

Departmental Missions, Goals and Assessment¹

An interesting question sometimes raised in academic circles concerns comparing the department not with other departments but with its own ideas of what it ought to be doing. How do the department's activities measure up to the purposes and aspirations of the university and the department? A department cannot compare deeds with aspirations unless it knows to what it aspires. Aspirations can be formally stated in writing or can exist only in the minds of the chairperson and the faculty. A written statement of purpose has certain advantages in maintaining stability and continuity as the department changes. Formulating such a statement also helps department members articulate their feelings about the proper roles and functions in the framework of the college or the institution. Ordinarily, such a statement is called a *mission statement*.

The term *mission statement* may seem a mildly absurd way to categorize an expression of department aspirations; for some persons the work *mission* has quasi-military or religious connotations. Nevertheless, those who control the purse strings, especially administrators and granting agencies, look for and expect to find mission statements in the proposals and requests they read and review. Stroking the hand that feeds you is hardly an intellectual justification for a mission statement, but the case can be argued on other grounds—for example, the need for a broad, covering statement of fundamental purpose. A hallmark of any intelligent activity, especially intellectual activity, is that the participants know what they are about. It is not unreasonable to expect a department to have a sense of what it is doing and where it is going. The mission statement serves as the foundation on which the department builds and justifies the grounds for its existence within its professional aspirations before making final commitments for an academic year. Then if it truly wants to take responsibility for shaping its professional destiny, it will, at the end of the academic year, compare its achievements with earlier aspirations.

Mission statements typically contain both abstract and concrete elements, which may range from the grandiose to the specific. They often contain ideological components representing widely held beliefs about the value of a college education, and they include societal as well as professional aspirations. The idealistic components of the mission statement have strong roots in American culture and continue to be affirmed, despite the odds against their being achieved. The mission statement is often based on two assumptions: that progress is an incremental movement toward some high aim and that the aim will not actually be achieved.

Many departments write their own mission statements, but not all do. Mission statements can be prepared by planning officials, external consultants, legislative committees, administrators, and, of course, faculty committees. Many mission statements have a formal aura about them. They often appear in master plan documents, budget request documents, long-range plans, and development grant applications. Mission statements often contain information and data that serve as guides for making appropriate decisions about a department's commitments. Often the statement about the department that appears in the university catalog stands as a mission statement.

The chair, in conjunction with a faculty committee, should conduct an annual review of the mission statement and bring it up to date, if necessary. Systematic redefinition of the department's mission is appropriate at certain times—for example, after the departure of senior faculty members, when curricular changes are called for, and when resources become

¹ From *Chairing the Academic Department: Leadership Among Peers*, by Allan Tucker. Used with permission from the American Council on Education and the Oryx Press.

so scarce that the department's historic mission cannot be achieved. Listed below are some central characteristics of a good mission statement. Each characteristic is followed by an excerpt from a college or university catalog, but none of the excerpts is a complete mission statement in itself.

- A mission statement clearly defines the department's overall purpose.

The mission of the department is to train professionals who are capable of doing research in the methodology of biostatistics and to apply their statistical and quantitative knowledge to the solution of problems encountered in the community health field. [a biostatistics department]

- A mission statement describes the scope and character of the teaching, research, and service activities of the department. It identifies the persons or groups that the department serves, tells how it serves them, and describes the results of the service

...to provide undergraduate instruction in physics for physics majors and to prepare elementary and secondary pre-service teachers to meet state certification requirements. [a physics department]

...research focused primarily on the pulmonary and cardiovascular system and the effects of environmental agents on human and animal health. [a physiology department]

...meet the needs of commercial fishermen in the southeast by providing extension services. [a fisheries department]

- A mission statement should describe any resources or activities that distinguish the department from others and should emphasize any unique qualities the department may have.

...offers programs in bilingual-bicultural education, with special emphasis in Greek and Hispanic studies. [a foreign language department]

Chairs should beware of mission statements that are too broad and thus fail to show how the department differs from other departments. Other mission statements are too narrow and describe activities in too much detail. A mission statement that meets this criteria is difficult to write.

Statements of Goals and Objectives

Having discussed mission, we can move on to the second and third levels of specificity—*goals* and *objectives*. A goal is a statement of a desired accomplishment which will contribute to the realization of the educational mission of the department. It has a specified or implied end, whereas missions are continuous. This is not to say that all goal statements must indicate the period of time within which they must be achieved. Goals may be short-term or long-term, but they must be realizable sooner or later. To predict when some goals will be reached is sometimes difficult. In such instances, intermediate goals may

be set in order to help develop plans for achieving the goals. The department most assuredly ought to be able to tell when a goal has been accomplished.

