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The Endless Good Argument : The Adaptation of Mission at Two Liberal Arts Colleges

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Abstract

A meaningful institutional purpose does not just pop into existence. It must be constructed, with reference both to core values and to changing market or demographic conditions. This article examines three important moments in the history of two different institutions to better understand the development of such a process and explore how a sense of mission and the core values can survive over time, despite inevitable challenges.

Comments

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A meaningful institutional purpose does not just pop into existence. It must be constructed, with reference both to core values and to changing market or demographic conditions. This article examines three important moments in the history of two different institutions to better understand the development of such a process and explore how a sense of mission and the core values can survive over time, despite inevitable challenges.

by Matthew Hartley and Lawrence Schall

How Mission Matters

Most college and university administrators work in institutions decades or even centuries old. Over time, as these institutions respond to new challenges and new environmental contingencies, they adapt patterns of behaviors based on a process of trial and error. They learn what strategies work and develop shared understandings about “how we ought to do things around here.” The residue of this successive pattern of learning is organizational culture (Schein 1992). Over the past two decades researchers have described the powerful ways in which shared norms and values influence the behaviors of individuals and, by extension, entire institutions (Deal and Kennedy 1982; Schein 1992)—including colleges and universities (Tierney 1988). Characteristic of a strong (that is, a coherent and shared) organizational culture is a clear sense of purpose or mission (Chaffee 1984; Clark 1972; Dill 1997; Hartley 2002; Keller 1983; Tierney 1988).

Institutional mission influences organizational life in at least two major ways: First, mission is instructive. A mission helps people discern which activities or behaviors are valued and which ought to be shunned (Ouchi 1980; Schein 1992). It serves as a kind of broad framework within which people organize their activities and it answers the question, what should we be doing? Second, a mission can also give people a sense of meaning about their work. It

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may promote a sense of uniqueness (Clark 1972; Martin et al. 1983; Selznick 1957). It can also explain how the work contributes to a larger cause, which can generate greater commitment (Hartley 2002; Martin et al. 1983; Pettigrew 1979). This “meaning-making” function of an institutional mission suggests that organizations benefit from answering the workplace equivalent of the great existential question, why are we here? Both of these factors—a clear understanding of institutional priorities and a willingness, indeed, a desire to implement them—are vital to the success of any strategic initiative.

Interestingly, despite the benefits of having a clear mission, the *process* by which colleges go about clarifying and revising their academic missions remains largely unexplored (Delucchi 1997).

This article presents an historical analysis of this phenomenon at Swarthmore College (Swarthmore, Pennsylvania) and Olivet College (Olivet, Michigan). A hundred years ago, like many small colleges, both institutions served a regional—even a local—clientele. Today, Swarthmore is a highly selective, nationally known liberal arts college with a billion dollar endowment. Olivet, by contrast, is a nonselective institution that draws most of its students (many of whom are first-generation students) regionally and, until relatively recently, has led a rather hardscrabble existence. To some degree, the two are extremes within an institutional type. A closer examination, however, reveals that they are linked in ways that belie the “rich college/poor college” comparison. Both faced strikingly similar challenges historically—broadening their appeal by moving away from their church affiliations and weathering environmental shifts such as the Great Depression or the “stagflation” of the 1970s and ’80s. In both cases, individual presidents raised the institutions to positions of truly national prominence. Throughout their histories, successive generations have struggled to clarify, define, and refine their missions.

A meaningful institutional purpose does not simply exist—it must be constructed.

These accounts underscore that a meaningful institutional purpose does not simply exist—it must be constructed. Organizational theorists Collins and Porras (1994, 1996) argue that institutional purpose consists of two elements: a core ideology and an envisioned future. The core ideology is the set of values shared by institutional

members, particularly those in a position to influence policy. The envisioned future is the group’s aspirations for the institution—a vision of what the institution might be able to achieve. Often, crafting a successful vision requires that vision to be both rooted in core values and extended beyond those values, sensitive, for example, to changing market or demographic conditions. To be clear, we are not advocating here the development of mission or vision statements. A number of researchers have pointed out that often these consist of stock collections of vague and aspirational phrases and fail to convey any meaningful sense of an institution’s unique identity (Chait 1993; Davies 1986; Delucchi 1997). Rather, the development of a core ideology and envisioned future requires institutional members to commit to collective, sustained discussions about the core purposes of their educational institution. This article examines three historic moments in these two institutions’ histories in order to better understand how such a purpose is developed:

