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Cover Page Footnote

Author Note The framework of this article was presented as a paper at the NALS 2011 Conference (National Association of Laboratory and University Affiliated Schools).

Abstract

This paper concerns the content, role, and purpose of mission statements in higher education and the advisability of aligning the mission and activities of a laboratory school with the overall aims of the sponsoring college. We review strategic planning for alignment and share mission-driven activities that we have developed. We end with ideas about receiving recognition for doing the important job of a laboratory school, through disseminating and displaying examples of excellence.

College Mission Alignment: Lessons for Laboratory Schools

Living out an important mission helps a laboratory school stay focused, productive, and energized. This paper concerns a discussion of mission statements in higher education, the process of aligning the mission of a laboratory school with the overall aims of its sponsoring college, ways to fulfill this mission, and strategies for receiving recognition for doing this job through disseminating and displaying examples of excellence.

When we examine the mission statements of U.S. colleges, we see similarities. Most frequently in mission statements, colleges want their students to: 1. Experience and acquire a liberal education; 2. Contribute to the world; 3. Develop social responsibility; and 4. be engaged, responsible citizens (Meacham, 2008). The laboratory school is well placed to carry out this mission in the 21st century. It is a community institution, actively engaged in the solution of problems common to families and educators, and committed to contributing to the world. It can also be a place for global citizenship, leadership, meaningful service, and exposure to diversity.

Embodying the applied legacy of educator John Dewey, the typical laboratory school connects students, researchers, scholars, community partners, local alumni, and families in a grand collaborative partnership. Benson, Harkavy and Puckett noted in their exploration of Dewey's contributions to higher education that "...Dewey emphasized that action-oriented, collaborative, real-world problem solving education can function as the most powerful means to raise the level of instrumental intelligence in individuals, groups, communities, societies, and humanity" (Benson, Harkavy and Puckett, 2007). This problem solving is taking place in research, teaching and practice at laboratory schools, which are centers of innovation. As Dewey

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wrote in 1896, of the University of Chicago Laboratory School: “It bears the same relation to the work of pedagogy that a laboratory bears to biology, physics, or dentistry. Like any such laboratory, it has two main purposes: (1) to exhibit, test, verify and criticize theoretical statements and principles; (2) to add to the sum of facts and principles in its special line....” (Dewey, 1896). However, in our lean and modern colleges and universities, it is not enough to merely complete these functions of research and scholarship, and to support a mission of service in a vague and general way. To thrive, laboratory schools must “...undertake a very important job that fits a niche, be recognized for undertaking this important job, and do it very well” (King, 1984). Let’s examine the role of the mission statement, the important job done by laboratory schools, and ways to analyze this relationship.

Unpacking the College Mission Statement. Lake and Mrozinski (2011), in a case-study review of college missions, concluded that “by some estimates, mission statements have risen to the level of mythology in what they have done and can do for organizations...” (6). They are no longer options, but necessities – a requirement for every accrediting agency in higher education. Current research addresses the effectiveness of the mission statement as a tool for strategic planning, and as an expression of what the college really does for its students.

The role of a mission statement is to focus efforts, guide expenditures and direction, and increase innovation. In his study of nonprofit organizations, McDonald (2007) found that “... a clear, motivating organizational mission helps an organization to focus its attention on those innovations that will most likely support the accomplishment of that mission. Such a mission also creates a climate in which innovations are given a fair chance to succeed. As a result, (organizations) with clear, motivating missions tend to be more innovative” (p. 256).

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In order to align with a college's mission statement, one first has to find it! This may not be simple. In their study of the mission of higher education, Taylor and Morpew (2010) found that most colleges and universities have more than one published mission statement, which can lead to confusion—unless we understand that they serve different purposes. The public mission statement, which is found in places like the *U.S. News and World Report* guide to colleges, is generally longer, contains more persuasive terms, may list majors or areas of excellence, and is a recruitment tool, as well as a statement of the college mission. Mission statements for in-house and strategic planning purposes are shorter, more general, less prone to persuasion, and more likely to be broken into discrete subsections, which are then linked to measurable goals and objectives.

Our mid-sized Liberal Arts focused institution's strategic mission statement is as follows:

“XXXXXXXXXXXX educates students for global citizenship and responsible leadership, empowering graduates to pursue meaningful lives and productive careers. We are committed to the liberal arts ethos and guided by its values and ideals. Our guiding principles are excellence, innovation, and community” (wwwXXXXXXXX.edu).

