

Abilene Christian University

## Digital Commons @ ACU

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Electronic Theses and Dissertations


---

1-2020

# A Look at Vision: Perspectives Throughout the Organizational Hierarchy of the Christian University Context

William Kyle Brantley  
wkb16a@acu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Business and Corporate Communications Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Organizational Communication Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Brantley, William Kyle, "A Look at Vision: Perspectives Throughout the Organizational Hierarchy of the Christian University Context" (2020). Digital Commons @ ACU, *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 185.

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Electronic Theses and Dissertations at Digital Commons @ ACU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ ACU.

This dissertation, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the College of Graduate and Professional Studies of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

**Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**

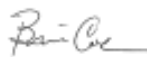


---

Dr. Joey Cope, Dean of the  
College of Graduate and  
Professional Studies

November 19, 2019

Dissertation Committee:



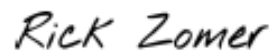
---

Dr. Brian Cole, Chair



---

Dr. Jaime Goff



---

Dr. Rick Zomer

Abilene Christian University  
School of Educational Leadership

A Look at Vision:  
Perspectives Throughout the Organizational Hierarchy of the Christian University Context

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by  
William Kyle Brantley

January 2020

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my parents—my first teachers. Your unending love, support, and belief in me are what have enabled me to pursue my own vision for this life. You are the foundation to this work.

I give thanks to Mark Hughes, my former boss and mentor. You placed your confidence in me at an early stage in my career, and I have grown much in thanks to your guidance. Not only did you teach me how to lead and treat others well, but you encouraged me to travel this road, and I will always be better for it.

I give much gratitude to those who served on my dissertation committee—Dr. Brian Cole, Dr. Jaime Goff, and Dr. Rick Zomer. I consider myself fortunate to be able to work with each of you in this process. My utmost thanks goes to Dr. Cole for his steady encouragement, wise counsel, and his persistent drive towards excellence.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who have served or are serving in Christian higher education. We get both an opportunity and a responsibility to serve Something greater than ourselves in this field. It is my hope that this study may help others in the field enhance the life-changing education and experiences our institutions provide.

© Copyright by W. Kyle Brantley (2020)

All Rights Reserved

## Abstract

Research supports vision as a central tenet to leadership. Just as important as the content of vision is how it is communicated. However, once a vision is cast, far less is known about how it is communicated throughout the organization and how it influences members throughout the organizational hierarchy. For faith-based organizations like Christian colleges and universities, vision is particularly important as it serves to steer the institution toward a greater realization of its faith-based identity. This study contributes to the empirical research on vision, its communication, and its effect, as both the nature and impact of vision communication within Christian higher education are explored. A multicase qualitative research design was employed at 2 Christian universities in the southeastern U.S. Purposeful sampling stratified participants based on their position level within the institution (i.e., senior-level executive, mid-level manager, entry-level employee). Data were collected primarily through 36 interviews. Findings show that vision communication was primarily attributed to the president at each institution, though others felt a responsibility in sharing vision and expressed it in different ways. Additionally, there was a strong, shared alignment with the Christian-focused vision, which was a compelling factor for participants. However, the clarity of what the overall vision was or how to implement it was often obscured by factors unique to each institution, resulting in self-interpretations, assumptions, and frustration. Recommendations are provided for practitioners and for further research, including: leveraging positional power the president has as the chief communicator of vision; establishing an infrastructure for vision communication; and, for faith-based institutions, emphasizing the connection of the institution's faith-identity to its vision in order to further inspire employees to pursue the vision.

*Keywords:* vision, communication, higher education, Christian, university, faith-based

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	i
Abstract.....	iii
List of Tables .....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Background .....	3
Statement of the Problem .....	7
Purpose of the Study.....	8
Research Questions .....	10
Definition of Key Terms .....	10
Summary .....	12
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	13
Organizational Vision.....	15
Vision Communication.....	29
The Communication of Vision Throughout the Organizational Hierarchy .....	35
Vision in Higher Education.....	39
Summary .....	49
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	50
Research Design and Method.....	50
Population.....	53
Sample.....	54
Materials/Instruments .....	60
Data Collection.....	61
Data Analysis Procedures.....	63
Methods for Establishing Trustworthiness.....	65
Researcher's Role.....	67
Ethical Considerations.....	68
Assumptions .....	68
Limitations.....	69
Delimitations .....	70
Summary .....	71
Chapter 4: Results .....	72

Case Study 1: Veritas University .....	73
Case Study 2: Lux University .....	95
Cross-Case Analysis.....	108
Summary of Themes .....	121
Findings for the Nature of Vision Communication.....	122
Findings for the Impact of Vision Communication.....	126
Summary .....	130
 Chapter 5: Discussion .....	 132
 Discussion .....	 132
Limitations.....	147
Recommendations .....	148
Conclusion.....	156
 References.....	 158
 Appendix A: Participants .....	 175
 Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	 177
 Appendix C: IRB Approval .....	 179



## List of Tables

Table 1: Attributes of an Effective Vision According to Baum, Locke, & Kirkpatrick (1998) .....	18
Table 2: Attributes of an Effective Vision According to Pekarsky (1998) .....	19

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Vision has been hailed by many influential thinkers and leaders as a force to be generated, harnessed, and employed in order to drive an organization towards greater effectiveness. Covey (1994) asserted that the passion precipitated by vision “can empower us to literally transcend fear, doubt, discouragement, and many other things that keep us from accomplishment and contribution” (p. 105). According to Senge (1990), vision has the potential to “focus the energies of thousands” and create “a common identity among enormously diverse people” (p. 207). Kouzes and Posner (2002) recognized vision as a potent means of motivation for members within an organization. Furthermore, there is a substantial body of empirical evidence that demonstrates vision as a powerful management tool that may be used to positively influence organizational performance (Baum, Locke, & Kirkpatrick, 1998; Cole, Harris, & Bernerth, 2006; Jing, Avery, & Bergsteiner, 2014). On the other hand, when vision is unclear, neglected, or absent altogether within an organization, the consequences can be detrimental to both employee morale and the firm’s bottom line (Baum et al., 1998).

While the significance of vision has been upheld in leadership theory (Nanus, 1992; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Senge, 1990) and also demonstrated in empirical studies (Baum et al., 1998; Jing et al., 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2017b), past vision-related research has focused more on vision’s *content* and less on its *communication* (Carton, Murphy, & Clark, 2015; Collins & Porras, 2008; Stam, Lord, van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2014; Westley & Mintzberg, 1989). Moreover, there is no universal application process of vision given the varying characteristics, compositions, and complexities unique to each organization. As such, organizational context must be understood in order to effectively disseminate vision throughout an organization.

One unique type of organization that must be studied within its own context is the higher education institution (HEI; Taylor & Machado-Taylor, 2010). These types of organizations are distinct for their plurality of populations (Bük, Atakan-Duman, & Pasamehmetoglu, 2017) and the ever-changing, volatile environment in which they operate (Zaccaro & Banks, 2004), which can present real challenges for the communication of a clear vision within the HEI. Studies have cited disconnects in institutional vision from the operations of the university (Abelman, Atkin, Dalessandro, Snyder-Shuy, & Janstova, 2007; Wylie, 2017), which ultimately can lead to a divide between promotion versus practice. For faith-based institutions in particular, vision typically expresses some sort of spiritual stake in identity (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009), and the fulfillment of the spiritual facet of the institutional vision can be a differing component by which success can be evaluated (Alford, 2006). These ideals, if communicated effectively, may help keep the organization spiritually oriented within the volatile, competitive environment. While research has explored the content of these types of statements at faith-based HEIs (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009; Weeks, Winningham, & Winningham, 2017; Woodrow, 2006), interestingly, much less attention has been paid to how this information is actually communicated to stakeholders within these academic communities (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009).