- *The founding of the institution.* As Clark (1972) and Schein (1992) observe, the founder or founders play a disproportionate role in shaping the values and purposes of the institution. This is also a time when the aspirations of the institution are clearly articulated.
- *Curricular reform in the early 20th century.* In the 1920s, Frank Aydelotte, a member of the first American class of Rhodes Scholars, brought to Swarthmore the Honors Program. Within 10 years, Swarthmore developed a national reputation among faculty and students for intellectual excellence and intensity. In the 1930s, Olivet hired a young president, Joseph Brewer, who brought the University of Oxford’s tutorial program to the institution and attracted, for a brief period of time, a number of noted literary luminaries.
- *Critical incidents within the past decade.* In 2000, in an effort to strengthen its overall intercollegiate athletic program and ensure its commitment to academic excellence, Swarthmore ended its football program after over 100 years of involvement. The decision split the community and generated intense debate over what type of student Swarthmore ought to serve. Swarthmore’s president weathered the storm and today remains a strong and effective leader. Olivet experienced an ugly racial incident in the early 1990s that tore apart the campus. In the aftermath, an intense debate ensued about the institution’s purposes, resulting in an impressive institutional transformation.

The Endless Good Argument: The Adaptation of Mission at Two Liberal Arts Colleges

An examination of these moments suggests that certain elements of the institutions' core ideologies (contrary to Collins and Porras's assertions) do shift somewhat over time. The whole constellation of values is not replaced, but certain values within that set gain ascendancy during particular time periods. We contend that despite the ongoing debates about the relative emphasis of various ideals, indeed, because of the fact these communities care so deeply about these issues that they are willing to engage in real debate, members of these institutions have been able to forge a shared sense of purpose.

The evolving missions of Swarthmore and Olivet shed light on several important issues:

- How institutional missions shift over time
- What factors influence institutional mission
- To what extent evolving mission has played a role in the different stories of these two schools

Two Cases, Three Moments in Time

The founding of the institution. The mid-17th century was the heyday of Quakerism in America and its epicenter was arguably Pennsylvania. The Quaker religion was not evangelical. Indeed, a significant movement within Quakerism—the Quietist movement—argued that Quakers should distance themselves from the world. Many felt that education ought to be “guarded,” that is, for Quakers taught by Quakers, in a defensive mode protective of their special culture.

Swarthmore College was opened in 1869 under the presidency of Edward Parrish. There were no academic standards for admission; all children admitted were either offspring of shareholders of the corporation that governed the college or members of the Religious Society of Friends. Students were placed according to their ability and 85 percent of them enrolled in a college preparatory program. Soon after opening, the college faced a controversy that resulted in the resignation of its president. Parrish had been a strong president, but one who leaned to a relatively permissive standard in the treatment of students. This approach was in direct conflict with those founders who believed the college must maintain its guarded nature at all costs; that remaining guard was the only means of preserving the Quaker faith. While the more liberal standard eventually won out, at the time it was Parrish's undoing. Edward Magill, a man who had been the central character

in the conflict, replaced Parrish. The episode stemmed from a significant debate that was largely unresolved at the time of the college's founding: would Swarthmore primarily be a device for societal preservation or would it become more open and welcoming to the world outside? Both ideas and ideals were represented on the Board of Managers and the debate would continue in the intervening years.

Far to the west, in 1844, a band of 39 abolitionist missionaries was led to a hill in south-central Michigan by “Father” John J. Shipherd, an Evangelical Congregational minister. Shipherd named the spot “Olivet” in memory of the Mount of Olives from the New Testament. A decade earlier, Shipherd had founded Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, but he became restless and felt called to move further west in order to create a new institution of learning, one predicated on strict adherence to the precepts of Christianity and the then-audacious principle of equality for all people, regardless of gender or race. The missionaries arrived on a hilltop determined to found a community of faith and a college. It was a bold vision, and one consonant with the progressive and pious ideals of Shipherd's supporters.

Because the community had limited earthly means, Shipherd traveled back east to secure financial support for the new college and found it in a wealthy abolitionist from upstate New York. The patron agreed to provide \$10,000 to the college on the condition that students of all races be allowed to attend. Shipherd felt certain the ideals of the community would support such a provision. However, the prospect of actually educating Black students alarmed some members of the community, who feared the presence of these students would, over time, result in the institution becoming a college exclusively for Blacks. After much debate and swayed by the moral authority of Father Shipherd (and the explicit threat that he would depart if the donor's conditions were not met), the community consented. Soon after, the patron lost his fortune and could not fulfill his pledge. An epidemic weakened the community and resulted in the untimely death of Father Shipherd. Nonetheless, those remaining maintained the provision of equality in the college's charter, assuring equal access and becoming the first private college in the country to do so.

