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Mission Restatement via Heritage Rediscovery: A Case Study

James D. Evans

Most institutions of higher education periodically review and revise their mission statements, with the primary goal of modernizing the school's philosophy to make it more "relevant" to current times. Lindenwood University used a different approach to renewing its mission statement: We took a serious look at our historical and philosophical roots and then accentuated those parts of our present service that best represent the expression of our institutional heritage. In the midst of this creative process, we discovered several important principles, including:

- that the founders of a university create an institutional theme that can transcend specific groups that occupy the institution at different times;
- that a university can become more successful by moving back toward the basic theme that led to its founding;
- conversely, that a university might begin to flounder when it loses track of its origins and strays in other directions;
- that a university should periodically explore its heritage and develop adaptive ways to express its fundamental purpose within an ever-changing higher education landscape.

Lindenwood is the fastest growing university in Missouri, having increased its student body by a factor of 10 in just 10 years. It is also the second oldest institution of higher education west of the Mississippi. I will document how we started to veer from our historical theme during the 1970s and 80s, how we began to rediscover our heritage about a decade ago, and how we have more consciously sought to honor our traditional identity through a reaffirmation of our original mission. I will also convey how a deliberate return to our roots has played a significant role in our recent prosperity.

A Brief History of the Institution

Pioneer woman Mary Sibley founded Lindenwood University in 1827 in the frontier town of Saint Charles, Missouri – near the point along the Missouri River where Lewis and Clark embarked on their trailblazing expedition to the Pacific Northwest. The "Lindenwood Female College" began as a finishing school for young women from well-to-do families, but, from its inception, was committed to combining professional issues with academic pursuits, the social with the intellectual, and the spiritual with the physical. In short, Mary Sibley brought holistic higher education to the American frontier. Two other major characteristics were to become defining features of this residential liberal arts school through the next century and a half: (1) An unwavering focus on the educational needs of each individual and (2) an emphasis on character development in the context of Judeo-Christian values. Mrs. Sibley stated that Lindenwood's basic mission is to produce ". . . enlightened, accomplished, and useful members of society." (St. Charles County Court, 1856). Lindenwood graduates would have not only intellectual prowess but also spiritual purpose, practical skills, and a strong sense of social responsibility (see Coker, 1997).

Lindenwood became a Presbyterian college in 1853, a four-year college in 1918, and a comprehensive university in 1997. Historical reviews and summaries of its development indicate that the University held to its original purpose, customs, and ideals through the mid-1960s. Up to that point, through varying times and fortunes, it had experienced gradual overall growth in its student body, and its programs and finances had stabilized in a healthy condition. Like so many private postsecondary schools, however, Lindenwood began to feel the impact of the economic pressures and rapid cultural changes that marked the 60s and 70s decades. In 1969, it attempted to strengthen its financial

base by becoming a coeducational institution. That fundamental change was associated with a relaxing of some of the social rules and a gradual shift away from traditional religious ideals and American-frontier values. By the mid-1970s the school's historically important focus on combining character development with intellectual growth and was displaced somewhat by a lopsided emphasis on academic development – a trend that also tended to discount the importance of community service and work experience.

In 1975, the school altered its basic character even further. Now doing business under the name of The Lindenwood Colleges, it had become a federation of four rather disjointed enterprises: The Lindenwood College for Women, The Lindenwood College for Men, The Lindenwood Evening College, and The Lindenwood College for Individualized Education. Graduate programs had also been added to the mix. That the institution was grappling with an identity crisis is evident in this extract from one of its mission statements in that era:

The Colleges offer a wide range of undergraduate majors, both in the disciplines of the liberal arts and sciences and in career-oriented areas. Its distinctive and flexible educational programs, offered in both traditional and innovative formats, are designed to meet the individual needs of a diverse student body, which includes both traditional and nontraditional college-age students. The Colleges also offer a number of graduate programs, which are intended to meet the needs of working adults in the St. Louis metropolitan area.