In this study, I explored both the nature and the impact of vision communication within the organizational hierarchy of two faith-based HEIs. By understanding the ways in which vision is disseminated within the HEI and its influence on morale and performance among differing personnel populations at differing levels within the organization, I endeavored to produce empirical knowledge toward the body of existing research on the topic of organizational vision, specifically as it interacts within the organizational structure of the Christian university context.

The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of the background on this topic, defines the problem of practice, explains the purpose of the study, identifies the research questions, and defines key terms that are used throughout this study.

## **Background**

A vision may act as a compass for all organizational members with the ability to inspire aligned action towards a shared purpose. Pekarsky (1998) maintained that a “well-conceived vision” is one that is shared, clear, and compelling (p. 280). A shared vision is one with the ability to unite and inspire. A vision should be clear enough to distinguish the identity of the organization and offer genuine guidance in decision-making and priority-setting activities. Also, a vision that is compelling is one that motivates members to work together in meaningful, directed activity. Effective visions have been shown to reap numerous benefits within the organization such as improved employee morale and affective commitment (Jing et al., 2014; Ryu, 2015), increased organizational profitability and growth (Baum et al., 1998), and increased employee and customer satisfaction (Jing et al., 2014; Kantabutra, 2008). However, despite their promising potential, visions do not always pan out as purposed. When vision is not understood or shared by all constituents, the resulting goal ambiguity can lead to a host of negative effects within the organization, including higher turnover (Domm, 2001), lower productivity, decreases in customer satisfaction and tenure (Jing et al., 2014; Kohles, Bligh, & Carsten, 2012), and a loss of profitability (Baum et al., 1998; Gulati, Mikhail, Morgan, & Sittig., 2016; Jing et al., 2014).

Modern day organizations operate with a more loosely committed workforce (Mayfield, Mayfield, & Sharbrough, 2015) in an increasingly unstable, ever-changing environment (Darkow, 2015). Research has demonstrated that vision is critical in inspiring motivation among followers in these types of environments (Stam et al., 2014). According to Daft and Weick

(1986), it is the role of top-level leadership to analyze and make interpretations within contexts like these, formulating an organizational direction and disseminating this vision to all stakeholders. However, despite consistent efforts of vision communication, many leaders have found that their employees are not familiar with their organization's own vision and goals (Ryu, 2015).

Much of the current vision-related research focuses on vision content—the components and characteristics of the verbiage contained within the vision statement (Carton et al., 2015; Collins & Porras, 2008; Stam et al., 2014). However, Westley and Mintzberg (1989) asserted that “*how* the vision is communicated becomes as important as *what* is communicated” (p. 19). According to Mayfield et al. (2015), a model to operationalize the communication of strategic vision has yet to have been identified. Previous literature offers broad recommendations and generalized guidelines, but it “does not provide a framework for the systematic development, implementation, and diffusion of leader communicated strategic vision” (Mayfield et al., 2015, p. 107).

Since vision is typically defined by and disseminated from top-level, executive leadership within an organization, Mayfield et al. (2015) submitted that lower level leaders may not be transmitting the vision in a consistent way to their subordinates or to external stakeholders if communication from the top is ineffective. As Fairhurst (1993) posited, “it may be precisely . . . in the discourse between leaders and members where a vision succeeds or fails” (p. 366). Research on this topic maintains that visions should not only be well-conceived and -crafted (Collins & Porras, 2008), but also *communicated* strategically and repeatedly in order to motivate an organizational body towards achieving optimum coordination (Carton et al., 2015; Domm, 2001; Mayfield et al., 2015). Once transmitted effectively, vision has been shown to

positively influence a variety of performance indicators within organizations (Baum et al., 1998; Gulati et al., 2016; Jing et al., 2014).

The development and communication of vision statements is not a one-size-fits-all process. The context of the organization must be considered. Despite evidence of a positive relationship, vision's effect on performance is not fully understood (Kantabutra, 2008), particularly in HEIs (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). The structural hierarchy of HEIs and the ever-changing environments in which they operate offer unique challenges to such dissemination. A plurality of identities exists within the HEI based on its diversity of stakeholders (Bük et al., 2017) such as students, faculty, staff, administrators, board members, and alumni. This unique composition makes communication throughout the HEI a multidimensional task whereby both the historical identity and the future-oriented strategy of the institution must be considered (Steiner, Sundstrom, & Sammalisto, 2013). Further complicating this matter is the increasingly volatile (Letizia, 2017; Zaccaro & Banks, 2004), competitive (Kosmutzky & Krucken, 2015), unclear, and even contradictory (Oertel & Söll, 2017) environment in which HEIs operate. Research has revealed sizable disconnects between organizational vision and individual units on a college campus (Abelman et al., 2007; Özdem, 2011; Wylie, 2017). This leads to a divide between promotion versus practice, which can result in differing opinions on what may be perceived to be appropriate behavior (Nite, Singer, & Cunningham, 2013; Seo & Creed, 2002) and may lead, ultimately, to an organization missing its missional mark.

Unlike secular universities, religious HEIs offer another dimension to higher education—an educational enterprise permeated by spiritual purpose and promotion. Within the faith-based university, specifically, a differentiating component of success can be assessed by the fulfillment of the mission and vision as it relates to the intended spiritual identity and activity of the

institution outlined in the institution's vision (Alford, 2006). For religious colleges and universities, it is an expectation to find some form of spiritual identity communicated within the institutional mission and vision statements (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009). While Dosen (2012) contended that Christian mission and identity should be the concern of the entire institution, the effective transmission of an institutional vision throughout all layers of the university is a vehicle by which this can potentially be achieved.

According to Alford (2006), vision "translates mission into action, establishes organizational values, and allows institutions to successfully confront the future" (p. xii). Vision statements are intended to complement institutional mission, but they serve to point the organization in a direction of transcendence (Abelman, 2012). As such, vision is uniquely connected to the idealized future identity of faith-based institutions and can act as an impetus for organizational purpose and culture and, if communicated effectively, can be a deterrent against falling down the "slippery slope of secularization" which threatens the very existence of institutional identity for these types of colleges and universities (Flory, 2002, p. 349).

The relationship between organizational vision and effectiveness seems to be well established. While much is known about the development and content of vision statements, we know far less when it comes to the way these are communicated within the organization (Kopaneva, 2013), especially within the Christian HEI. Vision can be a powerful force with the ability to unite, motivate, and direct all organizational members towards a transcendent state (Covey, 1994; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). It can provide meaning and purpose to constituents across all levels of the organization, from the board of trustees to the most recently hired employee. The synergy as a result of a well-conceived, -crafted, and -communicated vision has been shown to improve the financial state and overall effectiveness of many organizations

(Baum et al., 1998; Jing et al., 2014;). However, research has also identified that deficiencies exist in vision communication on college campuses (Abelman et al., 2007, Özdem, 2011). By exploring how vision is currently being communicated within the faith-based HEI, stakeholders may come to a greater understanding of its influence on employee morale and performance at various levels throughout a college or university.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Previous research has established a link between more effective vision communication and higher degrees of employee performance and satisfaction, customer satisfaction, employee commitment (Domm, 2001; Jing et al., 2013; Ryu, 2015), and higher overall profitability for the organization (Baum et al., 1998; Gulati et al., 2016). However, there is a lack of clarity on how HEIs are to communicate vision. For religious colleges and universities in particular, administrators are challenged with articulating the religious identity found within the institutional vision (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009; Cesareo, 2007). Studies have revealed that when vision is misunderstood or neglected, the results can be detrimental to the overall success of the firm. Baum et al. (1996) found that organizations with CEOs who did not possess a vision performed significantly worse than those with CEOs that employed their visions. On a college campus, the result of an ineffective vision can be goal ambiguity, competing logics (Nite et al., 2013; Seo & Creed, 2002), or structural schisms which may lead to tensions in organizational culture and identity (Fugazzotto, 2009). Vision serves to shape the behavior of an organization's employees by cultivating a higher level of commitment and investment, which, in turn, influences employee performance and ultimately leads towards greater operational success.