Its public mission statement, as provided in *US News and World Report*, is much more specific:

Founded through innovation, focused on excellence, fueled by dedication to pragmatic liberal arts--Xxxxxxx College has transformed lives by educating responsible, global citizens since 1885.

Located lakeside in XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, Xxxxxxx provides small-town community and proximity to neighboring XXXXX, a premier international destination. Beneath Spanish moss and inside the arched doorways of Spanish-Mediterranean buildings, students experience small classes led by faculty nationally recognized for innovative teaching and scholarship. Data demonstrate that our students excel in writing, collaboration, discussion, and community-based learning. Students work with faculty to publish collaborative research. Unique curricula, such as Sustainable Development, Australian Studies, and language-intensive International Business, complement the traditional liberal arts.

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The overlap between these self-descriptions is in the areas of liberal arts, responsible citizenship, global focus, and community-based learning. To align with the college mission, first locate both types of statements. If the laboratory school is particularly noteworthy, its accomplishments may become a part of the public statement. However, for the purposes of in-house support, alignment with the measurable goals of the college is most important. While a simple Internet search shows that many laboratory schools have mission statements, too, these were often composed without reference to the overall college's strategic planning process.

Next, consider the mission of the laboratory school, as defined by the National Association of University and Laboratory Affiliated Schools (NALS). NALS criteria include the creation of improvements in education through research and experimentation, excellence in clinical and teaching practices, staff development, and (in more recent years) student teaching (www.NALS.org). How are these two missions aligned?

Mission Alignment: A Strategic Process

Alignment with the college mission seems a self-explanatory necessity. But consider the work of Welsh and Carraher (2009), who reviewed the mission statements of 214 Catholic colleges, all of which contained reference to values such as ethical reasoning and service. Of these, 34 had undergraduate schools related to entrepreneurship embedded in the university, and their missions were compared to both the overall university and the business or professional school mission. These programs seem to have been created without attention to the overall mission of the college, save that of increasing enrollment. Welsh & Carreher (2009) noted that "There is little evidence that the mission of entrepreneurship...reflects the mission of the business school or college where (it is) housed, let alone the university or college" (p. 16).

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Mission alignment is a strategic process of self-study, comparison, communication, dissemination, and recursive review.

Strategic Planning and Self Study. To begin connecting with the mission, lab schools should work with a group of advisors, including faculty, staff, students and parents, to compare a lab school's mission statement and related performance with that of the sponsoring college. In service to students, most colleges focus on the areas of service, leadership and character development, excellence, development of student skills, and campus support for diversity.

Table 1 is a crosswalk, comparing these areas with the criteria for laboratory schools (<http://www.nals.net>). In each area, consider how a program meets the NALS and the typical college mission criteria. For example, in the area of **Research and Experimentation**, our laboratory school trains undergraduate students to administer a variety of observational instruments to measure the quality of educational settings and provides service through support for evaluation research in the community. We have worked in collaboration with the local Early Learning Coalition, the YMCA After School Care Alliance, and many more agencies. In this crosswalk process, you are sure to discover strengths and weaknesses.

Development of Student Skills. At the Rollins College Child Development and Student Research Center (R-CDC), we connect student learning in Developmental Psychology classes to the real world through a once per week, hands-on 3 hour lab experience in the R-CDC classroom. This experience allows students to take their textbook learning to the next level of application in a high-quality, supportive environment where we can scaffold their skills in observational and experimental research and adult-child interaction. Each student learns fundamental skills in observational and experimental research, conducts a home visit and case

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study, and completes an observational assessment of a target child, culminating in an assessment and case study report and separate portfolio for families. By preparing students to take leadership roles in teaching, research and community service work with children, we are helping to prepare a generation of informed and competent professionals and parents. The supervised work experience enforces the importance of employability skills, such as timeliness, accuracy in observational data recording, professional attire, ways of contacting and working with parents, and conducting in-home interviews.

The laboratory experience produces motivated students who learn to record observations accurately, enter them into our Child Observation Record and language-sample research data base, draw conclusions from the data, and summarize these concisely in lab reports. Older students, building on this early training, continue on to conduct research and community service on a wide variety of child development related projects.

