Chapter 18
Countering Bad Press about Higher Education with Institutional Vision

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ABSTRACT

This chapter summarizes findings from several investigations that have performed a DICTION-based content analysis of the mission and vision statements of distinctive types of academic institutions. Key linguistic components found to constitute a well-conceived, viable, and easily diffused institutional vision were isolated, measured, and compared to normative scores gathered from a nationwide sample of colleges and universities. Findings revealed significant stylistic differences across institution types regarding clarity, complexity, pragmatics, optimism, and the ability to unify the campus community. In doing so, they provided a prescription for how mission and vision statements can better serve as guiding, governing, and self-promotional documents, particularly in times of crisis, change, and negative press.

INTRODUCTION

U.S. institutions of higher education have certainly received their share of bad press. According to Claussen (2011), national U.S. news magazines have devoted almost no attention to the core functions and significant achievements of higher education over the past decade, emphasizing instead big tuition hikes and student loan debt, underrepresentation of minorities on campuses, and backroom deals by elite universities. Marek (2005) found that 51.8% of all national news stories contained no positive evaluative statements about higher education and 36.5% contained neither positive nor negative statements.

More specifically, feature articles in *The Wall Street Journal* (Wildavsky, 2009) and *Newsweek* (McArdle, 2012) reported that college is a poor financial investment, and *Forbes* referred to today's college campus as "a place occupied by unserious students learning too little" (Karlgaard, 2006). *Bloomberg* recently noted that excessive spending was "killing higher education" (Taylor, 2012) while a *New York Times* headline announced "Colleges Spend More on Recreation than Class" (Dillon, 2010), which was not only false but was readily picked up by dozens of other media outlets before the story was corrected (Ashburn, 2011).

"Higher education," observed Marquis (2011), "is under attack by the news media and it is impacting public opinion." A recent Pew Research

study (Pew Research Center, 2011) found that 57% of Americans surveyed felt that higher education does not provide a comparable value for the cost and 75% agreed with national news reports that college is unaffordable for a majority of Americans. Yeoman (2011) suggested that the news media have been taking particular notice of the low graduation rates and low post-graduate earnings at many for-profit colleges, which are generalizing to audience perceptions of all higher education institutions (see, also, Berrett, 2012; Gramling, 2011). So, too, is the mainstream media's often-negative portrayal of historically black colleges and universities (see Riley, 2010) which, according to Gasman and Bowman (2011), misleads the public and can exacerbate problems some HBCUs already face.

Some scholars have suggested that many of these misleading portrayals are due to fewer reporters in traditional media outlets assigned to higher education (see Altbach, 2011; Mangan, 2010). However, Claussen (2011) and others (see Donoghue, 2010) have claimed that this negativity is fueled by an anti-intellectualism that pervades the mass media. Regardless of the cause, Wilson (2011) observed "universities have found it harder to shape their image," particularly with the instant news dissemination over the web and the explosion of social media. This, in turn, allows media coverage to shape public policy debates on public education inadvertently:

Universities and colleges across the country are full of good ideas and policies that never make the transformation from the lab to the market. One reason is the lack of marketing knowledge amongst university administrators and a misunderstanding of how the media covers complex topics.

The practice of marketing and public relations for higher education, suggested Marek (2005), has become more and more important:

There is general agreement in many scholarly journals that education does not tell its story well. Calls are made for higher education to shape public opinion proactively, moving it toward metaphors and understandings that are more favorable to the current theoretical basis and practice in higher education.

The elite institutions do not fall under this same pressure, as their brands are rooted in such a strong tradition of providing an exceptional and rigorous education. However, they too are finding it difficult to make their value proposition to prospective students and donors in light of the bad press that surrounds them (Friedman, 2011; Sei-Hill, Carvalho, & Cooksey, 2007; Wilhelm, 2012).

MAIN FOCUS

Institutional Vision in Higher Education

Institutional vision is the means by which a college or university's character and value is identified and communicated within the academic community and to outside communities. It is here that an institution's aspirations are recognized, commitment is established and expectations are reinforced (see Fox, 2003; Pekarsky, 1998). Institutional vision defines the kinds of human beings the academic establishment is attempting to cultivate and recognizes the skills, sensibilities, values, attitudes and understandings students should be acquiring during their education (Fox, 1997).

For most colleges and universities, the declaration of their institutional vision takes the form of a mission statement and/or a vision statement. Mission statements typically define the physical, social, fiscal, religious and political contexts in which that institution exists. Vision statements complement these characteristics, but transcend them as well. They form a set of aspirations for

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