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The Mission of Rhetoric and the Rhetoric of Mission Statements

PHILIP E. SMITH II

DURING my term as English department chair, I participated in rhetorical mission-statement fashioning when we underwent a university-wide process of self-appraisal in 1990. The University of Pittsburgh administration required every unit to prepare a ten-page self-study document that included a mission statement as well as other information. My program directors helped prepare the drafts, which were placed in our reading room and then discussed in open department meetings at which colleagues suggested revisions. During the process, we learned that our self-appraisal required several kinds of rhetorical moves, from purely pragmatic applications of the required institutional formulas to self-conscious descriptions of our own disciplinary disagreements and pedagogical differences. Although no one in the department welcomed the exercise, we gained an important, morale-building overview of our achievements as well as a stronger sense of our unfulfilled needs. Finally, we composed a document that served us very well as a warrant for successfully increasing our share of university resources over the next five years. After this experience, I am convinced that, although the administrative impetus for requiring mission statements may have its origins outside academe, in business management and long-range planning practices, the process of self-study and the composition of a mission statement nevertheless can be made a flexible, adaptable, and rhetorically useful practice for English departments. Because we must learn to explain ourselves both to the outside world and to ourselves, the process of writing explanations can help clarify our professional and institutional aims and disagreements as well as strengthen our collective resolve to improve our working conditions for the benefit of our students and ourselves.

In the autumn of 1995 I collected 92 sample mission statements from English departments at United States and Canadian institutions ranging from community colleges to research universities. The chairs at another 19 institutions informed me that their departments had no mission statements. I sent e-mail requests for mission statements to the 309 department chairs (38% of the total ADE membership of 813 chairs) who listed an e-mail

address in the Directory section of the Fall 1995 *ADE Bulletin*. Fifty-two requests were refused and returned because of incorrectly listed or incomplete e-mail addresses. The remaining 257 requests were presumably delivered. I received responses from 111 institutions, or 13% of the total ADE membership. The chairs at 92 institutions provided me with mission statements, vision statements, or extracts of catalog language identified as the functional equivalents of mission statements. A list of responding institutions, including the 92 with mission statements and the 19 without statements, appears in the appendix to this essay. Chairs, heads, or deans at all the institutions listed kindly gave me written permission to include the names of their institutions in my list. I gratefully acknowledge permission for the extracts from mission statements and e-mail quoted below.

In response to my query, several chairs mentioned that requests for program descriptions could be met by catalog language or statements of English major requirements; a few chairs mentioned that they had produced planning documents or curriculum reforms or had responded to assessment or accreditation requirements but had not prepared a mission statement. One chair sent me several pages from a draft of a planning document and remarked that the English department at his prestigious university "does not have a mission statement. Perhaps more to the point, I am not at all sure that we should have a 'mission statement' if by 'mission' one means a purpose similar in zeal and clarity to the purpose of religious or military expeditions." Another chair of a highly rated department that has no mission statement inquired, "May I ask, WHY would any department choose to write such a document?"

The author is Associate Professor of English and former Chair of the English Department at the University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh. A version of this paper was presented at the 1995 MLA convention in Chicago.

One answer is that mission statements have, in the last twenty years, become expected rhetorical vehicles with which many, and perhaps most, college and university English departments represent their programs not only to the world but also to themselves. But, to return to the question, why would any department choose to write one?

Most chairs probably did not choose but, instead, were asked or required to produce a mission statement as a function of an accreditation, self-study, or assessment procedure. However, mission statements are an appropriate rhetorical tool for English departments to use in the wake of more than a decade of the critical and political attacks on academe now known as the culture wars. Also, following a decade of reduced state budgets and accompanying demands made by state legislators for institutions of higher education to prove that they deserve allocations of scarce financial resources, colleges and universities have pragmatically adopted planning protocols recommended by schools of management and have learned how to provide much more information about themselves to legislators and the public. Finally, because all six regional accreditation authorities now require both institutional and departmental statements of goals or missions to be produced for self-study documentation during periodic reviews, almost all departments should expect to have to compose one sooner or later (Allison 76).

