Clear and Consistent Institutional Objectives

At most colleges, process has taken over, leaving purpose to shift for itself. Objectives rarely surface when questions of policy and practice are raised. Faculty and staff seldom ask whether the activities and experiences offered by the college environment actually facilitate academic and personal development. Often the only person concerned about objectives is the catalogue writer, who raises a question every two or three years when it is time for revision. Consciousness of purpose has given way to deference to tradition and authority or uncritical acceptance of current practice. Innovation and experimentation, if they occur at all, are often undertaken or borrowed with no apparent thought to institutional objectives.

Need for Objectives

Boyce (1967, p. 2) found a pervasive absence of clear and consistent objectives and defined the issue as a central concern: "During our study we found divisions on campus, conflicting priorities and competing interests that diminish the intellectual and social quality of the undergraduate experience and restrict the
capacity of the college effectively to serve its students. At most colleges and universities we visited, these special points of tension appeared with such regularity and seemed so continuously to sap the vitality of the baccalaureate experience that we have made them the focus of this report."

At most institutions, administrators and faculty as well as students are caught in the machinery. The main thing is to keep it running smoothly. Squirt oil where it squeaks. If that does not work, replace the part or redesign it until it functions again. Comfort becomes the prime criterion. For administrators, it is a smoothly functioning institution, a shiny image, solid financial security. For professors, it is minimal teaching and maximum time for professional advancement and personal interest, two office hours per week to keep individual students at a safe distance, lectures that can become books and articles. For students, it is freedom to study as much or as little as they are inclined to do, time for social pleasures, and good grades earned with little effort. The assertions may be exaggerated, but the basic point is not—comfort does not always accompany significant development; institutional purposes are not always best realized when things go smoothly.

As Boyer (1987, p. 3) emphasizes, "Scrambling for students and driven by marketplace demands, many undergraduate colleges have lost their sense of mission. They are confused about their mission and how to impart shared values on which the vitality of both higher education and society depends. The disciplines have fragmented themselves into smaller and smaller pieces, and undergraduates find it difficult to see patterns in their courses or to relate what they learn to life."

Some institutions can be clear about their mission but not clear about what that mission implies for student learning and development. Typical mission statements include eloquently formulated goals. For example, some goals related to student development are included in this mission statement from an energetic public institution that aims to become a "University of the twenty-first century" (George Mason University Board of Visitors, 1991, p. 12):

The University will be an institution of international academic reputation providing superior edu-
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cation enabling students to develop critical, analytical, and imaginative thinking and to make well-founded ethical decisions. It will respond to the call for interdisciplinary research and teaching not simply by adding programs but by rethinking the traditional structure of the academy.

The University will prepare students to address the complex issues facing them in society and to discover meaning in their own lives. It will encourage diversity in its student body and undergraduate, graduate, and professional courses of study that are interdisciplinary and innovative. The University will energetically seek ways to interact with and serve the needs of the student body.

Though more effective than most, statements like these remain abstract about outcomes for students. They provide an excellent point of departure, however, for identifying much more specific objectives.

The president of the university whose mission was just described cleary articulates the distinctive characteristics of this forward-looking institution contrasting new directions with earlier constants (Johnson, 1996):

Two distinct models of the university come to mind. One is the classical image of the ivory tower, divorced from surrounding events, indifferent to materialistic values, immersed in activities of the mind, detached from all worlds but its own. The other is the interactive university, alert to trends in the society, be they international, national, regional or local, and sensitive to the potential symmetry in the relation between the university and its many constituencies, oriented to service in the broadest sense, which includes teaching and research, rubbing shoulders with potential consumers of the university’s human and intellectual products; immersed in the turbulent environment; and honoring multiple faculty roles inside and outside the institution, with regard to influencing the future...[pp. 14-15].
After all, much of the structure and organization of a modern American university bears the marks of the industrial era, of the factory system. Indeed, it was that great gulping expansion when industrial America capitalized the machine simplification of human needs that the undergraduate college, the academic department, the graduate school, and professional training formats were all invented. Indeed even the semester-hour credit was an invention of that period, and perhaps a significant one, since any student’s view reveals the factory model: quality standards for task materials; a process which is synchronous, serial, and uniform, output which is standardized and graded. While other institutions in our society, including our current factories, have customized their services and products, universities remain locked in an organization which is an artifact of an age now gone [pp. 12-13].

