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Elisa Robyn

Academic Dean, College of Contemporary Liberal Studies, Regis University, erobyn@regis.edu

Linda Lujan

New Ventures Officer, Chancellor's Office; Dean, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Maricopa Community Colleges, linda.lujan@domail.maricopa.edu

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Vision, Mission, and Values: Design and Communication

Dr. Elisa Robyn
Dean, College of Contemporary Liberal Studies
Regis University
(erobyn@regis.edu)

Dr. Linda Lujan
New Ventures Officer, Chancellor's Office
Maricopa Community College District
(linda.lujan@domail.maricopa.edu)

Abstract

Leaders in Jesuit institutions have an opportunity to live and express the university vision, mission and values in a variety of ways through forms of communication that embody the many ways the Jesuit tradition respects the whole person. It is easy to overlook these opportunities when our current institutional thinking is often consumed with academic assessment, measurement and accountability. The authors argue that leaders can bridge this gap by starting with Ignatian pedagogy and exploring the field of elegant design.

Vision, Mission and Values: Design and Communication

Virtually all organizations, including Jesuit institutions of higher education, have developed a vision statement, mission statement and institutional values. These are displayed on posters on walls, flyers handed out to students, web page updates, expensive brand campaigns touting the values, and sometimes even elaborate booklets with the history and narrative of the institution's mission. Our institutions spend much time and often engage many individuals to develop our vision mission and values. We spend time and money to publicize it, then use it to market ourselves, but do we live it? More importantly, what about our mission, vision and values truly differentiates us from all the other institutions of higher education? How are our vision, mission and values different from our competitors down the street? How do our students, employees, and communities understand our lived difference? How do we ensure we are truly living those values, meeting our mission, and aspiring always toward our vision so they become more than "words on the wall"?

Design and communication

Our vision, mission, and values should demonstrate our commitment to students, learning, the future, innovation, and society. But it

is in the small actions, the living actions, that our vision, mission and values take life. In some ways not ensuring that our actions do so is similar to designing a business card and marketing package with all the right words in a font too small or too light to read. We are saying the right words, but our design is not making these brilliant and thoughtfully crafted words — the ones we created, often with a highly-paid consultant — come alive, or even seem believable to ourselves and our students.

In the world of design, form follows function, but if we have not imbued the function with the essence of our vision, mission and values, the form will be ragged, rough, and will fail to inspire. If we create the form without clarifying the true function, we will have a haphazard message full of disjointed elements.¹ Perhaps this is truly one of the most important leadership roles in a Jesuit institution: guiding the institution in living the vision, mission and values so the functions inspire elegant design forms.

For example, at every moment, in every meeting we have the choice of walking in alignment with our personal and institutional vision, mission and values, or stepping away from them for convenience, to save time or money, or to accomplish an agenda. At times this may even appear necessary or expedient. Budgets must be balanced, conflicting needs must be served, new

state or federal mandates must be followed, and political realities must be acknowledged.

Sometimes we need to slow down when we wish to walk faster, or choose between two difficult options, neither of which we like. Yet if we are intentional, especially during the times when it is most difficult to do so, we can strive to stay true to our design. We can function as the living embodiment of institutional vision, mission and values.

Being intentional about our design means being mindful of the times when an extra few minutes, or a change of tone, or even a change in body language powerfully communicates what we really believe in. If we pay attention we can notice many small rituals that occur throughout our days tell the real story behind the words. How, for example, do we introduce our new faculty and staff at our meetings? This might seem trivial, but each moment is an opportunity to live our designed vision, mission and values.

Being intentional about our design can be challenging. The new language of higher education often focuses on measurement and assessment.² We have heard many an academic leader repeat the mantra "we get what we measure" in relationship to student learning. What they often fail to recognize is we "get" what we are able to measure based on our budgets, technology, and skills, which might not be an indicator of student learning. In doing so, we might be measuring elements of the student experience that do not directly support learning. We are, however, very clearly telling our students that we value what we are measuring, and this might not be the most important message we wish to convey or the outcome we most desire.