I set out on this path of research as a result of my own line of questioning related to vision at the faith-based institution where I am employed. I have found that while a Christian



college or university's ongoing, operational mission may be clear, an organizational vision of a future identity may not always be present and/or articulated in an effective manner. There are many within my own institution who are unfamiliar with vision, and there does not seem to be a consensus on where we should head—or who we should be—as a university. Colleagues of mine in admissions, advising, and academic units across multiple faith-based institutions in the southeastern U.S. have expressed feeling discontent when it comes to knowing the direction in which their institution is going. Many cite a disconnect based on little, if any, interaction with upper-level administration. As a result, some have felt uninformed or unheard. Included in this same void is the effective transmission of vision and, with it, the potential synergy of working towards a shared concept of the future. Given these conditions, these types of questions may arise among higher education practitioners and leaders: Who do we want to be as a university? How are we to best support our institution's long-term goals in our work? And, how can we more effectively articulate and reiterate our vision and celebrate the milestones of vision fulfillment along the way?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine how vision is currently being diffused throughout Christian HEIs so that leaders can be provided with insight as to how to develop key practices and strategies to communicate a vision that is more shared, clear, and compelling across all layers of the entire institution for the purpose of a more coordinated, focused future. By studying vision communication and its effects within the unique composition of the Christian HEI, leaders within higher education may know more of the themes common to effective vision communication and, also, the threats to this effectiveness. As a result, pitfalls may be avoided, and best practices may be adopted.

In order to determine how vision is being communicated through the HEI and to assess its impact, I employed a qualitative, multicase study research design to study two Christian HEIs in the southeastern U.S. According to Jones, Torres, & Arminio (2006), research within the field of higher education is often and easily segmented into cases. It is my hope that through these two case studies, readers may come to make naturalistic generalizations based on findings related to vision communication within Christian higher education.

The population of this study included universities that self-identify as Christian institutions. These nonprofit, private universities have historic roots in Christianity and are currently Christ-centered in mission based on the explicit declaration of such through formalized statements such as their vision statement and/or mission statement. The sample for this study included two Christian universities within the southeastern U.S., referred to as Veritas University and Lux University (pseudonyms). While both are self-described Christian universities, differences in size, structure, and financial positioning are variables by which vision may be affected at each institution.

A multiperspective approach was used in order to gain insight throughout each university as to how vision is being communicated. Personnel across various levels of each university were selected for interviews. I stratified personnel into three primary layers for this study: senior-level executives, mid-level managers, and entry-level employees. Using a purposeful sampling strategy, the focus of this study was placed on groups within the HEI that have some of the highest interaction with students, including faculty, enrollment practitioners, and student affairs personnel. As institutional vision has been defined as the philosophical template by which HEIs define the kinds of human beings they wish to cultivate (Abelman & Molina, 2006), it is beneficial to study these types of employees that have the most direct, ongoing interaction with

students in relation to how they receive, interpret, and communicate vision in their roles as frontline university representatives. I interviewed a total of 36 individuals between both case study institutions in order to assess their perception of how vision is communicated throughout the institution and how it impacts that individual in their role. Additionally, data artifacts were collected related to vision communication in order to triangulate findings. Data collection ceased once it was determined that thematic saturation had been achieved.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions were formulated in order to explore the nature and impact of vision communication within the Christian college and university context:

**Q1.** What is the nature of communication used to disseminate vision to constituents across a Christian HEI's campus?

**Q2.** How does institutional vision impact the work of personnel at various levels (i.e., senior-level, mid-level, entry-level) within a Christian HEI?

By asking these questions, I attempted to gain an understanding of how vision is transmitted on a Christian college campus and how vision influences the work of employees at various levels of the HEI. With a better understanding of how vision is actually being diffused throughout the HEI, strategies may be developed in order to help leaders communicate their institution's vision in a way that motivates all employees towards an image of what Stam et al. (2014) called a future *possible self* of the institution, or an idealized future identity of what the institution *could be*.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Entry-level employee.** This study considers entry-level employees as those organizational members who have no direct reports and a narrow scope of responsibility.

**Higher education institution (HEI).** A higher education institution is a college or university that has been accredited by a widely recognized accreditation body.

**Mid-level manager.** These individuals are found in the middle of the organizational hierarchy and have been referred to as the “linking-pins” of the organization (Raes, Heijltjes, Glunk, & Roe, 2011, p. 102). They work under the authority of senior-level executives, typically hold a wider sphere of influence, and are responsible for managing and communicating top-down initiatives to employees beneath them in the organizational chart. For this study, mid-level managers are dean and director-level personnel within the university.

**Senior-level executive.** This layer of the HEI consists of the president, vice-presidents, and provosts. Senior-level executives are regarded as the chief communication officers of organizational vision (Argenti, 2017).

**Vision.** Vision is “a mental image conjured up by a leader that portrays a highly desirable future state for the organization” (Conger, 1989, p. 38). Vision is the concept of the future for an organizational entity.

**Vision communication.** The process of transmitting the concept of vision to others within an organization with the aim of convincing followers that the vision is valid and worthwhile (Stam et al., 2014). Vision communication can be in written or oral form (Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

**Vision statement.** A vision statement is a living instrument that conveys the concept of the organization’s future or desired state (Gulati et al., 2016). While *vision* by itself may be the concept of the future, the vision statement encapsulates this concept into an organization-approved and promoted written declaration.

## Summary

Research demonstrates the positive effects of a well-conceived, -crafted, and -communicated vision (Baum et al., 1998; Carton et al., 2015; Jing et al., 2013). Higher education institutions are unique for their plurality of populations (Bük et al., 2017) and the ever-changing, volatile environment in which they operate (Zaccaro & Banks, 2004). These characteristics can present real challenges for the communication of a clear vision within the HEI, especially as it travels through the multiple channels of the institutional hierarchy. The cited research and practitioner experience above indicates that deficiencies exist in vision communication on college campuses. The following chapter reviews the literature on the concept and impact of vision communication within organizations, and, specifically, within the context of Christian higher education. By exploring how vision is currently being communicated within the HEI, leaders may know more as to how vision is being diffused throughout the HEI and its impact on employee morale and performance at various levels throughout the college and university.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research has demonstrated that the effective communication of organizational vision can lead to improved employee performance, increased tenure, and heightened job satisfaction (Jing et al., 2014; Kohles et al., 2012), as well as higher overall profitability for the organization (Baum et al., 1998; Gulati et al., 2016). However, there is a lack of clarity on how higher education institutions (HEIs) are to communicate vision effectively to all stakeholders within the organization. Christian HEIs, in particular, face a special challenge in disseminating and inspiring a shared vision that includes the added dimension of religious identity and agreement. At institutions like these, goal ambiguity, competing logics (Nite et al., 2013), and cultural tensions (Fugazzotto, 2009) can arise as a result of a vision that is unclear, misunderstood, or neglected.

