

Library Mission Statements

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NOT LONG AGO, A COLLEAGUE WHO HAS BEEN WORKING FOR THE PAST FEW years as the director of a seminary library related to me her frustrations with the administration at her school. Despite having worked hard to implement new programs, this director was under pressure from the dean to make deep cuts to the library's budget line for collections. With the recent loss of several library staff members due to resignations, there was also pressure on the director to not fill the positions that had been vacated. Her attempts to revise the remaining staff positions to cover the work caused by these vacancies elicited complaints from the staff who remained. In frustration, my colleague told me with dismay that she suddenly realized that all her creative planning for library programs and events mattered not at all to the dean, who,

she believed, really just wanted her to spend as little as possible and keep the remaining staff happy and uncomplaining.

In my nearly twenty years as a theological librarian, I have often heard similar grumblings from colleagues about administrators and faculty who just do not quite understand and value the work of the library in the same way that we librarians do. Some of our administrators seem to see us as a repository for physical books and nothing more. I once encountered an administrator who questioned the need for a technical services librarian to catalog the books, not understanding why we just couldn't place them randomly on the shelves after purchasing them! Another time, an administrator at my seminary questioned why we needed to keep buying books at all—didn't we already have plenty? I have also encountered faculty members who distrust the librarians to make appropriate book selections, and, of course, there are all the times we make efforts to provide creative and innovative instructional programs, only to have these efforts overlooked and ignored. Even getting administrators to commit to something as essential as time set aside for library orientation for incoming students can be a challenge when the need for such instruction is not apparent.

But, as my colleague also learned, even library staff members can be so focused on the concerns of their own jobs that they lose sight of the larger purposes for which the library exists. When staff depart and budgets are cut, library staff may need to take on new responsibilities, yet staff can be resistant to these exigencies, especially when they are comfortable within the familiar domains of their own work. Of course, identifying and communicating the larger purposes to which each staff member's work contributes is primarily the responsibility of the director or head librarian. But when higher-ups are not on board with what the director sees as the mission of the library, it is nearly impossible for the director to lead the staff effectively toward that mission.

While a library mission statement is not a panacea for these problems, it can be a helpful step toward clarifying for all parties the library's purpose and priorities. And I would argue that it is not simply the existence of a mission statement that can be helpful, but that the very act of crafting a mission statement can be especially beneficial. Of course, how the mission statement is developed—particularly who contributes and decides on what should be the library's mission—is crucial. In the following, I

will make the argument for the benefits not simply of having a clear mission statement, but of doing the hard work of engaging with key stakeholders to develop a mission statement.

Mission statements first became popular in the business world in the early 1980s (Alegra et al. 2018, 456) and were tied to the growing popularity of strategic planning that took off in the 1970s (Vizeu et al., 2013, 179). Academic institutions and libraries subsequently adopted the practice set in motion by the corporate world. Yet, interestingly, the term “mission” is theological in origin, and thus it is perhaps fitting for theological libraries to express an understanding of their purpose in terms of a “mission.” As noted by Vizeu and Matitz in an article arguing for the religious origin of organizational and corporate behavior,

...the word mission comes from the Latin *mitto*, meaning I send. Originally the term was used to describe the sending of the Son of God, Jesus, to mankind and later the sending of the Holy Spirit to dwell among the Christians. . . . The mission became the essential task of every Christian, according to the directions of the Gospels of the New Testament. (Vizeu et al. 2018, 184)

The idea of “mission” was central to Christianity and informed the idea of evangelization as the work of missionaries who were sent around the world spreading the gospel.

Although the “mission” of the theological library may not be identical to the work of Christian missionaries in spreading the gospel, it is not unrelated. Most theological libraries exist within theological institutions: schools of theology, seminaries, and divinity schools. The work of the library has its own specificity, but it fits within the context of the larger work of its parent institution. And the mission of most theological institutions is related in some sense to the mission of the church—the larger Christian community.

Mission statements communicate an organization’s primary purpose and reason for being. Just as the origin of the term “mission” is an active verb—the Latin *missio*—the mission statement describes not simply what the institution is, but what it *does*. The mission statement is not merely descriptive but is proscriptive; it speaks about what the institution’s core purpose is and points toward the goals that it must accomplish in order to further this core purpose. The mission statement makes explicit what should

be implicit in all the activities of the organization. Although proscriptive in nature, the mission does not need to define in detail how the organization will accomplish its mission, although it may include this information. What is most important is for the mission statement to provide a focus or purpose for the organization.

The theological library's mission should be aligned with the mission of its parent institution. It is not necessarily the same, however, as the seminary or school of theology is different from the library. But the library's mission should cohere with the core mission of its parent institution. The two missions should be compatible with one another and, since the library is subordinate to the parent institution, its mission should serve and support the mission of the school.

In addition to identifying the core purpose of the library, the library's mission statement should also identify the community the library serves. In most cases, for the theological library, this will primarily be the students and faculty of the parent institution, but it may also include other scholars, alumni, and other patrons. Again, because it is important for the library's mission to align with and support the mission of its parent institution, it is helpful for the mission statement to make this connection explicit. And while it is not necessary to define in the mission statement how the library will accomplish its purpose, it can be helpful to include this information.