The same is true with faculty. We can easily document and measure degree status, type of degree, ranking of the degree-granting institution, level and number of publications, and grant money raised. And for some institutions this is what is valued. However, most people are not, in the end, valued for those achievements. In fact few university mission statements actually talk about the academic level of the faculty. In Jesuit institutions we value, or claim to value, the hearts and souls of the individuals who work in our institutions, from the facilities crew to the

president. By focusing on measurable outcomes, such as degree status or grant money raised, we can inadvertently lose sight of our designed vision, mission and values.

What would an intentional focus on our design look like? Let's imagine a typical start-of-semester meeting with a room full of new and returning faculty and staff. The leader, be it the chair, dean, vice president, provost, or president, stands up and introduces the new faculty and staff members in the room. More often than not, the introduction sounds something like a recitation of degrees, honors, schools, title and accomplishments. All of this is important, but since the hiring committee has already read all this, sent the information around the school during the search, and asked probing questions in interviews and conducted reference checks about this information, what value has this introduction added? Do we know more about a person, who they really are and what they care about, by knowing if they graduated from UCSB or CSU or any other of the traditional descriptions we use?

This type of introduction is a missed opportunity to stay true to our vision, enliven the mission, and demonstrate our values. We have missed an opportunity to increase and demonstrate the elegance of our design. We have fallen prey to being the same as every other institution, even after our expensive battle to define our uniqueness, our distinctive edge. And in becoming more like everyone else, we have lost our own authenticity. This is deadly for a Jesuit institution.

Elegant Design

What would elegant design guide us to do?³ Instead of conducting the meeting like every other institution, we would intentionally use the introduction as an opportunity to link the new hire to our mission. Rather than using the measures of attainment and accomplishment that can be divisive or competitive ("really, your degree is from UCSB? Isn't that a surfing school?"), we can use the strategies that demonstrate our real values. What if the introduction talked about the "why" of the person, about what kept them up at night and what made them get out of bed in the morning? What if we talked about the ways they inspire others and us? What if we start using the

language of what we say we value, even if we cannot quantitatively measure it?

Elegant design is built on the principles of symmetry, seduction, subtraction, and sustainability.⁴ Symmetry assures us all that the institution is in alignment with the vision, that everyone, even the custodians, know they are helping students learn. Seduction does just that, invites us into a space or conversation. Subtraction creates space for ideas to grow and relationships to build. We are invited in to ask deeper questions in alignment with the life-blood of the institution. Sustainability assures our design is future-focused and aligned with the ecology of the institution.

For example, in the introduction the leader could tell the group that John, the new English faculty member, is committed to raising money for Multiple Sclerosis and has run a half marathon each year in honor of his sister who has the disease. The leader might talk about Malcolm, the new Criminal Justice faculty member, who is a former Marine and former sheriff and is committed to leaving a legacy of safety wherever he goes. Perhaps the leader tells the group about the associate dean Mary who is learning to play musical instruments so she can help a start-up theater with musical back-up. We see symmetry in the support for the mission; subtraction in the omission of academic credentials; seduction via an invitation to learn more; and sustainability in the linking of each individual's commitments to the future focus of the institutional mission.

In fact, what if we always had the courage to speak from our hearts to the hearts of others, even in an academic setting?⁵ There is a profound truth the authors have finally come to realize after more years of teaching and leading than we wish to acknowledge: no matter what discipline or subject we are teaching, we are helping our students discover how to live lives that matter. No matter what our personal leadership style is, in the end we are helping the people who report to us live with meaning and purpose. Regardless of the political battles we need to fight, or the rough seas we need to navigate, people want to know they are part of something important; that they too have value. In fact, this might be why the battles are sometimes so intense, and roads are so rough.