Collins and Porras (2008) posed the question: How can a decentralized organization work to ensure a coordinated, coherent effort? This question is especially pertinent to the field of higher education given its unique structural complexities and its stakeholder diversity. One tool that may help an organization's leadership maintain focus amidst the fray is vision. The purpose of this study was to (a) explore how vision is currently being diffused throughout Christian HEIs and (b) explore how it is impacting employees at various levels in the organizational hierarchy so that leaders can be provided with insight as to how to develop key practices and strategies to enhance the communication of vision across all layers of the entire institution for the purpose of a more coordinated, focused future. By studying vision communication and its effects within the unique composition of the Christian HEI, themes common to effective vision communication may be identified, and, also, the threats to this effectiveness.

Through Abilene Christian University's (ACU) online Margaret and Herman Brown Library database, OneSearch, I collected over 140 sources related to the following keywords and phrases:

- *Organizational vision*
- *Organizational mission*
- *Vision communication*
- *Organizational communication*
- *Vision in higher education*
- *Vision in Christian higher education*
- *Religious higher education mission*
- *Middle management communication*
- *Strategic organizational communication*
- *Organizational identity*

Furthermore, through the references of many of these articles, I was able to identify several pertinent dissertations through ProQuest Digital Dissertations & Theses Global, as well as procure multiple books published on organizational vision. The accumulation of these resources provided me with a firm foundation by which to conduct this study. The following is my synthetic summary of the literature on the topic of organizational vision and its communication, specifically within the structure of a faith-based HEI.

In the remainder of this chapter, I review much of the literature to date on organizational vision and its communication. The first section of the literature review includes an overview of organizational vision—its definition, attributes, content, and impact, as well as how vision is connected to leadership theory. Next, vision communication is explored, along with how vision

interacts within the various layers of the organizational hierarchy. Finally, vision and its communication are explored within the context of higher education and, specifically, within faith-based colleges and universities, including highlights of recent studies in the field.

### **Organizational Vision**

Many scholars have asserted that vision is a tenet central to leadership (Collins & Porras, 2008; Kouzes & Posner, 1995; Nanus, 1992; Stam, van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2010).

According to these theorists, a vision can become a palpable force of power in people's hearts (Senge, 1990) with the ability to unite across all levels of the organization (Nanus, 1992). Vision has the ability to catalyze the transformation of followers (Kantabutra, 2008), which can lead to positive impacts on overall organizational performance, from employee and customer satisfaction to financial profitability (Baum et al., 1998; Jing et al., 2014; Kantabutra, 2008; Zaccaro, 2001). Vision has the power to tap into and influence the commitment, motivation, and imagination of an entire organization. As Nanus (1992) explained, "there is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future" (p. 3).

Over the last few decades, there has been a shift in leadership research to include the *articulation* of visions to followers (Kantabutra, 2008; Stam et al., 2014), specifically, how it is communicated and the role that followers play in association with vision. Now, visionary leadership is fundamental to leadership in both theoretical discussion (Collins & Porras, 2008; Kantabutra, 2008; Nanus, 1992; Senge 1990) and empirical study (Baum et al., 1998; Gulati et al., 2016; Jing et al., 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2017a; Stam et al., 2010) as it is a means to provide focus amidst the fray of the ever-increasing dynamism of competitive environments. Vision has



been defined in numerous ways over the years, but research has revealed some common elements as to what defines vision and as to what actually makes vision effective.

**Definition of vision.** The word *vision* itself has been equated with a capacity for “foresight,” “discernment,” “imagination,” and “sagacity” (Vision, n.d.). Conger (1989) defined vision in the organizational context as “a mental image conjured up by a leader that portrays a highly desirable future state for the organization” (p. 38). Visions are like goals but different in the sense that they are more long-term, abstract, and do not necessarily have to be achievable (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996). Still, views have diverged on what constitutes a vision. Nanus (1992) saw vision to be a “realistic, credible, attractive future” for the organization (p. 8), while others like Covey (1994) considered vision to be an opportunity for imagination that stretches beyond reality. Some have argued that vision is determined and implemented by senior-level leaders (Domm, 2001), while others have maintained that vision-setting should take place at all levels within an organization (Collins & Porras, 2008). Moreover, recent research in the vein of vision has shifted the focus to followership as the key to effective vision (Avery, 2004; Kohles et al., 2012; Stam et al., 2010). No matter what view is taken, vision entails the conceptualization of a more desirable future, an ideal that is shared between both leaders and followers within an organization for the purposes of moving the collective body towards a transcendent state.

An organization’s vision is most often encapsulated within an official vision statement. A vision statement is a living instrument that conveys the comprehensive concept of the organization’s future or desired state (Conger, 1989). A vision statement communicates the organization’s desired destination (Gulati et al., 2016), allowing leaders to designate their north star and use it as a reference point for guiding organizational activity. While vision can be presented in a variety of ways, the vision statement is the organization’s official, authored

version of its idealized future meant to inspire and lead members at every level of the organization.

It is important to note here the difference between *vision* and *mission*. While both have been the subject of leadership study, much confusion exists as to the difference between mission and vision (Kantabutra, 2008) as oftentimes the words are used interchangeably. In fact, vision is frequently used synonymously with not only mission, but also *goals*, *strategy*, *values*, and *principles* (Baetz & Bart, 1996; Kirkpatrick, 2017b). However, the constructs of vision and mission should be viewed as distinct from each another. This lack of clarity can be problematic when trying to study the concept as it may allow for vastly different representations of the construct (Jing et al., 2014).

According to Falsey (1989), a mission statement says two things about a company: “who it is and what it does” (p. 3). Vision statements complement mission statements but also transcend them by forming a set of aspirations that is “distinct, coherent, and appealing” (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009, p. 85). Some scholars have asserted that vision should precede the formulation of mission and strategy (Hallinger & Heck, 2002; Zaccaro & Banks, 2004), as mission statements are said to serve as the “implementing arm” of the vision (Sheaffer, Landau, & Drori, 2008, p. 50). In sum, mission statements are about the here and now, while vision statements point all eyes toward the future. Once the construct of vision is clear, it can be studied more definitively. Despite the variances in the definition of vision, several common themes emerge from these theorists’—and others’—views on vision.

**Attributes of an effective vision.** Vision has been empirically evaluated over the years to reveal numerous themes common to vision efficacy. In their comprehensive review of literature on the concept of vision, Baum et al. (1998) found the following attributes necessary in order for

vision to be effective: brevity, clarity, future orientation, stability, challenge, abstractness, and desirability or ability to inspire. Table 1 is my outline of the characteristics of an effective vision according to Baum et al.

Table 1

*Attributes of an Effective Vision According to Baum, Locke, & Kirkpatrick (1998)*

Item	Attribute	Definition
1	Brevity	A vision should be brief, but not so brief that it is indiscernible.
2	Clarity	A vision should be clear to all relevant stakeholders so that it is easily understood and accepted.
3	Future Orientation	A vision should guide the organization towards some long-term future.
4	Stability	A vision should be sound enough in that it can endure most changes in market and technology.
5	Challenge	A vision should inspire people to strive for what may be just out of reach. It challenges people to move beyond the status quo.
6	Abstractness	A vision should direct the organization towards an ideal, not an achievement. It should not be a singular goal that, once met, is abandoned.
7	Desirability or Ability to Inspire	A vision should be perceived as worthy of following. It requires an element of intrinsic motivation.