Though mission statements bear some family resemblances to distant ancestors like credos or mottoes composed for families, states, universities, and businesses, they are more recently evolved from United States corporate management planning strategies and practices promulgated and adopted in the late 1970s and 1980s. For example, one of the faddish management strategies, total quality management, developed its own highly formulaic rhetoric and distinctive structure of instrumentation. In response to the rapid adoption of such schemes by the business sector, how-to books and articles as well as collections of samples for writers of corporate mission statements began to appear in the 1980s and are still being published (Ackoff; Falsey; Graham and Havlick).

By the late 1980s these corporate management strategies had been adopted by nonprofit organizations and were also being imported into academe under the requirements of the regional accreditation authorities and in accordance with state and institutionally mandated outcomes-assessment schemes. These authorities and institutions disseminated to their various units the instructions for writing mission statements. Likewise, following importation of such management strategies into academe, there arose a market for discipline-specific how-to handbooks and for articles describing the application of mission statements (Christ; Bazin). One such handbook, *Assessing Communication Education: A Handbook for Media, Speech, and Theatre Educators* (Christ), specifi-

cally refers writers of academic mission statements back to the corporate model (Christ and Blanchard 40–43). So, to provide another answer to the queries of curious chairs, most academic mission statements arise out of administrative demands for assessment and accountability and have little to do with evangelical zeal—though a few statements furnished by English department at Catholic or Protestant Christian colleges might be so described.

For example, the Samford University English department's statement of its role in accomplishing its university's Christian educational mission was written in the language of management practices, having been developed after four years of university-wide discussions applying the rhetorical framework of total quality management and its five elements, mission, customers, critical processes, values, and vision. According to Janet Lasseter, associate professor and chair, the English department's present statement had to be revised from an earlier "poetic and moving description" because it did not specifically fit the administration's definition of the mission statement (e-mail 23 Oct. 1995). The earlier version, which has been retained as the department's preamble to the extensive bound document detailing its assessment practices and the history of its experience with total quality management, is often used by university administrators as a fine example of the English department's identity. The form of the current document resembles the university's mission statement and, since the content accurately conveys the department's sense of itself, the faculty members are pleased with it (Lasseter e-mail 14 Apr. 1996).

The Mission of Rhetoric

As Kenneth Burke teaches us, the mission of rhetoric is to persuade, to induce through identification the audience's cooperation with the purposes of the writer or speaker (43–46). The rhetoric of mission statements varies substantively and performatively according to the often imposed requirements of a system of accreditation or management or outcomes assessment; rhetoric also varies instrumentally according to different roles performed by institutions and departments (for example, a service department in a technical institute, a major department in a liberal arts college) and varies performatively according to religious or critical ideology of the faculty, which may teach students how to read and communicate in keeping with a Christian way of life or with a poststructuralist approach to reading and writing. So, in mission statements, persuasion can be focused toward a variety of ends. Some ends are intransitive, for example, approval or accreditation on the parts of parents, students, faculty colleagues, administration, accrediting agencies, or state legislators. Some ends are transitive, for

example, increased applications and enrollments by students, job acceptances by candidates, or acquirement of new resources from grants, gifts, or increased budgets. As one chair noted candidly about his department's rhetoric, "It was a nice little statement at one point, but the assessment people kept telling us to put more in it in view of future budgetary considerations ('We can't let you have it because it's not in your mission statement.'). Finances triumph over principles."

We can infer, given my account of the genesis of academic mission statements out of management practices, that such statements are composed for an increasingly routine public rhetorical occasion, namely, university or departmental assessment or accreditation. The usual audiences are, of course, "insider" institutional colleagues and administrators as well as "outsider" assessors or accreditors. But it would be a mistake to dismiss mission statements as perfunctory rhetorical exercises responding only to routinely imposed occasions. Mission statements and the processes of producing them can have important benefits for departments that take them seriously. The public and consensual composition of a self-defining rhetorical discourse focuses on the most skeptical audience of all: the members of the department themselves. The need to tell administrators and accreditors as well as the public what we do and why we do it means we must first bring our educational and institutional goals to the table for discussion and then describe ourselves to ourselves. This unusual professional introspection and coauthored writing can produce the occasions for building departmental rationales that Patricia Meyer Spacks recommends to other chairs:

A chair can function valuably by helping to specify differences, by calling attention to conflicts where they fester or burgeon, by demanding that the department reflect collectively on its differences and their meanings until it discovers its points of congruence, by insisting that a department find ways of taking responsibility for itself, and perhaps by raising and keeping firmly in view the alarming possibility that we may not be doing our jobs well enough. [. . .] It's even possible to imagine that a group that had reflected fully on its own workings should arrive at an implicit rationale for the complicated and diversified collective enterprise of teaching about literature and culture at the end of the twentieth century. Such a rationale might help individual departments understand and justify why they continue trying to produce new PhDs.
(*"Dealing"* 98–99)

In effect, what Spacks recommends for departmental self-responsibility and for the development of a rationale is the process of discussion and debate that leads to the formulation of a mission statement. In the process of discussion and drafting that informs the composing of any mission statement, it is important for a faculty to proceed according to Spacks's recommendation, to reflect fully

and critically on its own manifold commitments and aims, and to represent this self-reflection in the language of its statement. If, with Spacks's leadership, the University of Virginia English department can now accomplish this task, they should also be able to write the mission statement that, according to Spacks, they did not have at the time of my survey (e-mail).

The Rhetoric of Mission Statements

All the statements I collected, extensive or brief, were composed in rhetorical modes that were meant in one way or another to be found bulletproof by their intended audiences of administrators, assessors, and accreditors. One common mode involved adherence to bureaucratic requirements: the chairs of several responding departments in the midst of drafting mission or vision statements noted the requirement to conform to the format and language expected by institutions or assessment agencies. Another mode was characterized by brevity: often one paragraph or even one sentence invoking variously named rhetorical ultimates for English departments. For example, some statements relied on formulaic recitation of the holy trinity of teaching, research, and service, presumably because of institutional requirements (stated, very likely, as institutional missions) that departments be involved in all three activities. A different group of statements pledged allegiance to another holy trinity: literature, language, and writing. Yet another group honored developmental goals such as having students become better readers and better writers or having students develop critical and analytical skills.

Here are two examples of brief mission statements that I found usefully direct and nonformulaic. Both departments describe their English programs as if there were broad certainty about the aims and methods of disciplinary study in English. The mission of the department at Rhodes College subscribes to developmental goals for students, that is,

To develop in our students the ability to read critically, to think and to write independently, analytically, and creatively, and to approach diversity with respect and sensitivity so that they will be prepared to make the humane contributions to their world that are consonant with an excellent liberal arts education.

The statement from the University of the South also sets traditional goals for humanistic study:

Believing that the pleasure and wisdom accessible in literature can enrich Sewanee students' lives and have a wholesome influence on their characters, the English Department wants its students to read good literature, to be able to speak and

write intelligently about the form and meaning of this literature, and to carry from Sewanee a capacity for further understanding and enjoyment of literary works.

The sample I collected also contains several useful examples of rhetorical modes employed in lengthy, complex, but also thoughtful and self-reflective, statements. Those departments that composed mission statements in the light of the theoretical and critical approaches that have changed our discipline in the past quarter century reflected departmental disagreements and professional differences. They often situated themselves in relation to the educational implications of disciplinary changes. They found various forms of rhetoric that addressed several audiences simultaneously, including themselves, their students, their colleagues in other departments and administrators within the institution, their accreditors or assessors, and the outside world of the general public. Four excerpts should suggest what I take to be thoughtfully reflective rhetorical approaches.

The University of New Mexico's statement is forthright about locating itself in relation to demographic and disciplinary changes which

have brought stress as well as new opportunities to the professional lives of English professors. The pressure to keep up with ever-accelerating developments in one's field has intensified. [. . .] It's hard to say "We're all in this together" when "this," the academic study of English, is so shifting and divided.

George Mason University's statement centers its department's several different programs' missions around textual study:

The texts that carry information in our society are not only government reports and business statistics, but political speeches, scholarly books, best-selling novels, experimental films, and television dramas. A central mission for us is to teach students to attend critically to such texts so that they may cope successfully in a text-ridden world. A related mission is to introduce students to texts from the past so that their critical attention may be based on some knowledge of that past and some awareness of both continuity and change in the texts men and women have created in response to other times. For those reasons, the mission of "English" is in the broadest sense political—educating the young to take their place in the "polis."