An intense university must also be interdisciplinary if it is to have educational programs that respond to local, regional, national, and international needs. Knowledge packaged according to discipline based departments does not address complex social issues. Individual faculty talent must be distributed across departments and schools. Teaching and learning must occur in residential units, the library, and the university center, as well as in classrooms and faculty offices. Education, research, and service cannot go forward on a single comprehensive campus but must be created and carried out collaboratively in diverse locations in the region and elsewhere. These approaches—interactive, interdisciplinary, and distributed—and the innovative new programmatic elements they have attracted creative and talented faculty members and administrators as well as external political and financial support for new ventures. The three words provide oral exchanges, printed material, new program proposals, and task forces concerned with institutional development. But they have not yet led to equally clear and visible objectives for student
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Learning and development. No similarly shared language exists among faculty members, administrators, and student service professionals about key outcomes for students, appropriate for the twenty-first century, that would be consistent with this powerful institutional orientation.

That absence was dramatically illustrated by a proposed new general education core that resulted from three years of hard work by a highly competent and concerned faculty committee. Each of the new courses articulated its own objectives, but the proposal omitted any indication of general objectives that the core intended to fulfill. The problem hit home when a university task force was charged with creating the conceptual basis for a new university center that would integrate a core library, a diverse set of student activities, facilities for student-faculty interaction, and eating and recreational spaces. The only way to arrive at some sense of the core objectives was to analyze those mentioned for individual courses and look for overlap among them.

Impact of Clear Objectives

The basic point is that clear and consistent objectives, stated in terms of desired outcomes for learning and personal development, are critically important in creating an educationally powerful institution. These should not be hidden from course descriptions. They should be explicit and compelling. They should be defined by the members of the college community, taken to heart by campus leaders, and invoked as guides to decision-making.

Research evidence, dating back to Newcomb's (1943) detailed study of Bennington College, indicates that clear and consistent objectives make significant contributions to student development. Bennington College started in the late 1930s with a clearly defined philosophy and with a program consciously designed to be consistent with it. A liberal sociopolitical viewpoint was pervasive. Daughters of Republicans, curiously enough, came to the college. Upon graduation many were, in today's jargon, activists; they held strong liberal beliefs and worked for
them. Those who most identified with the dominant orientation of the college changed most. They enjoyed most prestige on campus; while those who maintained more conservative beliefs were less popular. The converted liberals more often than not married men who were similarly inclined, joined organizations congruent with their interests, and generally created, or moved into, conditions that sustained that orientation. So twenty-five years later, their views were relatively unchanged (Newcomb, Koenig, Flack, and Warwick, 1967). The few institutions that Jacob (1957) found to influence student values had their own prevailing atmosphere where teachers with strong value commitments were accessible to students and where students' value-laden personal experiences were integrated with the general educational program.

Clear and salient objectives make for internally consistent policies, programs, and practices. Such objectives reduce the frequency with which the developmental impact of one component runs counter to that of another. Thus, if development of purpose is a key objective, curricular requirements, teaching styles, and evaluation procedures can be coordinated accordingly, and the resulting arrangements will differ from those where intellectual competence has higher priority.

Clear objectives also help faculty members operate as individuals in ways more congruent with each other. Most of us have little control over our routine behavior. Our manner of teaching, our ways of responding to students, and our allocations of time and energy are all pretty well built in. To modify them in response to differing purposes and differing student needs and characteristics is enormously difficult. It requires a high degree of self-consciousness and unremitting efforts at self-correction. With clear institutional objectives, which we can be consciously attuned to, such self-correction has a chance to operate and in time may enable modification of our own behavior.

As Heath (1968, pp. 242-243) has pointed out in his study of Haverford, "A community that has an ideal or vision has, in effect, expectations of what its members are to become... When such expectations are consistently expressed in all structures and activities of the institution, then different communal..."
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experiences may mutually reinforce one another. It is rare that a specific type of educational experience is very significant in a person's life, as our data so clearly show. Rather, it is the coherence, the consistency, the atmosphere of one's environment that makes its impact upon development. Thus, for example, a college that aims to develop interpersonal competence could generate such specific objectives for students as understanding others, participating in groups, expressing thoughts and feelings, and appreciating cultural differences. It could identify opportunities for students to develop through working on group projects, sharing ideas and talking with friends about their backgrounds, taking classes and workshops that emphasize interpersonal communication, volunteering for a leadership position, or joining a student organization.