There is more than one audience for the library's mission statement, and the mission statement may serve different but overlapping purposes for each distinct audience. First, there is the audience of the library staff itself. A mission statement may serve as a statement of identity for the staff, and it may help staff members to recognize how their individual contributions to the work of the library come together for a unified purpose. Mission statements can also help staff prioritize their work, because they can use the mission statement as a benchmark against which they measure the work they are actually doing. In the same way, a mission statement can help staff guard against "mission creep," that is, the tendency to take on more and more tasks that may in fact be extraneous to the central mission of the library (McMullen 2015, 119–210). The mission statement helps to center the staff to understand themselves as part of a single team focused on the same purpose. The mission statement can also help staff be more flexible because it can help them see how modifying how they do

their work may be necessary for the sake of adhering to the library's mission, which remains stable and consistent. And if the library's mission statement is aligned with the mission statement of the parent institution, this can help staff to feel more directly a part of the larger educational organization within which the library exists. From experience, I have often observed that library staff can sometimes feel themselves cut off from the rest of the seminary community; a mission statement that connects the library to the seminary can help them feel more directly a part of the larger work of the seminary.

Administrators, especially seminary presidents and deans, are another important audience for the mission statement. The mission statement serves to set forth explicitly what the library's purpose is and, for some administrators, this can be a revelation. During times when schools are under increasing financial pressure, the library can be a tempting target for budget cuts. The value the library provides to the seminary is not always evident to higher-ups in the administration. A mission statement can help to provide a strong defense of the library's necessity and value. Some administrators simply do not fully understand what is involved in the work of the library staff. Some administrators even see the library as no more than a repository for physical books, and thus question the need for the library (and its staff) when there is the Internet. A mission statement, especially if it is explicit about the library's connection to the mission of the school, can serve to mitigate these misunderstandings about the library's importance and value.

A similar case can be made for the purpose the mission statement serves with respect to faculty. As with administrators, faculty may not be aware of how the library contributes to the mission of the school beyond simply obtaining and housing books needed for faculty research and teaching. Although faculty will be less directly involved than administrators in decisions concerning library budgets, when the threat of budget cuts arrives, having faculty on board who support and understand more fully the mission of the library can be of enormous importance.

Similarly, while students would not have the same clout as faculty, it is helpful for students to be aware of the mission of the library. Students will likely have even more direct personal experience of library services and resources than faculty, particularly if they benefit from library instruction and reference ser-

vices. Similarly, sometimes students are not aware that library staff are there to actually help them. Letting students know that service in support of the students is core to the library's mission through the mission statement will encourage students to take advantage of the services offered by the library, will improve student research and learning, and will in turn increase awareness throughout the school of the library's essential value.

In addition to administrators, faculty, and students, the mission statement can also serve to provide a sense of the library's identity and value to alumni and other potential donors to the school or the library. This last group will probably have the least amount of direct experience with the library's collections and services, which is why having a written statement that clearly explains the library's purpose is even more important in reaching this audience. They may rarely, if ever, enter the library, yet a mission statement can provide them with an understanding of the centrality of the library to the school's mission.

The task of crafting the mission statement is nearly as important as the mission statement itself. As we have seen, there are various stakeholders with an interest in the library: library staff, seminary administrators, faculty, students, alumni. It is crucial, when crafting the library's mission statement, to get input from members of each of these groups. Doing so can be enlightening, especially when what emerges are somewhat different understandings of the library's core activities and purposes. While it can be disturbing to discover that the faculty and administration understand the purpose of the library to be quite different from how the staff see this, having these conversations is important. Such conversations allow for a mutual education. Library staff can educate the faculty and administration about some of the unseen yet vitally important aspects of the library's work, and faculty and administrators can in turn identify their expectations for the library, especially with respect to the library's role in supporting the mission of the school.

In addition to soliciting input from a variety of stakeholders, it can be helpful in crafting the mission statement to consider the mission statements of peer institutions. Most important, of course, is to consider the mission statement of the parent institution and to try to make the connection between the mission of the library and the mission of the seminary explicit in the library's mission statement. While the mission statement itself should be

fairly concise, in crafting the mission statement it can be helpful to provide a document that unpacks and explains it in more detail, especially in terms relating it to the mission of the seminary. Finally, after its creation, the mission statement should not be set aside and forgotten but should instead be consulted regularly and used to help determine specific goals. To paraphrase from the words of a dean in describing the mission statement for a seminary, the library mission statement “both reflects and shapes the [library’s] commitments, ideally in a continuous process of accountability and revisioning” (Jenkins 2007, 19). In using the mission statement in this way, it may become clear at some point that the library is failing to live up to its mission; but it also may emerge that the library’s mission has changed and the mission statement needs to be updated.

Thus, the mission statement serves a number of purposes. It provides a statement that identifies the library by naming its core purpose, and ideally situates that mission in relationship to the mission of its parent institution. The mission statement should both reflect the reality of the library’s work and also be proscriptive and even aspirational. The mission statement provides the staff with a shared sense of identity, linking their individual contributions to a united purpose. The mission statement provides a benchmark against which staff can measure their accomplishments and identify priorities. It also serves to set boundaries to the work of the library and to prevent staff from being pulled into activities that are extraneous to the library’s mission. Finally, for seminary administrators, faculty, and students, the mission statement helps to make clear the value and centrality of the library to the life of the seminary.

Works Cited

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