This foundational study examined the predictive validity of these attributes in relation to organizational venture growth. What Baum et al. (1998) found was that measuring vision through these seven attributes is a way of measuring its quality or clarity. A significant correlation was traced between vision attributes and venture growth. In sum, it was found that “vision significantly affects organizational-level performance, and vision affects performance directly as well as indirectly through vision communication . . . and that theoretically based

attributes can be used to obtain a quantitative measure of vision” (p. 52). Baum et al. demonstrated that there are distinct elements that work together that make a vision more appealing and effective.

Pekarsky (1998) provided a simpler framework for a “well-conceived vision” (p. 280). He asserted that an effective vision is one that is shared, clear, and compelling (Pekarsky, 1998). Table 2 is my outline of the attributes of an effective vision according to Pekarsky.

Table 2

*Attributes of an Effective Vision According to Pekarsky (1998)*

Item	Attribute	Definition
1	Shared	A vision should be agreed upon by all members of the organization.
2	Clear	A vision should be easy to understand and envision.
3	Compelling	A vision should move an individual toward some improved state.

A shared vision establishes a greater degree of understanding and trust between employer and employee (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996), which can produce a type of psychological ownership within all stakeholders (Jing et al., 2014). Furthermore, Dvir, Kass, and Shamir (2004) found that the more that vision was assimilated within the organization’s employees, the higher their affective commitment was to the organization itself. In this light, stakeholders can be viewed as members of a larger community. When vision is shared, there is a greater capacity that vision will be embraced by all members of this community. A vision must be clear enough to establish identity and offer genuine guidance in decision-making and priority-setting activities at all levels of the organization. A clear vision is “unambiguous, easy to comprehend, and not convoluted or abstract” (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2008, p. 225). Bligh, Kohles, and Meindl

(2004) noted that a compelling message is one that is optimistic and inspirational. When a vision is compelling, it generates enthusiasm and stimulates stakeholders to transform the vision into meaningful activity.

Along with Pekarsky (1998), numerous other theorists have emphasized that a hallmark of an effective vision is one that is shared (Carton, Murphy, & Clark, 2015; Collins & Porras, 2008; Senge, 1990). Not only must a purpose be invoked, but it must be shared in order to have optimum effect. Getting multiple employees to envision and pursue the same goal can be challenging. After examining messages revolving around vision and values within 151 hospitals, Carton et al. (2015) submitted that leader rhetoric on vision should include imagery in order to enhance coordination among employees. Providing image-based rhetoric helps employees envision the same future. According to Carton et al.:

The vivid detail gleaned from image-based rhetoric about the future (e.g., “to one day see a city full of hybrid cars”) leads employees to share a similar mental image, and the limited amount of conceptual detail gained from a focused value system (e.g., “our core value is environmental sustainability”) provides meaning that is construed in a consistent way by different employees. (p. 11)

Most leaders’ visions ask their followers to “consider” the concept of a future rather than to actually “see” it (Carton et al., 2015, p. 11). For example, a vision may conceptualize a business “to become the region’s leading supplier of luxury goods” rather than conjuring a more tangible image such as “to see customers smiling through every interaction” (Carton et al., 2015, p. 11). These more indistinct visions are what Carton et al. refer to as “blurry” visions of the future (p. 11). Visions presented in this way lack a certain kind of allure because there is a greater degree of open interpretation for everyone involved.

Collins and Porras (2008) suggested that vision, at its highest level, consists of two key elements: a guiding philosophy and a tangible image. The guiding philosophy is described as “a

system of fundamental motivating assumptions, principles, values, and tenets” (Collins & Porras, 2008, p. 120). This guiding philosophy is where vision is originated and then infused with the organization’s decisions, policies, and actions, similar to a genetic code—“in the background, but always present as a shaping force” (Collins & Porras, 2008, p. 120). The tangible image, on the other hand, is the “vivid description” of the vision that engages followers and brings it to life (Collins & Porras, 2008, p. 128). This aligns with Carton et al.’s (2015) premise in utilizing image-based rhetoric as it uses shared cognition to convey a sense of something more concrete, making vision easier to actually envision. An organization’s guiding philosophy remains in the background, or “in the woodwork,” while the tangible image is affixed in the foreground, focusing people on achieving the goal ahead (Collins & Porras, 2008, p. 128). Whereas guiding philosophy is “deep and serene,” the tangible image is “bold, exciting, and emotionally charged” (Collins & Porras, 2008, p. 128).

Brief, clear, future-oriented, stable, challenging, abstract, desirable (Baum et al., 1998), shared (Pekarsky, 1998; Carton et al., 2015; Collins & Porras, 2008), compelling (Pekarsky, 1998) image-based (Carton et al., 2015; Collins & Porras, 2008), and founded on organizational values (Collins & Porras, 2008): These are many of the attributes of an effective vision according to research. But what about substance? These attributes serve to accentuate a vision, but the actual language used to convey a vision has also been the subject of much study.

**Content of an effective vision.** The style, characteristics, and delivery of vision may vary from person to person or from organization to organization. Likewise, the content of the vision may be dictated by the context of the organization. A vision may focus on a product or service, a market, a process, the organization, or company ideals (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989).

This is consistent with Pearson's (1989) view that effective vision considers an organization's industry, customers, and the competitive environment in which it operates.

Focusing on vision statements, Collins and Porras (2008) submitted that the problem with many vision statements is that they are not "clear, crisp, and gut-grabbing" (p. 118). Oftentimes, a vision statement is more of a bland description of operations than it is a vivid image of some just out of reach, attractive, idealized state. Instead, what we have are "muddled [stews] of values, goals, purposes, philosophies, beliefs, and descriptions" (Collins & Porras, 2008, p. 119). That is why tangible images, as coined by Collins and Porras (2008), are the vivid images that incite inspiration towards an improved future.

For example, in his quest to "democratize" the automobile, Henry Ford animated his vision of the future by using such tangible imagery through statements such as:

I will build a motor car for the great multitude . . . it will be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one—and enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces . . . When I'm through everybody will be able to afford one, and everyone will have one. The horse will have disappeared from our highways, the automobile will be taken for granted . . . [and we will] give a large number of men employment at good wages. (Lacey, 1986, p. 93)

Are companies today able to generate as much excitement through the same kind of visionary language? Over a century later, evidence of visionary leadership can be found in the same industry by looking at Mercedes-Benz's vision statement: "Our vision is to become the world's most renowned center for customer service in the automotive sector" ("Vision, Mission & Values," n.d.). Within this succinct statement of its favored future is the idealized state ("the world's most renowned center") and the differentiating value that will guide the company to this future ("customer service"). With this statement, Mercedes-Benz has staked their differentiation on serving customers over manufacturing vehicles, and it is their intention to be the best in the business by doing so.