In addition to specifying a certain end, goal statements have other characteristics. They represent a logical extension of the mission statement; they are oriented toward specific results; they are explicit; and they are supported by a series of objectives. A *goal*, therefore, is a statement of intention to achieve a specified result that is compatible with and will contribute towards the mission or purpose of the department and institution. It is the end toward which one or more activities are aimed. An *objective* is a statement of intention to achieve a specified result which, when realized, will contribute to the realization of the goal.

Both goal and objective statements indicate projected outcomes and stipulate the activities leading to them. To speak of *objectives* is to speak of the concrete, the observable, the knowable. Although missions and some goals may be ambiguous and imprecise, objectives generally specify some observable product or result. Objectives are, of course, closely related to the goals from which they are derived. Objectives generally are more concerned with short-term effects than are goals and usually specify a time by which the result is expected to be accomplished. Well-stated goals and objectives have these characteristics:

- They are consistent with the missions or goals from which they are derived.
- They are oriented towards specific outcomes.
- They identify activities by which the outcome or result is to be achieved.
- They are measurable in some way.
- They suggest an expected qualitative or quantitative change or accomplishment.
- They stipulate a time by which the result will be achieved.

An example of a goal in an English department is: “To identify entering freshmen with deficiencies in reading and writing skills and to improve those basic skills.”

According to our criteria, the objectives derived from this goal should specify steps that must be taken to identify the freshmen, and the measure of achievement or improvement that would be considered satisfactory by a certain time. Two objectives for this goal might be:

1. To administer and score Test ABC for all freshmen by October 30.
2. To raise the average score of deficient freshmen on Test ABC to the national norm of 540 by May 30.

Objectives that focus exclusively on results are often called outcome statements. Statements that typically describe what students, faculty, staff members, and others do are called activity statements. The second objective in the preceding example, “To raise the average score of deficient freshmen on Test ABC to the national norm of 540 by May 30,” is an activity statement. It could be converted to an outcome statement by rewording it in the following manner: “By May 30, 87 percent of all freshmen will score at least 540 on Test ABC.”

Some faculty members resist stating objectives in quantitative terms because the numbers and percentages that are so often a part of those statements appear to be arbitrary. In some cases such objections are justified. Why specify 87 percent instead of 83 or 90 percent, or any other percent for that matter? There may well be no reason for designating

87 percent except that on the basis of past experience it seems to be an attainable percentage. Good judgment and common sense are needed when stating measurable outcomes.

Activity statements not linked to outcomes do not translate into good statements of objectives. Nevertheless, activity statements frequently are used as objectives because the activities of educational processes are more readily observable than the outcomes. To observe a faculty member teaching and to specify what, where, and for how long he or she teaches is easy; to measure the long-term effects of that teaching is not so easy. When educational objectives are stated primarily as activities, too little emphasis is placed on educational outcomes. Although clearly specifying educational outcomes is an extremely difficult task, faculty discussion of desired outcomes might be beneficial for all. The faculty should be able to distinguish between activities and outcomes, and wherever possible should link outcomes with activities when formulating department objectives.

So goals as well as mission represent the department's aspirations. Goals are simply more specific and action-oriented expressions of the results that the department hopes to achieve. Some departments feel that goals must be expressed in behavioral terms; that is to say, the goal should contain a specific time frame and indicators of achievement so that at the end of the specified time the department can easily assess whether the goal has been achieved. Other departments do not insist on such a high degree of quantification in goal statements. Certainly some areas of endeavors are more amenable to behaviorally stated goals than others.

Can a department develop goals that are not immediately related to its academic or education mission? If academic goals are to be realized, the department must pay attention to its resources and plan to use them effectively. In many cases, departments need to set goals that deal with the acquisition and management of resources. A distinction may therefore be made between what are sometimes called primary goals and support goals. Primary goals are directly related to educational mission—i.e., the familiar triad of teaching, research, and service. Support goals are advocated not for themselves but for establishing conditions or situations whereby the primary goals can be achieved. Support goals within the department are concerned with the staff, students, physical facilities, department planning and management, record keeping and information gathering, and procurement of funding or support. For example, the goal of formulating department goals is a support goal that should lead to improvements in teaching, research, and service.