Comparison: Closing the Gap. Do your ongoing activities support the mission of the college? Do you focus on excellence and innovation in areas which are mission-driven? Laboratory schools often face a tension between the needs of the children and families they serve and the needs of the college overall. For example, parents may want services that are common to other private schools (such as after school care, extended hours, or year-round services) but which don't fit the mission of the school as a laboratory setting, or the administration may want scientific or entrepreneurial research that does not fit with your view of a lab school.

Choosing and funding mission-driven innovations sends a clear message. For example, Rollins' emphasis on **global citizenship** led us to direct our staff towards international opportunities for professional and curricular development, including training at the innovative

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Reggio Emilia Schools of Italy, and the implementation of Reggio based curriculum ideas here. Our students also study and support bilingual child development. We use Spanish/English songs, environmental labels, and some activities in our classrooms, and are beginning a study of children's' incidental acquisition of language by documenting the use of non-English words in conversation and writings of children.

In **educational innovation**, the laboratory school can serve by leading the way. Our school has become the first in central Florida to investigate and apply the Reggio Emilia approach to early education. The Reggio-based Rollins program is founded on principles of respect, responsibility, and community through exploration and discovery in a supportive and enriching environment based on the interests of the children through a self-guided curriculum. The teachers (and our undergraduates) are considered co-learners with children, and the creative learning process is recorded through observations, video, and photography that document the dialogue between teachers and children. As students observe and record this joint learning process, they produce research on the benefits of scaffolding learning, child-centered teaching, and supportive relationships to learning and creativity.

Communication: Public Perceptions. A next step is to measure public perceptions of your organization's purpose and contributions to the college mission. Through a combination of formal and informal measures (a survey of faculty, staff and students, plus key informant interviews, potluck dinners and conversations) you may learn that perception and reality are quite different. For example, does your college administration know of the lab school's deep links to young alumni parents and your social blending of faculty, staff and students in the lab school culture? For their part, do the families know of your achievements in research, teaching

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and community service? Is the lab school seen as a peripheral educational service to some families, or a central supporter of the college mission?

In 2005, a team of MBA students collected these data on public perceptions at our institution, and their report indicated that we were “that daycare center on campus” to most of the college. One MBA student noted, “You don’t look anything like what you actually do....who knew that 1 in 10 Rollins College graduates worked at the laboratory school before graduation, and that you were the recipient of major research grants?” Our Strategic Planning advisors recommended a name change, creation of a different website, and aggressive in-house advertising of our research and community service events.

Communication: Dissemination. All parts of a college are held accountable for supporting its educational mission. It is important for a laboratory school to hold high standards in this regard. Data concerning the assessment of student learning outcomes (of enrolled children, undergraduates and graduate students) should be collected and disseminated annually. Similarly, when our lab schools succeed in research, community service, diversity or development efforts, we must perform the final step of the scientific process and disseminate this information at each level in the life of the lab school. Through college annual reports, presentations to parents, deans, directors, presidents and funders, submission of newsletter and journal articles, it is the responsibility to the organization to be sure others know of its support for the mission of the college. Holoviak et al. (2010) recommend an occasional “town meeting” format, in which the widest possible group of people is included in a discussion of planning and program development.

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Steps on our road to alignment with the college mission continued with the inauguration of an annual conference designed to disseminate what we have learned. Titled the **Good Neighbor Conferences**, after our alumnus Fred Rogers '51, the outreach focuses on a theme related to our mission each year. The past 3 were *Being a Good Neighbor as a Campus Community*, *Good Neighbors in a Multicultural World*, and *Good Neighbors Develop a Moral Compass*. Undergraduate students are fully involved in each step of the conferences, which attract students, staff, alumni, faculty and local educators. Last year, 3 of the many workshops were co-presented by Rollins faculty and students, and one more by alumni.

Interdisciplinary Education and Research. A laboratory school can be a powerful place for the uniting of disciplines. We are already hosting Media Studies major, who develop documentaries about children's acquisition of gender stereotypes, and education students, who study assessment techniques. In strategic planning, we identified a lack of interdisciplinary focus as a weakness, and we are implementing new plans, including connections to the Art and Environmental science departments. Art students will work with the lab school children as projects develop over time to help the children learn artistic techniques, gain insights into materials and document meaningful learning. The children's art will be showcased at a once a semester display on a major gathering place on the campus. Environmental sciences students will help establish a recycle center on campus of materials that can be used creatively by our lab school and public schools in the area. Students will collaborate, search for space, establish collection sites and times, and volunteer their time for organizing and maintaining the Rollins recycle center, and plans include a research project on encouragement of recycling behaviors.