The content of vision has been studied in numerous ways. Stam et al. (2010) evaluated vision-based speeches based on their appeal to followers to envision not only a more idealized version of their organization, but an idealized version of themselves and how they fit into that organization. This follower-centric approach highlights the need for vision to be shared in order to be effective. Mayfield et al. (2015) analyzed vision communication from CEOs through the lens of motivational language theory. Motivational language is comprised of the three dimensions of meaning-making, direction-giving, and empathy in its ability to provide support and understanding to all stakeholders (Mayfield et al., 2015). In another study, Abelman and Dalessandro (2009) used Rogers's (2003) predictors of adoption and diffusion to compare the stylistic differences of vision statements among various religious HEI types. Rogers's (2003) model asserted that an idea is more readily adopted based on perceived relative advantage (e.g., what advantage does adopting this new idea grant me?), observability (e.g., to what extent can I observe this idea before I decide to adopt it?), and complexity (e.g., am I able to understand the idea?). Furthermore, visions can also be based on appeals for promotion or appeals for prevention. Promotion-appeals are those which emphasize some better future that should be pursued. Prevention-appeals, on the other hand, stress the undesirability of some future state should the organization maintain the status quo. Stam et al. (2010) found that visions based on prevention-appeals may be just as effective, and sometimes more effective, depending on the context of the situation and the individual follower's orientation towards aiming for something better or avoiding something worse.

Vision content may come in a variety of forms and plays a critical role in the extent of diffusion of that vision and the consequent impact on the organization. While content may vary, consideration of organizational context is key to crafting an effective vision (Pearson, 1989).



When an organization can successfully craft a vision using strategic content with the efficacy-enhancing attributes as described, significant benefits may be enjoyed at both the micro level (per each employee) and the macro level (the organization as a whole).

**Impact of an effective vision.** Research has demonstrated that vision can contribute significantly towards organizational effectiveness (Baum et al., 1998; Jing et al., 2014; Kohles et al., 2012), while a lack of a clear vision is a major source of declining organizational effectiveness (Baum et al., 1998; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Lucey, Bateman, & Hines, 2005). An effective vision offers a value-based motivational compass for stakeholders in an organization, as well as a guide for strategic decision-making. According to Bennis and Nanus (1985), through vision casting and communication, visionary leaders are able to harness emotional and spiritual resources within the organization and channel these into greater efforts towards a more desirable future state. Researchers have demonstrated the relationship between vision and organizational effectiveness. While researchers have taken varying approaches in exploring and defining this effectiveness, some of these measures include profitability and organizational growth (Baum et al., 1998; Gulati et al., 2016), stock price and market share (Avolio, Waldman, & Einstein, 1998), financial performance (Baum et al., 1998; Collins & Porras, 2002; Senge 1990), follower perceptions (Stam et al., 2014), employee satisfaction and affective commitment (Ryu, 2015), and customer satisfaction and employee retention (Cole et al., 2006; Jing et al., 2014).

This body of research has shown the pivotal role that visionary leadership plays in attaining heightened organizational performance and success. In Baum et al.'s (1998) rating of the visions of 127 CEOs for their attributes and content, the researchers found a significant positive relationship between those visions with higher quality attributes (i.e., brevity, clarity, challenge, and future orientation,) and content (i.e., visions that specifically emphasized growth)

compared with the organization's growth in sales, profit, and employment. Likewise, it was found that organizations with CEOs who did not possess a vision performed significantly worse than those with CEOs that employed their visions (Baum et al., 1996). Vision serves to shape the behavior of an organization's employees by cultivating a higher level of commitment and investment that, in turn, influences employee performance and ultimately leads towards greater operational success.

In Gulati et al.'s (2016) study, the vision statements of 312 acute care hospitals were examined for quality of structural components and compared with financial and growth-related performance measures. The researchers used a model based on the framework of Collins and Porras (1996) that evaluated vision statement quality as it included mission elements, values, long-term goals, and environmental factors. Performance was measured by the hospital's operating margin, return on assets, net patient revenue, and total discharges. Gulati et al. (2016) were able to show a positive correlation between vision statement quality and at least one category of financial performance in 13 of the 17 states included within the study. A statistically significant correlation was found between the hospitals' vision statements and at least one performance measure in 7 of the 17 states tested. However, while all correlations were positive, the finding of statistical significance was not consistent in any one category of financial performance. The researchers cited their lack of information related to the development of the vision statement and the consequent communication and implementation of it as potential factors that may have resulted in these marginal results. Their analysis focused on vision statement content and financial performance factors alone.

A more favorable financial positioning is largely the result of a more committed, more engaged workforce when looking through the lens of vision. As Jing et al. (2014) stated, when

employees feel intertwined with the destiny of their firm and feel empowered to work towards that destiny, “there is a virtuous cycle created, enhancing overall business performance” (p. 616). Kirkpatrick and Locke (1996) traced the effects of vision to higher levels of performance and to an increase in trust and inspiration among employees. As followers become emotionally and personally committed, they become willing, and even eager, to commit to this almost mystical force that is moving towards organizational growth and progress (Nanus, 1992). Furthermore, a more engaged, committed employee typically translates into higher organizational morale, greater productivity, increased satisfaction for the employee as well as the organization’s customers, as well as reduced rates of turnover (Jing et al., 2014). Turnover has negative consequences for the entire organization, affecting not only morale, but also productivity and overall organizational effectiveness (Gray, Phillips, & Normand, 1996). Jing et al. (2014) found that within 100 Australian retail pharmacies, managers who communicated their vision to employees outperformed their competitors and retained their employees longer than those who did not effectively share vision. This body of research on the impact of vision overwhelmingly supports that a more effective and shared vision leads to a more highly engaged workforce, which, in turn, leads to a healthier, more successful organization.

Vision has also been shown to have an impact in guiding general business strategy and is particularly effective during times of crisis and transition. Vision is a prominent and powerful strategy to manage organizational change (Kirkpatrick, 2017a). Vision may support positive change in several ways. First, it stimulates new thinking about the organization and its culture and how the individual may assimilate and contribute to this culture (Nanus & Dobbs, 1999). Secondly, it provides a compass for strategic thinking, planning, and decision-making (Boyd, Clark, & Kent, 2017; Conger, 1989). Third, the vision conjures an idea of a desired future state,

just out of reach, that ultimately empowers employees to take risks and experiment in pursuit of this vision (Senge, 1990). In sum, vision has the power to stimulate, to guide, and to empower employees to work towards a greater version of their organization, one that includes them as key players in that evolution.

**Vision and leadership theory.** Vision is a central component to some of the most influential leadership theories (Bass, 1985; Bryman, 1992; Senge, 1990). Two of these theories include charismatic leadership (Conger & Kanungo, 1987) and transformational leadership (Bass, 1985).

Berlew (1974) submitted that “the first requirement for charismatic leadership is a common or shared vision for what the future *could be*” (p. 269). Charismatic leaders gain followership based on their own inherent gifts and their ability to channel the devotions of their followers towards some transcendent goal (House, 1977). Baum et al. (1998) reviewed seven leadership theories that involved charisma in some form and identified three core elements common to all of these theories: (a) communicating a vision, (b) emanation of a charismatic personality (e.g., “forceful, animated, and confident”), and (c) taking action required to implement the vision (e.g., “serving as a role model, intellectually stimulating followers, and building followers’ confidence”; p. 43). A charismatic leader is one with the ability to inspire the masses through not only their personality, but through the communication and implementation of a vision.

Transformational leadership is another leadership theory that encompasses vision. Transformational leaders are individually considerate of their employees, acting as mentors and developers of their people (Bass, 1990). In this way, transformational leaders provide a vision and sense of mission to their employees that is congruent with their employees’ values. This is

often seen as some transcendent vision that not only will ultimately serve the organization, but will serve to grow the employee as well as they devote additional effort toward accomplishing the goals (Bass, 1990; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leadership entails the cascading effect of influential leadership, including how that leader's vision motivates employees to improve not only themselves, but the organization as well.