Curricular reform in the early 20th century. By the second decade of the 20th century, both institutions had grown and changed. They were still small colleges and their religious roots continued to inform campus life. However, America had changed with the outbreak of a world war and parochial sensibilities were shaken by the changing times.

Further, with the Great Depression looming, economic uncertainty—even catastrophe—challenged both of these fragile institutions to find ways to transform themselves.

At Swarthmore, Frank Aydelotte became president of the college in 1921. Aydelotte's experience as one of the first American Rhodes Scholars shaped his vision of the possibilities for American higher education: he believed in a system of education that stressed thoroughness, independence, and students' responsibility to educate themselves. These ideals were in fact Quaker ideals, and for Aydelotte, it was the Quakerism of Swarthmore that first attracted him to the college. He found that the members of the community had a willingness to discuss an idea on its merits, which he took to be the essence of Quakerism. Swarthmore's transformation to an academically elite college was evolutionary but dramatic. Within a few years of his arrival, Aydelotte initiated an Honors Program, beginning the transformation of the college into an institution that valued serious academic study and discourse above all else. While the extent of his vision was not something that would have been anticipated 50 years before when the college was founded, many on the board during the 19th century would have stood behind this new president. The debate between guardedness and worldliness that was present at the start had been resolved by the time Aydelotte took office. Soon after the turn of the century, the college had abandoned the ideal of only looking inward and was moving along a continuum to embracing and engaging the larger world.

Extracurricular life at the college was also transformed. Hazing was outlawed, sororities were ended by a student vote, and fraternities and secret clubs soon found themselves on the defensive (Clark 1972). On the athletic front, Aydelotte took the strong measure of banning the common practice of financial subsidies for football players. He transferred coaching from the control of alumni managers to college coaches with faculty standing, attempted to reduce spectators and their influence, and worked to develop a variety of sports, focusing on participation for as many students as possible.

Olivet has been described as small, caring, and poor throughout its history, interrupted by a few periods of distinction. During World War I, the college came perilously close to ruin and, in the aftermath, survived a succession of years with its budget running as often in the red as in the black. However, it was at this point in Olivet's hardscrabble history that a remarkable "golden age" emerged. Like Swarthmore's, it too occurred during the depression years. President Joseph Brewer was installed

as Olivet's president in 1934. Brewer had grown up in Michigan and returned to the area a young, Oxford-educated academic, whose erudite, cosmopolitan polish and worldly connections seemed oddly misplaced at this humble college. Brewer envisioned a midwestern academic Camelot and during his administration Olivet experienced a remarkable flowering. Working closely with the faculty, Brewer brought substantial curricular change in the form of the Oxford tutorial plan. The notion of faculty working one-on-one with students was consonant with the college's self-conception as a small, caring institution interested in the development of its students. Like Aydelotte at Swarthmore, Brewer had great aspirations for Olivet. Abandoning a more general curriculum, the institution began to heavily emphasize the arts and literature. Brewer invited a succession of friends to visit the campus for extended periods. Thus it was that Carl Sandberg, Dorothy Parker, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound found their way to the heartlands for a time. Brewer's emphasis on humanism and the importance of people living lives of purpose informed by great works of literature and art was, in its own way, consonant with the college's founding values.

Sadly, unlike at Swarthmore, the entire enterprise seems largely to have rested on the broad shoulders of this remarkable man. While Brewer's tenure of 11 years as president was not brief, Aydelotte served almost twice as long and was followed in office by a hand-picked successor, also an Oxford graduate, who continued Aydelotte's policies and programs without missing a beat. At Olivet, the national acclaim that blossomed for a time, according to one senior faculty member, was bought at too dear a price. The new curriculum was exceedingly time-intensive. When Brewer left Olivet, the initiative proved impossible to sustain and the college found itself over the ensuing years reverting to a more standard and less distinctive curriculum.

Critical incidents within the past decade. In the summer of 1991, Alfred Bloom became Swarthmore's 13th president. After nearly a decade in office, President Bloom faced head-on an important moment of decision and one that called into question Swarthmore's central mission: the issue of athletics and its role in the Swarthmore community. In December 2000, the Board of Managers approved the president's endorsement of a special review committee that called for the elimination of intercollegiate football after over 100 years of involvement. The path to this momentous and still-controversial decision was anything but direct.