During the 70s and 80s decades, the school suffered annual operating deficits and accumulated substantial indebtedness over the same period. It had lost sight of its historical mission, and, with that, its market appeal diminished. The market was still “out there,” but Lindenwood had drifted away from the institutional characteristics that would best serve that population. In the spring of 1989, the number of students had dropped below 1,000, the financial situation was dire, and there was no well-defined sense of purpose and direction. In view of the school's seemingly inexorable decline, the board of directors considered closing the doors permanently.

You Can Go Home

Instead of shutting down one of America's oldest institutions of higher education, Lindenwood's board made a courageous decision to “refound” the school. This involved three major actions. First, the board recruited an experienced president, and directed him to transform the university into a carefully managed institution. Second, it worked with the president and key members of the university community to rebuild the mission in a way that would bring Lindenwood back to its historical purpose and objectives. Third, the university community committed itself to implementing the rebuilt mission throughout all academic programs and in the day-to-day operations of the campus.

These actions launched a new era for Lindenwood that was based on a return to the fundamental precepts that had given rise to the original frontier university: individualized, holistic, values-oriented higher education that combines the practical with the academic. Several significant changes and initiatives followed adoption of the revised mission: Dormitory visitation rules were re-established and enforced; a code of conduct was developed and communicated to the students, faculty, and staff; programs aimed at developing a strong work ethic were put in place; the ideal of community service was made a prevailing expectation; a number of co-curricular opportunities and student organizations were added; a serious, individualized advising system was implemented; and the general education curriculum was strengthened to merge a traditional “liberating arts” form of higher education with career preparation. The revised mission was formally expressed in the 1994 version of Lindenwood's mission statement, which is displayed below.

Recognizing the unique possibilities presented by the university's rich frontier heritage, in 1998 Lindenwood acquired the historic homestead built and operated by Daniel Boone, his son, Nathan, and their families in a rural area of Missouri near the university. The “Boone Campus” is the headquarters of Lindenwood's Center for the Study of American Culture and Values, which will offer programs in American Studies and Environmental Studies.

The 1994 Revision of Lindenwood's Mission Statement

Lindenwood College is an independent, liberal arts college with an historical relationship with the Presbyterian Church. Its programs are value-centered and intend to create a genuine community of learning, uniting all involved in a common enterprise.

Lindenwood College seeks to offer undergraduate and graduate programs of high quality that will:

- provide educational experiences that will unite the liberal arts with professional and pre-professional studies in an atmosphere of academic freedom distinguished by personal attention of faculty to students;

- foster awareness of social issues, environmental problems, political processes, community service, and those values and ethical ideas inherent in the Judeo-Christian tradition and other major world cultures: belief in an ordered, purposeful universe; belief in the dignity of work; belief in the worth and integrity of the individual; belief in the obligations and privileges of citizenship; belief in the value of unrestricted search for truth;

- encourage a pursuit of knowledge and understanding through the rigorous study of a core curriculum of general education and an area of major emphasis, creating the foundation for life-long learning that will provide graduates with the tools and flexibility necessary to cope with future needs and changes; and

- build a deliberately diverse learning community structured around a residential population joined by commuter students of all ages, graduate and undergraduate, in St Charles and other sites, a community without economic barriers limiting access, in which students with different goals may join together in intellectual, social, spiritual, creative, and physical activities.

Lindenwood College's educational programs liberate individuals from limitations, enabling them to pursue rewarding and fulfilling lives.

When linked with tighter overall management of the institution and aggressive recruiting and public relations campaigns, these changes resulted in a period of prosperity that was unprecedented in the university's storied history. By the 1998-99 academic year, the unduplicated student count approached 9,500, the faculty had grown from fewer than 50 professors to more than 140, and the school had experienced nine consecutive years of balanced budgets and increasing revenues.

Mary Sibley also had run a tightly managed school with a resourceful spirit and the same clear purpose. She would have been proud of today's Lindenwood.

The 1999 Mission Restatement

Since Lindenwood reviews – and, if necessary, revises – its mission about every five years, we undertook a new mission-restatement process late in 1998, with the goal of adopting the new document in 1999. We had rediscovered our basic identity and spiritual heritage in the early 1990s, but our institutional self-concept became even more distinct as we proceeded into the later years of that decade. Consequently, we felt a need to restate our mission with even clearer conviction than we had in 1994. The remainder of this paper will describe the issues and procedural steps involved in what we call the “Heritage-rediscovery Approach” to mission restatement. The entire process, from the initial meeting through submission of a final draft to the board of directors, required less than two months.