There are a myriad of different types of leaders and leadership theories today. While a manager may have his eye on the bottom line of his organization, a leader is constantly looking toward the horizon (Nanus, 1992). Vision ultimately serves to create alignment and empowerment within the organization's membership body. Specifically, a shared vision has the ability to align and empower individuals at all levels within the organization. Nanus (1992) asserted that

Once people buy into the vision, they possess the authority, that is, they are empowered, to take actions that advance the vision, knowing that such actions will be highly valued and considered legitimate and productive by all those who share the dream. (p. 18)

Alignment plus empowerment yields organizational effectiveness, allowing employees to move the organization toward some better horizon—to work towards making the dream become a reality.

It is one thing to understand the significance of vision and those attributes that make it effective, but more is needed in order to reap its benefits. The next step is the implementation of the vision, which begins with the communication of vision to the stakeholders within an organization. There are differing methods of communicating a vision effectively, and these must be considered when exploring the nature and impact of vision within an organizational context.

## Vision Communication

In the 1960s, President John F. Kennedy charged NASA with the unimaginable—putting the first man on the moon. He galvanized this effort through his communication of a vision that sparked a greater sense of aspiration throughout the entire NASA organization. The employee who once thought, “I’m building electrical circuits,” began to see through their work that “I’m putting a man on the moon,” which ultimately led to their belief that “I’m advancing science” (Carton, 2018, p. 323). President Kennedy effectively cast his vision through speeches, internal dialogue, and memorandums in such a way that he united and compelled a collection of individuals to achieve what was previously thought impossible (Carton, 2018).

For leaders like President Kennedy, simply *having* a vision is not enough. Leaders must not only work to forge a motivational vision that inspires unified action, but also be able to effectively and strategically articulate the organization’s ultimate purpose and direction as it is contained in the vision to all stakeholders (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989). “Visions are not useful or effective until they are implemented,” wrote Zaccaro and Banks (2004, p. 368). It is the effective communication of vision that diffuses the ideal throughout the organization. While every organization has a purpose and many have well-defined visions according to Collins & Porras (2008), most companies are not able to successfully articulate their vision. Much is known about the rationale for and the developmental process behind the vision statement: why organizations need them, the elements that constitute a powerful vision statement, and best practices for formulating these statements. However, Kopaneva (2013) maintained that “we know almost nothing about what happens after that, once a vision joins organizational discourse” (p. 2). Much of the vision-related research to date explores the formulation and content of vision, but there is a gap, according to Kopaneva (2013), as to the nature and impact of vision from the

employee's perspective. A precursor to the success and impact of organizational vision is the stakeholder's awareness and understanding of it. This leads to the reality that "it may be precisely . . . in the discourse between leaders and members where a vision succeeds or fails" (Fairhurst, 1993, p. 366). Understanding how employees receive, perceive, and are influenced by vision may provide better understanding in how to better communicate vision within certain contexts.

Research on vision can generally be divided into four categories: development, articulation, communication, and implementation (Kantabutra, 2008). While vision has been compared with organizational performance in a multitude of studies, Baum et al. (1998) pointed out that understanding and justifying the results of such studies is difficult without knowing more about how an organization's vision is actually communicated. This means that vision communication must be empirically tested in order to more fully understand its effects. Past empirical analysis has explored multiple aspects of vision communication like communication style (Awamleh & Gardner, 1999; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996), communication of vision attributes (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009; Baum et al., 1998), use of image-based rhetoric (Carton et al., 2015; Emrich, Brower, Feldman & Garland, 2001), use of metaphors (Mio, Riggio, Levin, & Reese, 2005), and focus on followers (Stam et al., 2010).

While vision content refers to the information or the substance to be found within the vision, vision communication refers to the "expression of a vision with the aim of convincing followers that the vision is valid and worthwhile . . . Vision communication is about 'selling' the future image" (Stam et al., 2014, p. 1173). Communicating an empowering vision is the catalyst to mobilizing followers (Mayfield et al., 2015; Stam et al., 2014). Empirical study has demonstrated the significant role that vision communication plays regarding follower motivation

and overall performance (Baum et al., 1998; James & Lahti, 2011; Jing et al., 2014). To be such a powerful impetus for motivation, vision communication is yet to be fully understood. Stam et al. (2014) said that vision communication “holds the dubious honor of being both one of the most crucial and one of the most mysterious aspects of leadership” (p. 1172). While much research highlights the correlation between vision and effectiveness, a dearth of research exists when it comes to when, why, and how visions are effective (Stam et al., 2010).

Communication of a vision may come in a variety of forms, so there is no one prescribed way as to how to employ a compelling vision (Kantabutra, 2008). However, researchers (Avery, 2004; Kantabutra, 2008; Pekarsky, 1998) have indicated that visions are effective when they are shared among all members of the organization. Therefore, “*how* the vision is communicated thus becomes as important as *what* is communicated” (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989, p. 19). While there may be many recommendations as to how to craft a particularly engaging, motivational vision, the real complexity lies in the strategic communication of that vision to multiple stakeholders within the organization.

**Inspiring a shared vision through communication.** According to Senge (1990), the old model of vision development and communication was a “top-down” approach, whereby senior leaders, typically with the help of consultants, retreated into a private boardroom to hammer out some sacred statement of vision. This vision statement is then brought down from on high, with the expectation that everyone will immediately buy-in and follow suit (Senge, 1990). However, the emphasis has shifted in recent years to underscore the effectiveness of a *shared* vision rather than one enacted from a top leader or group of senior leaders. As Avery (2004) explained, a vision developed by a single leader or leadership team may not be as effective as business environments become more heterogeneous, complex, and dynamic. Years ago, when businesses



were more centralized and predictable, a vision from a single leader was usually enough to provide direction (Avery, 2004). However, in this new, more complex and ever-changing marketplace, leaders must begin to promote the organizational vision and value system in a way that permeates the entire culture—one in the form of a shared vision (Avery, 2004). As a result, employees who share the organization's vision and values are thereby able to respond more “effectively, innovatively, and timely to environmental changes” (Kantabutra, 2008, p. 130). Employees who are vested in the organization's future are more likely to perform at higher levels and with less guidance which, ultimately, leads to an organization that is more adaptable within changing environments. This sharedness of vision is developed through the communicative processes between leaders and their followers (Alford, 2006; Jing et al., 2014), and this kind of dialogue can take place in a variety of forms.

**Methods of vision communication.** Given variances in organizational size, composition, and environment, research is scarce as to how to practically communicate vision to all stakeholders within a singular organization. When it comes to vision, the vision statement is meant to encapsulate vision in its most comprehensive form. This statement is a living instrument that is designed to convey the concept of the organization's future or desired state (Conger, 1989). As a living instrument, the vision should be viewed as an idea that is dynamic and alive, a concept with the power to affect and influence. The communication of a living ideal that is in the abstract may be difficult to communicate; however, some fundamental practices are recommended when it comes to communicating vision such as using tangible image-based rhetoric (Collins & Porras, 2008), repetition (Domm, 2001; Westley & Mintzberg, 1989), relaying vision through stories (Domm, 2001, Orr & Bennett, 2016), using multiple channels (Mahurin, 2016), and working to infuse vision into everyday culture (Kirkpatrick, 2017a).