The Endless Good Argument: The Adaptation of Mission at Two Liberal Arts Colleges

At the end of a long string of disappointing (if not embarrassing) football seasons, in 1998 the college resolved to “fix” the problem—a new coach was hired, the number of assistant coaches was increased significantly, and the budget for travel and uniforms ballooned. To demonstrate the depth of its commitment, the college set aside 20 precious admission slots for football players in every enrolled class. The belief was that while the admissions office would probably need to admit these students outside the regular process for a time, once the foundation of the team was established, the number of football admits would quickly diminish. The new coach achieved success more rapidly than any one had imagined. Over a few seasons, no wins became one and one became three, and finally, his young team enjoyed a nearly .500 record. In that year, the decision was made by the Board of Managers to eliminate the sport. What went wrong?

Simply put, the cost to the institution of sustaining a viable football program came to be viewed as unacceptable. The number of football recruits needed in each incoming class had not diminished and the college leadership concluded it never would. Virtually every player on the team was a recruited athlete. Further, other coaches of both men’s and women’s teams began clamoring for special attention in the admissions process for their athletes. As well, athletics was neither the only, nor the most important, area to which the college paid attention. The college sought to build a class that was equal in men and women and racially and ethnically diverse, with a large international population, and with engineers and classicists, musicians and biologists. The college’s small size was severely limiting and something had to give.

For many opposed to the decision, the move to eliminate football reflected on the meaning and the mission of the college itself, and in turn, on the meaning of their time at the college. Was Swarthmore an institution that valued intellectual curiosity above other values or was that just one value that needed to be represented among its student body? This was the same debate that had nearly brought Aydelotte down 75 years before, with a vocal group of alumni who believed too much emphasis was being placed on one particular interest or trait.

The 1990s found Olivet facing a more systemic crisis. Olivet’s financial position had deteriorated to a point where balanced budgets had not been achieved in some years and payrolls were met through what one administrator quipped was “death-in-time budgeting”—the timely arrival

of an unexpected planned gift. Relations between the administration and the faculty had grown tense. The American Association of University Professors censured Olivet after the president fired an outspoken faculty member. Faculty members—and increasingly board members—began to feel the institution was adrift. One administrator, remarking on Olivet’s lack of distinctiveness in recruiting students said, “It had basically come down to, we’re cheap and we’re old and if that doesn’t work for you we’re a year-round sports camp with financial aid” (pers. comm. to M. Hartley, October 20, 1999). Eventually, the president’s mishandling of a high-profile racial incident resulted in his removal by the Board of Managers.

When an institution is in such a “crisis of decay,” to use Clark’s (1972) term, the result is often a “suspending [of] past practice” (p. 200). A trustee wrote an influential memo imploring the board to find an unconventional candidate, a “mad scientist” who would help the college reinvent itself. According to a senior faculty member, one candidate, Michael Bassis, who had served as provost during Antioch University’s renewal, stated unequivocally during his interview: “If you want incremental change, *don’t hire me*” (pers. comm. to M. Hartley, October 19, 1999). Many felt this kind of boldness was required. They noted Antioch’s and Olivet’s common roots as progressive colleges founded by abolitionists. The implication was clearly that Olivet should consider becoming another Antioch, a school much different in character than Olivet had ever been. Olivet appeared to have lost its way. Its core ideology and collectively envisioned future were gone, or at least missing.

Michael Bassis was selected as the new president of Olivet. Cohen and March (1974) observe that “the college president faces many ambiguities. The first is the ambiguity of purpose” (p. 195). For Olivet, reclaiming its history proved to be a particularly effective means of establishing a distinctive identity. As a senior administrator noted, Bassis pointed to both Olivet’s founding by abolitionists—“the first college by charter to admit women and people of color”—as well as to the radical nature of that purpose: an education predicated on an uncompromising commitment to issues of social justice (pers. comm. to M. Hartley, October 18, 1999). Bassis then formed a faculty committee (the “vision commission”) and charged the group with distilling the ideas from the broad-based discussions into a statement that everyone could endorse.

Olivet’s vision commission drew on themes of inclusiveness and social justice and articulated them as

“Education for Individual and Social Responsibility.” While the institution now had a “mission” or “vision” statement, there was no consensus about how this vision might be made manifest. Given the seemingly endless debates, the resistance of skeptics, and the sheer volume of work necessary to enact such comprehensive reform, the vision might well have suffocated in its infancy but for a small group of individuals who became absolutely committed to it. They saw the need to reclaim the radical social progressivism of Olivet’s founding. Over time, these “true believers” were able to draw others to the cause and were increasingly influential in the decision-making process.

