

Are Higher Ed Mission Statements Mere Window Dressing in New Mexico?

By William Patrick Leonard

December, 2011

Higher education funding is “under the knife” nationwide. According to the liberal Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, no fewer than 43 of the 50 states have cut funding for higher education.¹ New Mexico was one of those states as Gov. Martinez proposed \$38 million in cuts to higher education spending in New Mexico in 2011, a 3.8 percent cut from the previous year.²

Will these budget cuts have a negative impact on New Mexico’s institutes of higher education? Indeed, what is the primary mission of New Mexico’s higher education system? The answer to this question can and should be used to efficiently allocate limited resources. Prioritization of limited resources is not a big problem when money is flowing freely, but recent tough economic times have put a stop to the easily-flowing money. Thus, determining what a university’s core mission is – and what might be sacrificed with minimal harm – is more important than ever.

The Role of Mission Statements and Regents

How is this funding/oversight versus academic quality debate to be resolved? Both critics and respondents support their claims with arrays of data. Rather than relying on either side’s cherry picked data the Rio Grande Foundation sought to pursue a more simplified approach. All of New Mexico’s senior public institutions prominently proclaim their mission statements in their various print and internet publications. But, what role do those mission statements play in institutional decisions?

In an ideal world, a mission statement should publicly affirm the institution’s statutory mandate in terms its primary purposes, who will be served and how. Adopted by the regents, a mission statement should serve as the institutional compass. Stephen Covey has observed, “If you don’t set your goals based upon your mission statement, you may be climbing the ladder of success only to realize, when you get to the top, you’re on the wrong building.” The Rio Grande Foundation has found that New Mexico public universities may well be climbing the wrong building.

Mission statements are typically based on the input from all major internal constituencies. Ultimately, the governing board not only participates in their drafting but formally accepts and endorses the resulting statement. In New Mexico, the board of regent at each institution fills this role. These statements should then guide subsequent program and service recommendations

¹ [Nicholas Johnson, Phil Oliff and Erica Williams](http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=1214), Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “An Update on State Budget Cuts,” Feb. 9, 2011, <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=1214>.

² James Monteleone, “Gov. Aims to Cut Waste in Higher Ed,” *Albuquerque Journal*, January 13, 2011, <http://www.abqjournal.com/news/state/132336380588newsstate01-13-11.htm>

made by senior officers and ultimately the regents' decisions. Within statutory, regulation and fiscal constraints, each board of regents is the institutional gatekeeper.

Without critiquing each public university's mission statement, the Rio Grande Foundation sought to determine how the regents at each of the state's six public senior universities viewed the utility of their institution's mission statement in guiding their decision making. All communication was conducted via email addresses secured by Foundation staff. Many regent emails were publicly-available on university websites and seem clearly intended to make the regents accessible.

Prior to sending the actual survey, an individualized introductory and explanatory note was sent to each regent. This was followed by the survey instrument and four individualized follow-up reminders. Each respondent was emailed a survey including a copy of their institution's mission statement followed by ten brief questions that asked the following in relation to their university's published mission statement:

- Are the constituencies to be served clearly identified?
- Are the services to be provided clearly identified?
- Are any services or activities explicitly or implicitly prohibited?
- Is there any statement on how these services and activities are to be delivered or conducted?
- Have you referred to the institutional mission statement when making decisions involving the expenditure of funds?
- Do you believe that executives, administrators, faculty and staff relied upon the mission statement in making their program and service recommendations?
- Did you participate in the development and approval of the current mission statement?
- What is your institution's most important service—teaching/learning, research or service?
- How the individual regents assures themselves that the mission is being successfully pursued—faculty publications, grants, rankings or teaching/learning outcomes?
- What is your role on the board: chairman, committee chair or member (optional)?

Respondents could respond to each question with an appropriate answer. In addition, each respondent could insert optional written comments.

A link to a sample of the survey (for Western New Mexico University) can be found here: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/2VMMSLR>

Results

The response rate was dismal. Eight responses were received out of a total of thirty invitees.

Eastern New Mexico University—two responses
New Mexico Highlands University—one response
New Mexico State University—no response
University of New Mexico—two responses
Western New Mexico University—two responses
New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology—one response

Admittedly, email surveys can be viewed as a nuisance. The regents are, however, political appointees charged with the guidance of New Mexico's public universities. Also, the Rio Grande Foundation is a widely known and respected New Mexico organization.

Thus, it is difficult to understand how the survey could be viewed as an infringement. Since each university widely claims on their web sites and in hard copy, that their Mission Statement defines their purpose and constituencies served, taxpayers have the right to know if these flowery statements have any substance. More of the regents should have been willing to reveal if and how their institution's Mission Statement influences their decision making.

Conclusions

In terms of the impact of an institution's mission statements upon the direction of New Mexico's institutes of higher learning, the small number of responses makes this difficult. We can, however, clearly see that members of the boards of regents of New Mexico's institute's of higher education are not very responsive to public input.

Even among the eight completed surveys returned, there was no agreement that mission statements actually influenced institutional decision making at the regents level. Those responding indicated that they believed executives, administrators, faculty and staff did rely upon the mission statement in making their program and service recommendations. There was near unanimity that teaching was their institution's most important service and they relied on rankings to gauge institutional performance. To which rankings are they referring? It is hard to say.

At least among the regents at the six New Mexico public senior institutions surveyed, mission statements may not be fulfilling their intended purpose. Most, if not all, may be climbing the wrong building. In doing so, they are doing an injustice to their students and the taxpayers that support New Mexico's senior public higher education institutions.

William Patrick Leonard is Senior Fellow on Higher Education with New Mexico's Rio Grande Foundation. The Rio Grande Foundation is an independent, non-partisan, tax-exempt research and educational organization dedicated to promoting prosperity for New Mexico based on principles of limited government, economic freedom and individual responsibility.