Who Shall Serve?

The group charged with examining and recommending a revision of the mission was a standing committee of the Lindenwood University Board of Directors – specifically, the Mission and Purpose Committee. The committee consisted of six members of the board and the university president. Three of the board members were appointed specifically because they were also middle-aged Lindenwood alumni, and they would bring historical perspective to the deliberations. The president was considered an essential participant because he would contribute vision to the committee's work. Two senior faculty members were also asked to serve, in *ex officio* capacity, to provide input on the present-day nature and direction of the academic programs. The main principle determining the composition of the committee was that all participants had to have an abiding commitment to the future of the university and its students. Each committee member also had to bring a unique perspective to the team, and the various perspectives had to be complementary in their coverage of issues central to mission formulation.

□ Meeting #1: Initial Considerations and Planning (early November, 1998)

The following items were brought to the table at the first meeting.

- ◇ **According to North Central Association Guidelines, what criteria must a mission statement satisfy?** Chapter 3, *THE GENERAL INSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS, of NCA's Handbook of Accreditation (1997, 19)* specifies that a mission statement should define “the basic character of an institution, including”
 - a brief description of its main educational program(s) “and their purposes”
 - the populations of students served
 - the geographical area served by the institution
 - a description of “how the institution fits within the broader higher education community”

- ◇ **What time line should be followed?** The time line for revising the mission was left open, with the provision that the submission draft should be ready for the board of directors' February, 1999 meeting, which was approximately three months away. The committee would meet about every two weeks until the submission draft was complete. (As it turned out, four 60-90 minute meetings were all that was necessary to complete the task.)

- ◇ **What questions issues should be considered in developing the mission restatement?** We identified several preliminary items to be discussed. For example,
 - the university's relationship to the Presbyterian Church
 - the right to have values-based programs
 - the role of the history and philosophy of our pastAdditional questions included: What kind of school are we? What do we have in common with other kinds of institutions of higher education, and what parts of their mission statements have relevance for us?

The next step: A copy of Lindenwood's 1856 Deed Restrictions, which contained the university's first mission statement, was distributed to each committee member for study. Also, mission statements from a variety of other institutions, both local and distant, were handed out with the understanding that these would be discussed at the next meeting. All these mission statements were available on the Internet.

□ Meeting #2: Review of the Present Mission Statement

After reviewing a dozen college and university mission statements and conducting an item-by-item analysis of Lindenwood's present statement, the committee made the following determinations:

- ◇ **Small is beautiful.** The clearest, most informative mission statements were those that were most concise and pithy. We agreed with the viewpoint of BizPlanIt.Com (1998): “The mission and vision statements set the tone for not only your business plan, but also for your company. . . . Economy of words is critical. This doesn't necessarily mean that they should be short at the expense of effectiveness, but that each word should be powerful and meaningful. Be clear and concise” We found that our present mission statement was too wordy. It attempted to do more than it could, and, consequently, was less effective and informative than it should be. A major part of our restatement task would be to produce a more succinct and cogent document.

- ◇ **There were some basic source documents from which we would work to revise our mission statement.** We selected documents that would represent Lindenwood's past, present, and future directions, respectively. These documents included:
 - Lindenwood's 1856 Deed Restrictions [and mission] document, to revisit the original guiding principles of The Lindenwood Female College
 - Lindenwood's present mission statement, to give us a summary of what areas of service we had been considering important
 - A recently printed educational-philosophy document, titled *The Liberating Arts at Lindenwood University* (1997), which summarized the relationship of Lindenwood's present-day system of higher education to Judeo-Christian ideals and American-frontier values

- The recently published vision statement of Lindenwood’s president, which conveyed the university’s likely future direction

Another generally excellent reference to help guide the mission-restatement process is *Organizational Vision, Values and Mission* (Crisp Publications, Inc., 1994), by Scott, Jaffe, and Tobe.