Following are examples of primary and support goals:

To identify entering freshmen with deficiencies in reading and writing skills and to improve those basic skills. [primary goal, English department]

To produce graduates who will be eligible for admission to medical school. [primary teaching goal, biology department]

To provide advice and assistance to teacher education centers throughout the state. [primary service goal, education department]

To establish an internship program for seniors in law enforcement. [primary goal, criminology department]

To establish a system of department record keeping consistent with university policy. [support goal, any department]

To obtain additional laboratory equipment. [support goal, any science department]

Why should a department have goals? At a time when accountability is repeatedly used as a warning and a threat, department members should not only have a statement of their purpose but should be able to point to a set of goals that they expect to achieve. They should be able to express the professional aspirations of the department in ways that will allow those aspirations to be compared with actual accomplishments. The chair of a department that has stated its goals clearly and realistically and that has indeed achieved its goals within a certain period of time can make a good case for a fair slice of the economic pie that the dean keeps in the cupboard. Aside from the practical advantage of being able to say, "We said we would accomplish these things, and we have done so," goal setting serves another more theoretical purpose: it helps academicians not only know their purposes but also clarify their ideas about how those purposes can be fulfilled.

As mentioned earlier, goals must be realistic and attainable. The chair should try to avoid ill-conceived or badly stated goals. Following is a list of reasons that many goals cannot be realized or are flawed in other ways.

- Goals may be too specific, allowing for too little flexibility to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities or to deviate from a narrow path that may become blocked.
- Goals may be too broad or abstract, to the extent that the faculty cannot agree on what constitutes achievement.
- Goals may be too simple and trivial, to the point that even when attained they have little professional or political significance.
- Goals may be too grandiose to be attained given the existing faculty, student body, or resources.
- Goals may be too optimistic given the time or administrative support available.
- Goals may be overambitious in relation to the attitudes of the administration, the public, or the legislature.
- Goals may be too pessimistic or under-ambitious and may not reflect adequately the abilities and aspirations of the faculty.
- Goals may be contradictory and conflicting. When goals contributed by individual faculty members are not reviewed for consistency or realism by the chair or a faculty committee, the resulting set of goals may be contradictory.
- Goals may lack sufficient support from the faculty. If a chair develops a set of goals without faculty input and consensus, the goals may not be taken seriously or may be resisted or opposed.

The process whereby a department arrives at its goals is intimately related to the quality of the goals produced. An academic department is made up of persons who are likely to vary considerably in age, personality, style, and ability. Despite the stereotype of "the professor," anyone with academic experience knows that department members are rarely peas in a pod. Whereas it might be easier to get consistent and coherent department goals from a group of like-minded persons, the diversity of the faculty is probably a healthy thing, for a diverse faculty will have complementary skills. The problem the chair faces is how to derive a set of compatible expectations from persons whose styles and abilities differ. An unsatisfactory solution to the problem is to construct a department mold or procrustean bed that all members must fit. Such an approach is bound to stifle talent, creativity, and individuality.

Although many academicians are put off by the language of behavioral objectives and its industrial counterpart—management by objectives—others are quite taken with these concepts. Some education planners seem to think that simply stating objectives in behavioral terms with clear specification of outcomes is all that is needed to clear up confusion in the university. Even if a department can state its objectives with clarity and precision, it still must be able to assess the quality of those objectives. Whether a department's objectives are good depends on much more than the form in which those aims are stated. This material has suggested ways in which some clarity in the statement of purposes and goals may be attained, but their qualitative assessment depends on the good judgment and insight of the chair and the department. A chair can help unify the faculty members by involving them in developing the department's mission and goals.

Department members who have been successful in obtaining grants from external sources know that to specify their plans using the terminology missions, goals, and objectives is useful and convincing. Stating the department's planned activities in ways similar to those described in this material can be a valuable tool for obtaining resources at a time of increasing competition for available resources. The chair must decide how much precision and quantification can be sensibly used in reporting and planning the department's activities. Effective leadership includes the ability to foresee the consequences of one's actions. Planning a department's activities intelligently implies that the chair should have a good idea of what will happen to the department if the plans are carried out.

Departmental Accomplishments and Assessment

The chair is frequently asked to describe the department's activities and accomplishments as well as its aspirations. Such requests come from the dean, the central administration of the institution, from foundations and agencies that allocate grants and contracts, from accrediting associations, from legislative or governing bodies, and even from other departments. The task of reporting department activities with clarity and precision can be irksome, but it can pay handsome dividends if done well. Although no one wants to spend valuable time describing what seems to be obvious and well known, the chair should remember that accomplishments taken for granted within a department are not necessarily noted or publicized elsewhere. The allocation of resources may be based on reports or documents that reflect the chair's skill in articulating the importance of the department's accomplishments and aspirations. Also, academic departments are being asked to justify their own existence with increasing frequency. Those who dispense funds for higher education usually try to give them to departments or programs that evidence a sense of direction and purpose and that show the greatest potential for achievement. Many potential valuable activities have never been begun because the chairperson lacked motivation or was unable to report adequately the department's activities and goals. The following section will focus on ways in which the past activities and the future direction of a department may be described.