Institutional clarity and commitment generate similar clarity and commitment on the part of students, leading not only to increased efficiency but also to higher levels of motivation. Salient institutional objectives keep alive for students their reasons for being in college, and for being at that particular college. They can then organize time and energy more consciously to reach those objectives they value. Furthermore, when institutional objectives are explicit and widely shared, students reach each other, thus, whether the objective is development of intellectual competence or development of tolerance or identity, conversational content and pattern of relationships become organized around those goals.

Hayter (1987, pp 59-66) illustrates his research finding as follows:

At a large public university, we asked an associate dean about institutional goals. She pointed to the front leaflet of the university catalog and read a statement that emphasized vaguely worded references to "usable skills," "the expansion of knowledge," and "improvement of the quality of life."

A faculty member in the same institution said the university's goals are meaningless to faculty and students: "I'll bet you a thousand dollars if you asked..."
students. "Do you know what the university's goals are for you?" they would give you blank looks. "We asked and they did. Even the student body president, who might be expected to have a better idea of such things, said: "If there are any goals around here, they haven't been expressed to me."

In contrast, several institutions we visited seem confident of their objectives. One middle-sized college defines its mission as follows:

The college stands for an education that will give each student the skills of communication, the ideas and principles underlying the major areas of modern knowledge, the understanding that learning is a continuous lifetime process, and the courage and enthusiasm to participate in the creation of a better world.

As an urban, church-related university in the West with nearly six thousand students, the statement of purpose stresses the following convictions: "To pursue truth, to strive for excellence in teaching and learning and in scholarly endeavors, and to improve and enrich the community which the University serves and from which it draws its support."

An administrator at the institution said, "I think the distinctive dimension of our university is the religious emphasis. I think there's something distinctive about the people who come here. A graduate of our university will bring certain moral and religious values with him." What we found impressive was not the printed statement but the way the goals were talked about during the day-to-day decision making. This university had a clear idea of what it was trying to accomplish.

As the passage from Boyer illustrates, when institutional objectives are taken seriously, in time another factor begins to operate. Because the objectives are those of "this college," they can be perceived as somewhat outside and beyond any particular student. We can thus become identified with them and develop missionary zeal, our own self-interest is tied up with our
realization of the college objectives and the same realization on the part of others. Under such conditions, campus visitors may frequently be exhorted to modify their behavior and orientation to agree with the particular objectives, and the virtues of the institution in fostering integrity, social concerns, breadth of perspective, highly developed cognitive skills, or whatever the dominant objectives may be are persuasively extolled.

When faculty and students have taken the objectives seriously, they come to pervade various aspects of the institution, affecting parental rules, academic and nonacademic expectations and requirements, student-faculty relationships, and admissions criteria. This then leads to a third phenomenon—self-selection by prospective students and faculty members, which adds momentum and provides for self-perpetuation. Thus, in time, a community of shared ideas and goals becomes a reality sustained by processes of self-selection, which operate with increasing force and subtlety. The evidence for student self-selection when institutional objectives are clear and pervasive is abundant and unequivocal (Astin, 1964; Pace, 1962; Stern, 1964; Alverno College Faculty, 1962; Loucker, Cromwell, and O'Brien, 1966; Morekowsl and Doherty, 1983).

Alverno College gives us an excellent example of the power of clearly articulated objectives taken seriously. Alverno describes the eight abilities it wants its students to develop (Schulitz, 1992, p. 5):

1. **Communication.** The competent communicator habitually makes meaningful connections between self and audience, with well-chosen words and with and without the aid of graphics, electronic media and computers.

2. **Analysis.** The competent analyzer is a clear thinker and a critical thinker. She fuses experience, reason, and training into considered judgment.

3. **Problem Solving.** The competent problem solver gets done what needs to be done. The ability overlaps with and uses all other abilities.

4. **Valuing in Decision Making.** The responsible decision maker is reflective and empathic in approaching the value issues in her life. She habitually seeks to understand the moral
dimensions of decisions and accepts responsibility for the consequences of actions taken in all facets of her life. She understands and is sensitive to a variety of perspectives and experiences in making her own decisions.

5. Social Intelligence. The competent inspector knows how to get things done in committees, task forces, team projects, and other group efforts. She elicits views of others and helps reach conclusions.

6. Global Perspectives. The person who takes multiple perspectives articulates interconnections between and among diverse opinions, ideas, and beliefs about global issues. She makes informed judgments and tests out her own position.


8. Aesthetic Response. The authentically responsive person articulates an informed response to artistic works which is grounded in knowledge of multiple frameworks and exposure to a variety of artistic forms. She is able to make meaning out of aesthetic experiences and to articulate reasons for her choice of aesthetic expression.