Joseph Campbell said this best: "People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive."⁶

We have all watched leaders try to communicate how much the institutional vision, mission and values matter and fall short. We've seen a dean start a gathering with a short meditation, but in a tone of voice that says, "This is one more task, and I am not comfortable with it." We have heard poetry or psalms read at the start of a meeting, but without context, or without the careful selection of the part that will resonate with the group. We have seen people ask the group to have a moment of silence, while checking their notes as the others are expected to reflect. These actions are out of alignment with the words; the form is communicating the true underlying function. The leader has not designed a true opportunity to illuminate the vision, mission and values. The leader is out of touch with her own connection to the institution's vision, mission and values.

So what does work? Personal authenticity and inner alignment with the message we are trying to communicate, the form we are trying to create. Using words that we can say with authenticity, acting in ways that align with who we are rather than who we think we have to be in our roles, establishing processes and making decisions that reflect the true values of our institutions. Perhaps one of the most important elements is the Jesuit practice of reflection known as the *examen*, reflecting on our actions at the end of every day in terms of alignment with the vision.⁷ In the short term, raises and benefits will attract and keep good faculty and staff, but they will never keep them happy.⁸ It is the environment, the sense of being connected with people who are caring and supportive teammates, the knowledge we are doing meaningful work, and the respect and appreciation of our supervisors that make us happy in our jobs. In the end it is the organization's vision, mission and values-driven culture that keep us engaged and coming to work.⁹

Brand campaigns, creative marketing, conversations with students and parents, financial aid incentives, and freshman orientation weeks can bring students to campus. But it is the way we actively live our vision, mission and values every day, in ways large and small, that keeps them there. It is acting with a view larger than enrollments, moving beyond using the vision, mission and values as a “proof text” for our individual needs that convinces students we have an institution to be proud of, to return to, and to graduate from.

There are so many small ways that we miss the opportunity to enliven and enrich the vision, mission and values of our institutions. Every policy, every meeting, every brochure and piece of collateral, every piece of marketing and communication tells our real story, the story of what we measure, value and live. We have, at every moment, the opportunity to tell the story we want our constituents to hear. We can make the choice to act in ways that connect our students and employees to who we are and what we aspire to, to engage our students and faculty in the work of the institution, to live and communicate our best selves. And perhaps this is what Jesuit education is meant to do: to honestly inspire our students (and us) to live lives of meaning, purpose and value.

Ignatian Pedagogy

This focus on meaning, purpose and value is even more important within a Jesuit institution, where it is incumbent upon educators and administrators to lead by example. Perhaps the most powerful example occurs when we express our love of our content and disciplines, not our positions. Faculty should not only be able to stay in love with their disciplines, but teach in a way that helps others fall in love with the subject and content. From this perspective students are not fed information, but rather are learning to think like an expert in an area. Students learn to ask passionate questions and to disagree with compassion. Administrators have the obligation of staying in love with a discipline, but more importantly are asked to lead with passion and compassion.

Teaching as an expression of love is a unique element of liberal studies. It is true that faculty of

any discipline often love the content they teach, but it is vital in liberal studies, in disciplines that do not expand through scientific inquiry and exacting measurement. These disciplines lead us to ask and answer questions about the meaning of life, filling a life with meaning, and finding one’s particular vocation and purpose. These are disciplines of reflection and expression.

Ignatian pedagogy, built on the process of pre-reflection, context, experience, reflection, and evaluation, provides a natural foundation for this perspective.¹⁰ Whether we are introducing our faculty and staff in a meeting or introducing our students to a discipline we love, we need to set a vision, mission and values-based context for the information and experience. Defining the context challenges each of us to come out of our discipline-based siloes, to stop hiding behind our academic language and pedigrees, and to intentionally and authentically interact with each other and our students. We must choose to live the “words on the wall,” to meet people where they are, be it our faculty and staff or our students, and to provide an experience that opens the way of wonder and possibility. The “learners,” be they faculty, staff or students, internalize and integrate the experience and, finally, reflect on it. In the end we all must use our touchstone – the institutional vision, mission and values – and evaluate our actions and choices, then refine and intentionally move forward firmly anchored to our mission, vision and values. Once we are intentional about this we are designing the institutions we claim to be.