Reporting Department Accomplishments

The most important reporting of a department's accomplishments is unquestionably the annual report submitted to the dean. It is the dean, after all, who determines how scarce resources will be allocated, and the grounds on which such decisions are made. Deans have to put each department in a broader context of the college's mission and their own plans for

the college's future development. In doing this, at least three criteria are considered—namely, the programs worth, quality, and cost effectiveness.

A department that maintains adequate records of activities and files these in an orderly manner can compile its reports much more efficiently than a department that must send its members scurrying about once a year to find information that might have been amassed routinely and easily. An honest and well-written annual report can help a department determine its strengths and weaknesses and may suggest measures for improvement. Furthermore, when a department has an updated report of its accomplishments, it can more easily state its desires and aspirations. Answers to the questions below are useful in evaluating a department, developing a good annual report, and creating a database for planning future activities.

Information about students

- How many students are majoring in the department's field?
- How many students are enrolled in each course?
- How many degrees in the department's field have been conferred?
- How many students have received scholarships, fellowships, assistantships, grants and gifts?
- How many new majors have been accepted for the coming year?
- How many minority students have been recruited, trained, and graduated?
- How are the students performing in terms of grade point average and national tests? How does student performance compare with that of past years?
- What theses, dissertations, or research reports have been completed?
- What percentage of the total number of lower-division, upper-division, and graduate students in the university is majoring in this field? Is the percentage increasing, decreasing, or remaining relatively stable? What accounts for the change or stability?
- What evidence indicates that students are receiving the courses and information necessary for the next stage of their academic or employment careers? How many and what percentage of graduating seniors in the department were admitted to graduate school? To what graduate schools were they admitted? How many and what percentage of graduates were employed in jobs for which they have been trained?
- What other schools and colleges within the university are sending students to this department? Are other departments asking for service courses? Has a systematic needs survey been conducted? What are the past, present, and anticipated student demands for courses in this department? What are the past, present, and anticipated job market needs for graduates of department programs?

Information about degree programs, course offerings, and curriculum

- What courses were offered at each level during each term of the year and how many students were enrolled in each course?
- How many full-time equivalent students were generated by the department at each level?
- Have course syllabi been updated?
- Have courses been changed by using other media or more individual modes of instruction?

- Have new courses been added? How do these courses contribute to the program?
- Do the courses in the program meet the present and anticipated needs of the students and the job market?
- Has the program been reviewed? If so, by whom? A university committee? A state agency? Has the program been reviewed for accreditation?

Information about faculty members and their achievements

- How many full-time faculty members are in the department?
- Have new faculty members been added to the department?
- How many faculty members are on leave or sabbatical?
- Have any faculty members resigned?
- Have any faculty members been dismissed? Have any contracts not been renewed?
- Do any faculty members have reduced workloads?
- How many faculty members are temporary or part-time? Is the number of part-time or temporary faculty members increasing?
- Which faculty members have received professional honors or teaching awards?
- Have any faculty members received grants and contracts for research, development, or training?
- What is the record of publications by faculty members?
- Have any faculty members received awards for research or publication?
- What service activities have faculty members performed? For the school or institution? For professional associations? For the community?

Information about equipment, facilities, and supplies

- Are resources adequate to meet demands?
- Do any programs have inadequate resources? Are additional resources needed?
- Has new or special equipment been acquired for the department?

Information about department governance and administration

- How is the department structured? What are the roles of department committees? To what extent do students participate in department affairs?
- Have any new policies been implemented for the department's operation?
- How is travel money allocated within the department?
- Is the level of faculty morale satisfactory?
- What other important activities or actions should be mentioned?

Aside from the official information that is required by the central administration and the dean, each department must determine for itself what data it wishes to collect and maintain on a regular basis. Answers to the questions above illustrate the kinds of statements that appear in annual reports and surface in assessment requests from many sources. Departments can obtain much information from the university's institutional research office, which collects and stores much of this data.