The next step: The committee chairperson issued these assignments to be completed prior to the next meeting: (1) Each committee participant would study the source documents that had been selected. (2) On the basis of those documents, each participant would prepare a proposed mission statement of 25 or fewer words – a short paragraph that expresses the most essential purpose of the university. *Nota bene:* This last assignment was the key to stimulating the level of thinking necessary to successfully complete the process of mission restatement.

□ **Meeting #3: Development of a Working Draft**

The task of trying to arrive at the most essential elements of Lindenwood’s mission induced the following cognitive operations in the committee members:

- ◇ **Comprehension.** A mission statement, *per se*, should convey a very broad philosophy and purpose (*à la* BizPlanIt, 1998), not a hodgepodge of desiderata and their implications
- ◇ **Analysis.** Some recurring terms found in the participants’ drafts of a brief mission statement represent important connotations and ramifications of the university’s mission. Some of the significant concepts expressed in those drafts included Values Orientation, Merger of Liberal Arts with Professional Studies, Productive/Responsible Citizens, Judeo-Christian Tradition, Holistic Education, Liberal Arts, Individual Attention, Search for Truth, and Lifelong Learning.
- ◇ **More analysis.** A statement of mission and purpose should include three parts:
 1. a brief statement of our essential mission
 2. a statement of what we are committed to (i.e., the ways we *express and realize* our mission)
 3. a brief statement of who we are (institutional self-identity), including mention of our historical roots
- ◇ **Synthesis.** The committee chose an a succinct mission statement that condensed Lindenwood’s various mission concepts into an essential philosophy:

Lindenwood University offers values-centered programs leading to the development of the whole person – an educated, responsible citizen of a global community.

To this core credo, the committee members added a few *specifications of the mission statement*, which “define broad categories of action which the organization should take to realize its mission” (Saint Louis University, 1998),

[statement of our purpose and commitment (*specifications* of how we carry out our mission)]

Lindenwood is committed to providing educational experiences that

- combine professional and pre-professional programs with the liberal arts,
- focus on the talents, interests, and future of the individual student,
- promote diversity and an international perspective,
- support academic freedom and the unrestricted search for truth.
- [to be added to]

and a partial statement of “who we are” (institutional self-identity):

[brief description of who we are, including mention of our historical roots]

Lindenwood is an independent, liberal arts university that has an historical relationship with the Presbyterian Church and is firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian values. . . .

With the creation of this working document, the basic structure of the mission statement was in hand.

The next step: One more meeting was needed to complete the “specifications” and “institutional identity” parts of the mission statement. The chairperson directed the group to focus on what was still needed to finalize those items.

□ **Meeting #4: Completion of the Submission Draft**

Within the first half-hour of the final meeting, the committee members came together on this restatement of Lindenwood’s mission, which was recommended to the full board of directors for adoption.

Lindenwood’s 1999 Mission Statement

Lindenwood University offers values-centered programs leading to the development of the whole person – an educated, responsible citizen of a global community.

Lindenwood is committed to

- providing an integrative liberal arts curriculum,
- offering professional and pre-professional degree programs,
- focusing on the talents, interests, and future of the student,
- supporting academic freedom and the unrestricted search for truth,
- affording cultural enrichment to the surrounding community,
- promoting ethical lifestyles,
- developing adaptive thinking and problem-solving skills,
- furthering lifelong learning.

Lindenwood is an independent, liberal arts university that has an historical relationship with the Presbyterian Church and is firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian values. These values include belief in an ordered, purposeful universe, the dignity of work, the worth and integrity of the individual, the obligations and privileges of citizenship, and the primacy of the truth.

Conclusion

Periodic revision of a university’s mission statement is just good institutional procedure. But mission review and restatement becomes absolutely necessary when the shifting currents of cultural change separate the university from its essential spirit, as represented by its historical values and behavior patterns. In some regions, a school that becomes detached from its roots can lose the population of students that has been its reason for existing. A “Heritage-rediscovery Approach” to mission restatement expressly identifies the essential purpose of the university’s past service, and can bring about a renewed commitment to that purpose in a present-day form.

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