Connection and learning

There is one more aspect of design and communication we need to examine in this paper; it is the link between our actions and our mission of educating others. Learning is about relationships. The student’s relationship to the text; the relationship of the text to other writings inside and outside the discipline; the relationship of the student to other students and the faculty; and the relationship of the information to the student’s past experiences and innate self. In fact, we know the strongest memories are built through relationship to context or experience. The human brain learns through building deep connections

between thoughts, actions, emotions, the environment and information.¹¹

This notion of relationships is an integral and intimate part of Ignatian pedagogy, and is mirrored in many other faith-based teaching traditions. In the Ignatian tradition learning is a way of increasing a relationship with God¹² through a cycle of context, activity, experience, and reflection. There is a similar process in the Jewish tradition called *Chavruta*, which describes the way Talmud students study in pairs, challenging each other to a deeper level of understanding of the text.

Some secular traditions also use the notion of relationships. We find similar processes utilized in andragogy (pedagogy for adult students). Adult students spend class time engaged in conversations around the application of course content. The faculty acts as a partner in the learning environment, rather than the expert.¹³ The notion of facilitated learning also focuses on relationships, specifically the learner's relationship with content being more important than the teacher's expertise.¹⁴

These traditions ask us to focus on helping students think like experts, rather than learn what experts think. We put aside assessment and focus on relationships. We meet students where they are, understanding what most students really want is to feel respected and connected to the institution. Students, just like faculty and staff, want to know they are spending their time wisely and are part of something larger than themselves.

Conclusion

The word "design" is applicable in situations beyond choices of color and physical structure. We can view all parts of the institution, including budgets, pedagogy, syllabi, course content and other academic elements, through the design lens. Design helps humans communicate the structure and deeper meaning of any text or notion. Elegant design takes one more step and invites the student (or the participant) into the process. Elegant design intentionally engages participants, drawing individuals from across the institution into relationship with the vision, mission and values.

At every moment leaders have an opportunity to intentionally lead from the heart of the institution's designed mission, vision, and values. Our actions, our words, even our non-verbal communication must be in alignment with, and invitational to, living our mission, vision and values if we wish our students, staff and faculty to embrace and live up to the institutional goals. Doing so is elegant design in action. Doing so keeps us firmly anchored to our Ignatian beliefs and values. HJE

Notes

¹ Tim Brown, *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation* (New York, NY: HarperBusiness, 2009), 272.

² Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 256.

³ Marty Neumeier, *The Designful Company: How to Build a Culture of Nonstop Innovation: A Whiteboard Overview* (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2008), 208.

⁴ Matthew May, *In Pursuit of Elegance: Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2009), 224.

⁵ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Encouraging the Heart: A Leader's Guide to Rewarding and Recognizing Others* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 1999), 224.

⁶ Joseph Campbell and Bill D. Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1988), 293.

⁷ Howard Gray, S.J., "The Experience of Ignatius Loyola: Background to Jesuit Education," in *A Jesuit Education Reader*, edited by George Traub (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008) pp. 63-87.

⁸ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 2002), 333-334.

⁹ Chris Groscurth, "Why Your Company Must Be Mission-Driven," Gallup Business Journal online, (6 Mar. 2014), accessed November 20, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/167633/why-company-mission-driven.aspx>.

¹⁰ International Commission on the Apostolate of Jesuit Education, "Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach" (1993), accessed April 22, 2016, <http://jesuitinstitute.org/Pages/IgnatianPedagogy.htm>

¹¹ Karl R. Wirth and Dexter Perkins, "Learning to Learn," (2008) accessed December 5, 2015, <http://www.macalester.edu/geology/wirth/learning.doc>.

¹² Judaism 101, “The name of G-d”, accessed March 8, 2016, <http://www.jewfaq.org/name.htm#Writing>.

¹³ Malcolm Knowles, *Andragogy in Action: Applying Modern Principles of Adult Learning* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1984), 444.

¹⁴ Carl R. Rogers and H. Jerome Freiberg, *Freedom to Learn*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY, Pearson, 1994), 352.