This outpouring of energy transformed the institution. Bassis launched a capital campaign and Olivet was able to erase its million-dollar debt. The first stage of its campaign far exceeded the target proposed by fund-raising consultants and the college’s enrollment began to grow. As impressive as these tangible gains may be (e.g., programmatic and fiscal improvements), even more striking is the transformation in attitudes about institutional life—there is intense satisfaction and pride in what has been accomplished.

Analysis

What are the lessons that current academic leaders might draw from these stories about why mission matters? Specifically, as institutions change and grow, how can they uphold that core set of values that sustains commitment? One similarity between Swarthmore and Olivet is that there is a striking continuity of certain key values over time. Despite the significant changes experienced by these institutions (Swarthmore and Olivet are far larger and more complex institutions than they were a century ago, for example), certain ideas, some of which can be traced back to the institution’s founding have consistently resonated within these academic communities. At Swarthmore, the inclination to weight the scale toward providing a rigorous academic experience as opposed to serving the “well-rounded student” has been a force for over 100 years. At Olivet, the notion of an education for the purposes of advancing social reform and elevating the human condition has proved an enduring and powerful construct in its recent revitalization. These core values proved to be powerful legitimizing elements in discussions about institutional direction. During planning and times of change, academic leaders would do well to unearth such core ideas at their own institutions—to study where and how they originated

and how they have evolved. This may entail looking at key historical documents, or it may mean engaging in discussions about the institution’s educational goals. One recent example at Swarthmore is the effort to develop a coherent communication plan with its alumni. The early research has indicated that some alumni feel disconnected from the Swarthmore of today because, for example, they see so many new buildings and the student population, in both size and diversity, looks so different from the way it looked when they attended. These findings have encouraged the administration to pay much more attention in its communications to explicitly drawing the parallels between the impact that Swarthmore in 2005 has on its students and the impact it has had on its graduates from every decade.

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Second, core values must sometimes subtly shift or be emphasized in new ways to fit changing circumstances. Presidents and other leaders play a significant role in this collective sense-making effort (Weick 1995), and their ability to either define or to create the venue for the development of a vision can have a dramatic effect on shaping evolving mission. Frank Aydelotte transformed Swarthmore into an institution that valued academic excellence and rigor above other values, and those academic values have largely remained intact since. Bloom, three-quarters of a century later, made the difficult decision to change the college’s athletic program so that these core values could continue to flourish in a very different time. Joseph Brewer sponsored his own variation on Olivet’s central theme of progressive education. Bassis, 75 years later, worked with the core group of true believers to translate Olivet’s founding purpose to fit current circumstances through the development of “Education for Individual and Social Responsibility.”

Third, there is no escaping that each institution must periodically struggle to redefine its purpose. At Swarthmore, a major thread of the debate involved the balance between two ideas of how to best educate tomorrow’s leaders: whether through a program that is centrally about academic rigor and excellence or through one that works to educate and transform the “well-rounded” scholar/athlete. At Olivet,

there was the tension between those who wanted to remain true to the college's radical progressive roots and the competing desire by others to not wander too far from convention. Thus, though Shipherd flung wide the college's doors to students of all races, he had to contend with the fears of some followers that Olivet would become a college exclusively for Blacks. More recently, the label of an education predicated on social justice had to be amended with the terms "service" and "responsibility" to avoid charges of "socialism." If these discussions are at times contentious, leaders should take comfort in knowing that this has almost certainly been the case throughout their institution's history—even at the time of founding. A provost at Swarthmore has referred to this as "the endless good argument."

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Finally, these stories underscore the possibility of creating a collective sense of purpose. They also underscore that a "shared" mission does not mean universal consensus. Rather, mission-centered change is the emergence of a shared understanding with sufficient currency among a large enough (or influential enough) group of individuals to spur change. Olivet's small group of true believers converting their own excitement about developing a new kind of progressive education based on social justice sparked a broad-based curriculum reform effort. If this examination underscores anything, it is that the renegotiation and reinterpretation of mission is an incredibly delicate operation, more of an art, to be sure, than a science. Effective leaders find ways to listen and amidst the cacophony of institutional values find ways to draw from them a harmonious variation on an enduring theme. 📖

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