Diversity of Learners through Inclusion. Of course, all laboratory schools must be nondiscriminatory, enrolling children regardless of their backgrounds. But to actively seek

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diversity means going beyond simple nondiscrimination. On each campus, the barriers to diversity are different. They include financial, based on costs; historical, based on methods of recruitment that exclude people unconnected through word of mouth or long term patterns of enrollment; or structural, based on hours of operation that restrict access to working parents. In the face of our peculiar barriers, we chose to reach out to the community of children with disabilities to increase the diversity of our learners and provide a more realistic educational environment for our undergraduate students than we could accomplish in a privileged, partial-day school program. Therefore, we make plans and establish procedures that permit the participation of children with autism spectrum disorders, Down syndrome, behavior challenges and many more identified developmental delays and disorders. Our students conduct a rich array of applied and research based projects with these children and their families. Our budget includes consultative services in Applied Behavior Analysis and family support services. The impact of this inclusive socialization and educational process provides benefits to the children, students and families. We demonstrate to undergraduates that we walk the talk of diversity.

Service Learning. XXXXX XXXXX was cited in 2011 by *USA Today* as one of the 20 colleges most committed to community service. We say here that community engagement starts at age 2! Each year, the lab school exemplifies service as children and undergraduates help the community. The impact of service must be concrete, developmentally appropriate, and meaningful for children and students. Last year, children and students participated in a “Trike a Thon” and contributed efforts to raise funds for cancer research, as one of our preschoolers is battling leukemia. We also chose to provide assistance to early childhood centers in our community that serve families in need. Gift baskets and toys were collected for families in our neighborhood. Through concrete examples, we teach small children about helping others.

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What's Your Story? In considering mission alignment, every lab school must determine a unique story that goes beyond educating and caring for campus children. For example, Carnegie Mellon University's Children's Center has capitalized on the rich array of cognitive developmental research partnerships on campus, publishing and presenting extensive, themed work on learning and cognition (Carver, 2001). Lest we think we must be all things to all people (the definition of "scope creep;" Nelles & Vorhey, 2010), consider the University of Iowa, where the department of physical education has created a preschool program molded around movement education that elegantly meets the needs of researchers, undergraduate students and parents (Marston, 2002).

Study the alignment of your laboratory school with the overall mission of your college. If you take steps to highlight what you already do to embody your college's mission, and make future decisions and resource allocations mission-driven, then excellence in teaching, research and service may result, and your mission will be clear to all.

Author Note

The framework of this article was presented as a paper at the NALS 2011 Conference (International National Association of Laboratory and University Affiliated Schools).

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Table 1

Crosswalk of the National Association of Laboratory and University Affiliate Schools (NALS) Criteria and College Mission Statement

		Common Elements of College Mission Statements				
		<i>Service</i>	<i>Excellence</i>	<i>Leadership/ Character</i>	<i>Student Skills</i>	<i>Diversity</i>
NALS Criteria for Laboratory Schools	Research & Experimentation	Program Evaluation Research -- quality of after school care programs and child care centers	Sponsor and house Senior Honors Research Projects each year	Through website and newsletters, disseminate current research in child development	Training in objective observation, quantitative and qualitative data analysis	As a site for inclusion of children with disabilities, conduct research in practices of applied behavior analysis
	Clinical & Teaching Practices	Good Neighbor Conferences:Community workshops on best practices in early education, research	National Accreditation Demonstration and dissemination of new curricula, teaching methods	Job skills, adult-child interaction, and leadership in service projects to the lab and community	Training in developmental screening and early identification of children with disabilities. Case study methodology	Nondiscrimination policy in enrollment, hiring. Recruitment of members of underserved groups. Include children with disabilities
	Staff Development	Involve staff and students in community service (Trike a Thon, holiday baskets) Give portfolios of child's work to parents	Consistently recruit and hire top quality staff	Provide opportunities for professional development	Develop staff skills in teaching, research and community service	Provide diverse professional development opportunities (Travel to other countries, training in inclusion and diverse learners)