Most chairs see the advantages of using the previous year's annual report as a guide when preparing a report for the current year. This procedure has the positive aspect of ensuring that the most important continuing commitments and activities are given proper attention. The activities of most departments have an organic continuity, and it is not surprising that annual reports repeat a large volume of information from the year before. Since the annual report summarizes and reviews the department's history for a given year, it can be used to compare the year's accomplishments with those of previous years, thereby giving some indication of the state of the department. The report can show whether the department is growing or shrinking, flourishing or floundering, but the comparison will be based only on the standard of what the department has done in the past. A department may designate a particular year as a normative standard—for example, the year of the greatest number of undergraduate enrollments; the year of the highest graduate enrollments; the year of the highest number of degrees conferred; or the year of some significant achievement in research, publications, or grants awarded. The department can then compare its current activities with those of normative years.

Alternatively, the chair might want to know how the department measures up to other departments. A department can be compared with departments representing the same discipline at other universities in the region or in the nation. The department may also be compared with other departments within the same institution or with a set of department standards derived by a professional or accrediting association.

When a department wishes to compare itself with departments of the same discipline at other institutions, nationally top-ranked departments are often used as the basis for comparison. First, the department might look at characteristics that are easily measurable, such as the number of faculty members, the number of students, admissions standards, funding per student, and so forth. One frequently cited standard of comparison is the student-faculty ratio, the assumption being that the smaller ratio, the more contact a student will have with faculty members, resulting in education of higher quality. Another way of comparing accomplishments with those of other departments of the same discipline at other institutions is to count the number of times a particular author is cited in the professional literature. By noting the department affiliation of the most frequently cited scholars, the chair can gauge with moderate assurance the ranking of his or her own department in areas of research, scholarship, and publication.

A crucial but questionable assumption underlying judgments based on this procedure is that the future creative activities of the faculty will be like those of the past. Furthermore, whereas this form of comparison is based on objective, quantifiable evidence, it is limited by focusing on research, which is only one of the three major functions of institutions of higher education. The national ranking of graduate programs also reflects this focus, but in a much broader way. Unfortunately, graduate school rankings are often based on judgments that are extremely subjective and that may at times be woefully out of date. Nevertheless, in the "professional status sweepstakes" some department chairs commonly make sweeping assertions based on these kinds of data. Chairs and faculty members have to guard against believing that their past productivity indicates something about the present; to confirm this assumption, they must examine the department's current activities.

Sometimes departments are grouped with others at the same institution. Usually a group includes departments from related or cognate disciplines, such as those in the social sciences. Since there are no uniform or national standards for grouping cognate departments, some interesting problems can result. For example, a history department, because of its concern with literary exposition, might find itself grouped with a humanities or language and literature group, or the same department, if it emphasizes historical data

analysis, might be grouped with the traditional social science departments. Psychology departments have been grouped with the social sciences when social-psychological relations were most important, with the biological sciences when the emphasis was on animal studies and experiments, and occasionally with the health sciences area when a clinical program was preeminent. Some departments may find that they are being compared with other departments in their college or university with whom they feel they have very little in common. Most of these groupings are for administrative convenience in monitoring and controlling budgets and expenditures and analyzing cost data. The chair who is required to respond to comparisons of this kind needs as much knowledge as possible about the other departments in the group in order to defend the interests of his or her department.

A department may be part of a discipline that, through its professional association, has developed a set of normative standards by which a department can evaluate itself. Some professional associations conduct evaluations using such standards when preparing to credential degree programs. These standards frequently specify such details as the percentage of the faculty that should possess the doctorate and the minimum number of faculty members needed to set up and maintain a bachelor's degree program. The existence of normative standards usually indicates a high degree of professional consensus on the most valued characteristics in that discipline, the activities considered appropriate within it, and the quality of education and accomplishments expected within it. Departments that aspire to meet minimum standards within the discipline tend to look to the professional association's guidelines; departments that are interested in meeting or exceeding the accomplishments of the top-ranked departments in the discipline tend to compare themselves with those departments.

In the end, many decisions are made based on the presentation of departmental accomplishments. A wise chair will have demonstrable evidence of the department's effectiveness.

Questions

1. Does your department have a written mission statement? When was that mission statement last reviewed?
2. To what extent do you feel that statement represents your department's current teaching, research and service activities?
3. Does your department have written goals that support your mission statement?
4. Does the dean expect an annual report from the chair regarding the progress, success, and needs of the department? If so, how is the report used? If not, how can the chair provide this information to the dean so it will impact the departmental budget and chair's evaluation process?
5. Do you find the record keeping suggested beginning on page 7 overwhelming and, perhaps, unmanageable or impossible?
6. How would you evaluate the quality of record keeping in your department? To what extent are sufficient data available to respond quickly to a request for information?
7. Do you have a staff person or faculty member especially interested in research that may be able to assist with compiled departmental data?
8. Have you asked for data from your institutional research office and alumni affairs office?
9. In what ways does your department measure student learning outcomes?