palmer & Short, 2008), and still others utilize a smaller sample (e.g., $n = 50$, Holosko et al., 2015).

To answer the research questions, the researchers reviewed the NACC 2015 membership list to identify schools that housed the nonprofit program curricula. Of the 46 universities on the list, 36 had school-level mission statements. Researchers examined the mission statements as an aggregate ($n = 36$). Next, they divided the mission statements by school location for further analysis. Business schools (BS, $n = 11$) make up the largest category of NACC schools with mission statements. Public administration (PA, $n = 10$) includes schools of PA, public services, public policy, or government. Arts, science, and humanities (ASHU, $n = 9$) also includes liberal arts schools. The "other" (OT) category ($n = 5$) includes schools not previously designated. The researchers analyzed these data to determine the number of words and the frequency of words in the mission statements. They also examined the NACC 2015 Curricular Guidelines for Graduate and Undergraduate Studies in Nonprofit Leadership, the Nonprofit Sector, and Philanthropy using word frequency analysis. One limitation of this research is the precision of which schools adhere to their mission statements. It is possible that some schools have outdated mission statements and have not updated them to current activities.

All data were initially housed in a spreadsheet. This format allowed for an accurate calculation of the number of words in each mission statement. The data were then imported to NVivo 10, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) tool, which served as the analyzing device for the word frequency examination. The use of CAQDAS enhances the validity of the study as it has been found that CAQDAS can distance the researcher from the data, thus allowing quantitative analysis of qualitative data (Barry, 1998). Additionally, Hinchiffe, Crang, Reimer, and Hudson (1997) argued that CAQDAS allows social science researchers to create homogeneity in methods, and Richards and Richards (1994) reasoned that the CAQDAS adds rigor to qualitative research.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: What are the average number of words used in NACC school mission statements? How do the average number of mission statement words vary by school location?

Table 1 provides an overview of the descriptive statistics for mission statement word count. For all of the schools ($N = 36$), the range was 115 words with a maximum

of 120 words and a minimum of 5 words in the mission statements. The mean was 56 words and the standard deviation was 32.67 words. PA schools ($N = 10$) had a range of 96 words with a minimum of 24 words and a maximum of 120 words, a mean of 65.2 words, and a standard deviation of 32.34 words in their mission statements. BS ($N = 12$) had a range of 73 words with a minimum of 20 words and a maximum of 93 words in their mission statements. The mean was 40.08 words and the standard deviation was 22.15 words. Finally, programs located within ASHU schools ($N = 9$) had a range of 99 words with a minimum of 21 words and a maximum of 120 words, a mean of 75.66 words, and a standard deviation of 35.37 words in their mission statements.

Table 1

Mission Statement Word Count Descriptive Statistics

Item	All schools	PA	BS	ASHU
Observations	36	10	12	9
Range	115	96	73	99
Min	5	24	20	21
Max	120	120	93	120
M	56	65.2	40.08	75.66
SD	32.67	32.34	22.15	35.37

Note. PA = public administration; BS = business schools; ASHU = arts, science, and humanities.

BS mission statements had a lower mean word count than PA and ASHU mission statements. BS mission statements averaged 38.5% fewer words than PA mission statements and 47% fewer words than ASHU mission statements. Also, BS mission statements had a smaller range of numbers, 73 versus 96 and 99, respectively, meaning that they were likely closer to the average and had fewer outliers. Based on the differences in the mean word count for mission statement dependent upon location, the researchers hypothesized that NACC programs located in ASHU schools would have the most words in their mission statements that matched the NACC guidelines, followed by PA schools and then BS.

To answer the second, third, and fourth research questions, the researchers completed two word-frequency queries in NVivo 10. In the first interrogation, the data focused on the exact word and did not group by synonyms. The second query grouped the words by synonym. The queries were set to identify the top 50 words with more than three letters. This allowed the researchers to exclude conjunctions. The researchers printed and analyzed both queries with the goal of eliminating routine words that would be expected in a mission statement from the higher education sector (*college, university, school, education,* and *mission*). They compared the two lists manually to identify proper groupings. The researchers recognize that NVivo is a powerful tool, but ultimately there is no substitute for the manual review of experienced researchers.

They compiled the top 10 list in a series of research meetings; however, when the word frequency clustered around a specific number, they extended the list.

Research Question 2: What are the most frequently used terms in NACC school mission statements?

Table 2 provides the keywords with the highest frequency among all of the schools' mission statements. For schools focused on the nonprofit sector, the frequency of the words *public* and *service* is expected in their mission statements. An interesting inclusion in the top 10 is the word *business*, which is reflected more often than the word *community*. The researchers considered combining the terms *community* and *communities* with the terms *global* and *world*. A review of each mission statement revealed a different intent, with the words *community* and *communities* focused on the local, state, or national environment, as opposed to the words *global* and *world,* which clearly have a broader intent.

Table 2

Mission Statement Frequency for All Schools

Word	Frequency
Public	22
Service	21
Research	19
Students	18
Business	16
Education	16
Sciences	16
Community/Communities	16
Global/World	16
Leaders/Leadership	15

Note. Number of statements examined $n = 36$. List total $n = 10$.

Research Question 3: How do frequently used terms in mission statements vary by school location?