The mission statement written by the English department at Santa Clara University introduces itself in the context of the current

fierce debate about the nature of the discipline. [. . .] Some might look on this disarray as evidence of incoherence, a fragmentation of the late nineteenth-century positivistic project in national language and literature. In truth, the history

of the discipline is one of on-going dialogue, self-examination, and critique.

So, they conclude, "such lively debate [. . .] does not excuse the English department from formulating for itself and its students a set of standards by which it may judge itself and be judged."

The University of Wisconsin's statement lists the "four relatively discrete disciplinary areas that comprise the departmental faculty": creative writing, composition, English language and linguistics, and English-language literatures. It goes on to assert succinctly that "the Department serves as an institutional memory for the cultural traditions that it studies, as their interpreter within the new contexts of the present, and as an agent of their continuing appraisal and critique."

The kinds of rhetoric that enable the best mission statements to speak convincingly inside and outside their originating departments have been studied by Wayne Booth, notably in *The Vocation of a Teacher: Rhetorical Occasions, 1967–1988*. In his epilogue, "The Idea of a University," he classifies three kinds of rhetoric that are indispensable to intellectual and collegial life within universities: "Our very survival depends on our control of that kind of knowledge—that is to say, on our repertory of rhetorical practices and norms" (324). I found the most successful mission statements to be those that move credibly and convincingly among these three kinds of rhetoric, mediating the discourse for maximum effectiveness of understanding, by using the specialized rhetoric of disciplinary insiders, the rhetoric of academic inquiry that can function across disciplines, and the general, public rhetoric that serves best to address audiences outside our disciplines and institutions. When mission statements achieve such breadth of address, they do far more than accomplish the ordering efficiencies of some exercise in management imported into academe; they do far more than produce a bulletproof defense against anti-intellectual enemies in the culture at large, especially in legislatures and capital buildings. Mission statements that are composed out of a department's genuine and perhaps difficult discussion and debate about intellectual differences can provide, as Spacks suggests, a "rationale for the complicated and diversified collective enterprise of teaching about literature and culture" and, I would add, composition, creative writing, and film and media studies in English departments "at the end of the twentieth century" ("Dealing" 99).

I mentioned at the beginning that a mission statement could serve as a warrant for increasing a department's resources and for building faculty morale. The consultative process we used to write our departmental mission statement at Pitt in 1990 prepared us to develop and defend a

set of initiatives called “Fix English” that, when finally approved and implemented in 1994, won us improved teaching loads, an increase in full-time faculty lines, and an increased operating budget. I believe that the discussion accompanying our composition of a mission statement constituted an important part of our department’s ongoing—over several years—consideration and review of professional ends and means; it contributed to our own awareness of our programmatic improvements as well as our faculty members’ and graduate students’ accomplishments, all of which were recognized by a substantial rise in the ranking of our PhD program in the 1995 National Research Council survey.

Our mission statement used Booth’s three varieties of rhetoric but it also combined scrupulous accuracy in gathering and reporting our enrollments, teaching loads, and staffing resources with a rhetorical appeal to maintaining and improving educational quality and

with a rationale for reallocation of university resources that the English department generated from tuition dollars. In public hearings and discussions with deans that followed the preparation of our mission statement, I was able to show that only 34% of our approximately 14,000 annual student enrollments were taught by full-time faculty members and, therefore, that the English department operated as a cash cow for the university to the potential detriment of the department’s mission to provide high-quality education for undergraduates and graduates. This use of rhetoric was an important aspect of a persuasive and successful argument to ameliorate these conditions. I believe it suggests that other departments might benefit from the process of developing mission statements out of thoughtful, self-reflective study and discussion and then implementing them as pragmatic rhetorical strategies for collective improvement and recognition.