Like every college, Alverno expects a student to learn a certain amount of subject matter. It posits that a student is best prepared for the future with a combination of subjects that includes the arts and humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences. But as valuable as it is, this knowledge alone is not enough. Woven through all classes are activities that help students integrate it with successively higher levels of sophistication in each of the eight abilities. A history course, for example, helps a student analyze and communicate historical knowledge. A science course includes among its goals the formulation and solution of scientific problems. The eight abilities give backbone to Alverno's curriculum, uniting it with a common purpose for teaching and an organizing framework for learning.

Students choose a course for both the subject matter and the abilities it offers. At the beginning of each course, a student "contracts" to advance in several of the eight abilities. Faculty have defined six levels of sophistication for each of the eight abil-
4. Develop facility in making value judgments and in-dependent decisions:
   Level 1—Identify own values.
   Level 2—Identify and analyze values in artistic and humanistic works.
   Level 3—Relate values to scientific and technological developments.
   Level 4—Engage in valuing in decision making in multiple contexts.
   In majors and areas of specialization:
   Level 5—Analyze and formulate the value foundation/framework of a specific area of knowledge, in its theory and practice.
   Level 6—Apply own theory of value and the value foundation of an area of knowledge in a professional context.

2. Develop global perspectives:
   Level 1—Assess own knowledge and skills to think about and act on global concerns.
   Level 2—Analyze global issues from multiple perspectives.
   Level 3—Articulate understanding of interconnected local and global issues.
   Level 4—Apply frameworks in formulating a response to global concerns and local issues in majors and areas of specialization.
   In majors and areas of specialization:
   Level 5—Generate theoretical and pragmatic approaches to global problems, within a disciplinary or professional context.
   Level 6—Develop responsibility toward the global environment in others.
Alverno’s Office of Research and Evaluation found that graduates consistently develop these abilities. In addition, every student must fulfill the requirements for a major and a support area. “Annually, over 90 percent of Alverno’s graduates put their degrees to work in areas related to their college major within six months of graduation. Nearly 90 percent of Alverno’s graduates eventually pursue graduate studies after earning their baccalaureate degrees” (Schmitz, 1992, p. 5).

Alverno’s clearly articulated objectives and the thoroughness with which they pervade the academic program, the general educational climate, its assessment program, and its institutional research demonstrate the educational power of such arrangements. They illustrate Pascarella and Terenzini’s synthesis of research and comments concerning its policy implications (1991, p. 655).

We have already noted that the effects of specific within-college programs, conditions, or experiences consistently appear to be smaller than the overall net effect of college. This is no surprise, since it is probably unrealistic to expect any single experience to be a significant determinant of change for all students. Nonetheless, this conclusion implies that the enhancement of the educational impact of a college is most likely if policy and programmatic efforts are broadly conceived and diverse. It also implies, however, that they should be consistent and integrated. There appear to be only a few specific programmatic or policy levers that administrators can hope to pull and produce a significant effect across the campus. Indeed, it may be potentially more productive for faculty, administrators, and researchers to conceive of the environments of any given campus not as unitary and global but rather as an amalgam of many diverse subenvironments, each of which has an influence (Baird, 1988). Furthermore, while the impact of any single subenvironment may be small or modest, the cumulative effect of all
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... if they are mutually supportive — can be substantial.

Thus, instead of singular, large, specially designed, and campuswide programs to achieve a particular institutional goal, efforts might more profitably focus on ways to embed the pursuit of that goal in all appropriate institutional activities. For example, while special speakers and campuswide meetings may be one way to increase racial tolerance, it may be even more effective if awareness of and sensitivity to the issue permeate the selection of course content, the cultural activities of the campus (such as speakers, plays, concerts, art shows); student admissions and faculty and administrator hiring and reward systems; committee appointments; selection of trustees; audit and unambiguous responses to activities or incidents that are racially biased; and so on. In short, rather than seeking large levers to pull in order to promote change on a large scale, it may well be more effective to pull more small levers more often.

Clear objectives concerning student learning and development, widely shared and emphasized in oral and written communications, help ensure internal consistency between the "small levers." The particular vectors of development affected, of course, will depend on the particular emphasis of a given institution. For one college, competence is most important; for another, integrity; for a third, autonomy and purpose. But it is the clarity and consistency that determine whether development will be fostered. In their absence, conflicting forces and ambiguous messages may immobilize students, leaving them passive, uncommitted, and inarticulate about what they have gained from their college experience.