Table 3 provides the keywords in the mission statements grouped by school location and shows that schools' mission statements shared common keywords. ASHU and BS mission statements shared the keywords (1) *academic*, (2) *professional*, and (3) *students*. BS and PA mission statements shared the keywords (1) *leadership*, (2) *research*, and (3) *service*. However, PA and ASHU mission statements did not share any common words. This is an interesting finding. According to Mirabella (2007), approximately 10% to 12% of graduate programs with a nonprofit management focus are in BS. The numbers are lower for undergraduate programs at 7% to 12%. Historically, nonprofit programs have had a stronger connection to PA and ASHU schools; however, the results suggest that the language in the mission statements is different.

Table 3

Shared Terms for All Schools

Word	ASHU	PA	BS	Matches
Academic	Yes	–	Yes	1
Affairs	–	Yes	–	–
Arts	Yes	–	–	–
Business	–	–	Yes	–
Committed	–	Yes	–	–
Community	–	–	Yes	–
Creative	Yes	–	–	–
Disciplines	Yes	–	–	–
Effective	–	Yes	–	–
Global/Globally/World	–	–	Yes	–
Graduate	Yes	–	–	–
Innovative	–	–	Yes	–
International	–	–	Yes	–
Leaders/Leadership	–	Yes	Yes	1
Liberal	Yes	–	–	–
Management	–	–	Yes	–
Nonprofit	–	Yes	–	–
Policy	–	Yes	–	–
Practice	–	Yes	–	–
Professional	Yes	–	Yes	1
Public	–	Yes	–	–
Research	–	Yes	Yes	1
Science	Yes	–	–	–
Service	–	Yes	Yes	1
Social	Yes	–	–	–
Students	Yes	–	Yes	1

Note. PA = public administration; BS = business schools; ASHU = arts, science, and humanities.

Additionally, although the words *public* and *service* were the most frequently used in mission statements, they were not shared across the mission statements of the three types of schools. The keyword *public* was exclusive to PA mission statements. The keyword *service* was present PA and BS mission statements, yet it was absent from ASHU mission statements.

Also noteworthy, PA was the only school type that had *nonprofit* as a keyword in the mission statements. These simple discoveries may have larger implications in regard to the most appropriate location for nonprofit management programs.

Research Question 4: How do these mission statements align with NACC Curricular Guidelines?

Table 4 presents the keywords found in the NACC Curricular Guidelines and how they are shared or not shared across school locations. When comparing the schools' mission statement keywords to the NACC guidelines, the researchers found that ASHU mission statements shared only one keyword with the NACC Curricular Guidelines: *society*. BS mission statements also shared only one common word with the NACC Curricular Guidelines: *management*. However, PA mission statements had three words in common wiht the NACC Curricular Guidelines: (1) *nonprofit*, (2) *public*, and (3) *effective*. The researchers expected the words *nonprofit* and *public* to be used frequently, but determined that the word *effective* added little meaning to the results.

There were two noteworthy absences from the NACC guidelines. The word *leadership* was missing as a key term in the guidelines, and instead we found the word *management*. Both PA and BS mission statements shared the term *leadership*, whereas only BS mission statements used the term *management*. In addition, neither mission statements nor the NACC guidelines mentioned the term *entrepreneurship*. With the recent emphasis on social entrepreneurship in the sector, that is surprising.

Table 4

NACC Guidelines

Word	Frequency	ASHU	PA	BS
Nonprofit	61	–	Yes	–
Organizations/Organizational	31	–	–	–
Social/Societal	25	Yes	–	–
Sector	19	–	–	–
Philanthropy/Philanthropic	19	–	–	–
Volunteer	17	–	–	–
Role	16	–	–	–
Management	14	–	–	Yes
Mission/Missions	13	–	–	–
Theory/Theories	13	–	–	–
Financial	10	–	–	–
Public	10	–	Yes	–
Action	9	–	–	–
Development	9	–	–	–
Effective	9	–	Yes	–
Marketing	9	–	–	–
Strategies	9	–	–	–

Note. List total *n* = 17.

Conclusion

This research has important implications for the best place debate and the accreditation debate. Currently, practitioners and scholars are debating the best location for nonprofit management programs (Mirabella & Wish, 2000). Additionally, the field also lacks consensus in regard to the question of accreditation for nonprofit management programs (Hoefer, 2003). In this research, we found that PA schools were the only type of school with the keyword *nonprofit* in their mission statements. Additionally, we found that PA schools had the highest level of keywords that matched the NACC Curricular Guidelines.

Despite having a higher average word count per mission statement, ASHU mission statements only shared one keyword with the NACC guidelines. Additionally, BS mission statements had the lowest average number of words and had only one keyword in common with the NACC guidelines. Academic institutions at the college level need to consider whether their mission statements accurately reflect the programs and the communities they serve. The third sector is a critical component of the U.S. economy, making up approximately 9% of GDP (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Further, the sector fulfills the societal need of stepping into the gaps and providing services not offered by the private or government sector. Academic institutions should not discount the importance of the sector to society and to the educational content provided to students regardless of disciplinary affiliation.

A strong connection to mission has a cascading effect on curriculum. From the perspective of assessment, faculty leading nonprofit programs may find it difficult to connect their program outcomes or course outcomes to the larger mission of the college. This has the potential to dilute the direction and continuity of the program. This could be an argument for the adoption of a nonprofit-focused accrediting body. At the macro level, this approach provides a strong foundation for the discipline. At the micro level, it provides programs, degrees, and certificates across academia with a stronger direction that they may not be receiving from their colleges because of variances in location and approach to mission. Future research should consider a broader analysis of mission statements in nonprofit-related programs beyond NACC-affiliated schools.

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