Appendix

92 Responding English Departments with Mission Statements

Abilene Christian University	Iowa State University	State University College of New York,
Albion College	Lake Forest College	Purchase
Arizona State University	Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge	Stephen F. Austin State University
Belmont University	Louisiana State University, Shreveport	Trinity College, CT
Bethel College	Luther College	Union College, NY
Biola University	Macalester College	University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa
Birmingham-Southern College	Mankato State University	University of Arkansas, Fayetteville
Central College	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	University of Cincinnati
Chatham College	Michigan State University	University of Houston, Downtown
Christopher Newport University	Middle Tennessee State University	Campus
Citadel, The	Morningside College	University of Illinois, Urbana
Clarke College	Mount Saint Mary’s College, MD	University of Maine, Farmington
Coe College	North Carolina State University	University of Maine, Machias
College of Saint Benedict	North Central College	University of Maryland, College Park
College of William and Mary	North Dakota State University	University of Minnesota, Duluth
Concordia College, Moorhead	Northwestern University	University of Nebraska, Omaha
Creighton University	Northwest Missouri State University	University of New Mexico,
Dakota State University	Ohio Northern University	Albuquerque
Eckerd University	Olivet Nazarene University	University of North Carolina,
Framingham State College	Oregon State University	Wilmington
Gallaudet University	Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute	University of Northern Colorado
George Mason University	Rhodes College	University of South Carolina, Aiken
Georgia College and State University	Ripon College	University of Southern Colorado
Grand Rapids Community College, MI	Saint Michael’s College	University of the South
Hamilton College	Saint Olaf College	University of Wisconsin, Madison
Hamline University	Samford University	University of Wyoming
Hampden-Sydney College	Santa Clara University	Valdosta State University
Hanover College	Skidmore College	Valparaiso University
Hartwick College	Southwest Missouri State University	Virginia Commonwealth University
Haverford College	State University College of New York,	Willamete University
Hood College	Brockport	Winona State University
Indiana University–Purdue University,	State University College of New York,	Xavier University
Fort Wayne	Geneseo	Youngstown State University

19 Responding English Departments without Mission Statements

Babson College¹
Carnegie Mellon University²
Clayton College and State
University³
Columbia University
Eastern Michigan University
Georgia State University

Grinnell College
Memorial University of
Newfoundland
San Diego State University⁴
University of California, Berkeley
University of Redlands
University of Southern California⁵

University of Virginia
Vanderbilt University
Wayne State College
Westchester Community College, NY
Western Illinois University⁶
Western Washington University
Yale University

Notes

¹The head of the division of arts and humanities at Babson College noted that while the institution has no English department, the study of English is included in the division; Babson is a business school with a specific mission statement about management education, and the mission of the humanities division is embedded in that of the college.

²Carnegie Mellon University's English department has since completed a mission statement.

³The English department chair at Clayton College and State University wished to note that the department is newly organized and, while neither apathetic nor hostile to mission statements, has not yet considered the matter of drafting one.

⁴San Diego State University is preparing a statement describing its departmental curricular specialty, the teaching of teachers of literature.

⁵The University of Southern California English department has developed an internal document, not for publication, outlining a strategic plan for growth over a two- to five-year period.

⁶The English Department at Western Illinois University has since created and approved a departmental mission statement.

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Deconstructing the Mission " 137 missions and find that the rhetoric of the statements was geared toward employee buy-in. Two content analyses of university library missions found specific library roles and audiences delineated therein (Bangert and Day 1997; Aldrich 2007). Ray Hackney and John Pillay's (2002) work on deconstructing information technology (IT) mission statements described the theory of the "vanishing author" (33). Results The roles chosen in library mission statements reflect the standpoint of those writing the statements, and vice versa. The "roles" are construed here as extrinsic or instrumental impacts of libraries and "standpoint" as intrinsic to what libraries are as institutions. Many of the codes occur in both groups, creating a web of interconnections. Rhetoric is a technique of using language effectively and persuasively in spoken or written form. It is an art of discourse, which studies and employs various methods to convince, influence, or please an audience. For instance, a person gets on your nerves, you start feeling irritated, and you say, "Why don't you leave me alone?" By posing such a question, you are not actually asking for a reason. Instead, you simply want him to stop irritating you. Thus, you direct language in a particular way for effective communication, making use of rhetoric. A situation where you make use of rhetoric is c University of Pennsylvania. ScholarlyCommons. Mission Statements: A Thematic Analysis of Rhetoric Across International Type. jhe773-pg456-471. GSE Publications. For example, Delucchi (1997) found that the mission statements of schools dominated by enrollment in professional fields extolled their institutions' liberal arts focus. Although institutional theorists would concede that mission statements may inform some universities' strategic plans, they would argue that the primary purpose is to serve normative rather than utilitarian purposes.1.