Naturally, the primary way that leaders impart purpose to their followers is through rhetoric in verbal or written form (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Bennis and Nanus (1985) highlighted the importance of using written and oral communication to compel the support of organizational vision. Bass (1985) noted how leaders motivate followers through speeches and pep talks that encouraged them to work towards the vision. Kouzes and Posner (1995) believed that leaders should employ powerful language using vivid imagery and metaphor that enables followers to use their mind's eye to focus on the future. Visionary leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., Winston Churchill, Steve Jobs, and Madeleine Albright are known for enacting their visions of a better tomorrow through the language of their speeches and their writings. According to Westley and Mintzberg (1989), "language has the ability to stimulate and motivate, not only through appeals to logic but also through appeals to emotion" (p. 20).

Vision is not conveyed through written and oral communications alone. Other theorists have pointed out that the values found in visions can also be reinforced nonverbally (Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Locke, Kirkpatrick, Wheeler, Schneider, Niles, Goldstein, & Chah, 1991). Nonverbal, vision-reinforcing communication may include dramatic gestures, role modeling, and the way leaders select, train, and reward employees (Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Locke et al., 1991).

The practice of actively promoting a shared vision involves the ability to invoke an image of the future that fosters genuine commitment rather than half-hearted compliance. Stam et al. (2010) maintained that "vision communication refers to the expression of a vision with the aim of convincing others . . . that the vision is valid and worthwhile" (p. 501). Leaders can therefore be characterized as translators of organizational purpose (Mayfield et al., 2015). "Top leaders are focal interpreters who scan the environment to craft a strategic vision that is shared by, reduces uncertainty for, and generates meaning for stakeholders," noted Mayfield et al. (2015).

Furthermore, communication efforts surrounding vision should focus on fulfilling the vision rather than simply raising awareness (Alford, 2006).

Storytelling is another method by which vision can be communicated. Kouzes and Posner (2002) described leadership as “the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspiration” (p. 24). Throughout history, great leaders have used storytelling to transmit their vision. The basic formula for any good story is a hero overcoming adversity for the sake of something better. Stories may provide compelling accounts of the past, present, or future (Orr & Bennett, 2016). According to Domm (2001), stories can be told in a variety of ways. “Leaders may create positive corporate stories, or company legends, or share achievement-stories,” said Domm (2001, p. 46). Orr and Bennett (2016) found that the use of storytelling is apt for evoking emotion among followers and providing them a creative means for sense-making of organizational realities. Organizational stories allow leaders to harness the organization’s identity—and with it, the imaginations and allegiances of its people—in a way that no sum of facts could ever do.

No matter how well a vision is crafted, it will fail if it is contextually inappropriate or if it is poorly communicated and implemented (Nanus, 1992). According to Mayfield et al. (2015), a model of communication has yet to be developed that operationalizes strategic vision. Given the growing level of organizational diversity and rapid change in competitive environments, there is no one-size-fits all model of vision communication. Therefore, it is helpful to understand the unique context in which each organization operates, and the roles individual employees play in communicating and interpreting important messaging such as organizational vision.

## The Communication of Vision Throughout the Organizational Hierarchy

Modern day organizations operate with a more loosely committed workforce in an increasingly unstable, ever-changing environment (Darkow, 2015; Mayfield et al., 2015). Top-level leadership is charged with analyzing and making interpretations within this context, formulating an organizational direction and disseminating this vision to all stakeholders (Daft & Weick, 1986). Research has demonstrated that vision is critical in inspiring motivation among followers in this type of environment (Codreanu, 2016; Stam et al., 2014). However, despite consistent efforts of vision communication, many leaders have found that their employees are not familiar with their organization's vision and goals (Ryu, 2015). The following explores how vision is often communicated at three distinct levels within an organization: senior-level executives, mid-level managers, and entry-level employees.

**Senior-level executives.** One of the most fundamental roles of a senior-level executive within an organization is to be the chief communication officer of the organizational vision (Argenti, 2017). Hart and Quinn (1993) labeled this role as *Vision Setter*, responsible for “creating a sense of identity and mission—the definition and articulation of the firm’s basic purpose and future direction” (p. 551). According to Senge (1990), the old model of vision development and communication was a “top-down” approach, whereby senior-level leaders, perhaps with the help of consultants, retreated into a private boardroom to design and develop the vision statement. This vision statement is then presented to the organization with the expectation that everyone would follow suit (Senge, 1990). However, the emphasis has shifted in recent years to highlight the effectiveness of a collective vision rather than one enacted from a top leader or group of senior leaders. Reicher, Haslam, and Hopkins (2005) maintained that leaders, through their communication of vision, become entrepreneurs of collective identity. This

means that visionary leaders are able to shape their organization into an organism that is coordinated with and committed to the leader's vision.

Kirkpatrick (2017a) conducted a descriptive study of 30 leaders in successful companies, interviewing CEOs, presidents, and founders, in order to ascertain the impact of the vision statement on organizational performance. The sample size included larger companies, medium-sized companies, and small companies; 14 of the companies were included on a best-places-to-work listing. Kirkpatrick assessed through these interviews with senior leaders how vision was developed, communicated, and implemented within their organizations. What she found was that there was no one way to develop a vision statement. Some leaders believed the responsibility fell squarely on the founder's or president's shoulders. Others approached it in a more inclusive method, inviting other employees to review and provide input into the vision's development. Some recommended the use of an external individual to facilitate the development process. Despite these variances, all 30 of the leaders agreed on the importance of regularly communicating the vision to all employees in order to achieve optimum organizational alignment (Kirkpatrick, 2017a).

While much research exists as to how senior leaders *should* be using communications, "little has been done to study how successful leaders *actually* use communication to successfully execute strategy within their organizations" (Argenti, 2017, p. 146). Ryu (2015) pointed out a disconnect between leaders and subordinates when it comes to communicating vision and goals, despite consistent efforts to raise awareness and encourage acceptance. Perhaps this is why recent researchers (O'Connell, Hickerson, & Pillutla, 2011; Stam et al., 2014) encouraged more of a shared visioning process rather than a top-down approach.

**Mid-level managers.** While senior-level executives have the primary responsibility to develop a vision and initiate it through strategic communication, it is the mid-level manager that should be able to translate the vision into action (Zaccaro & Banks, 2004). Management studies often focus on the upper echelons of the organization, but the roles mid-level managers play are essential to the operation of the organization (Johansen & Hawes, 2016). Mid-level managers are responsible for supervising other employees within their unit and are tasked with hiring, evaluating, and improving these individuals (Brewer, 2005; Mintzberg, 1979). Moreover, they allocate and distribute resources; oversee the creation of budgets, schedules, and reports; they develop and enforce policies; they network with those within and outside of the organization; and they work to ensure proper motivation and cohesion among their members (Johansen & Hawes, 2016). Research focused on mid-level managers can provide significant insight into organizational performance.

Engagement of the middle layer is crucial in maintaining the clarity and integrity of organizational messaging from the top to the bottom of the organizational chart (Reed-Lewis, 1986). Mid-level managers determine the level of alignment with the organization's espoused vision and values (Way, Simons, Leroy & Tuleja, 2016). Confusion, ineffectiveness, and inefficiency may result if a manager produces inconsistent or mixed messaging (Ryu, 2015). Studies have demonstrated the positive effects of vision statements on individual division and manager effectiveness (Bass, Avolio, Jung & Berson, 2003; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007). Raes et al. (2011) identified mid-level managers as "linking pins" (p. 102), and given this critical position, they have the opportunity to not only carry out and create strategic initiatives, but also have the ability to delay or even harm organizational strategies (Guth & MacMillan, 1986; Mayfield et al., 2015). A common complaint reported by mid-level employees is that they feel

they are treated as managers and not as leaders (Nanus, 1992). They experience so much pressure to produce short-term results and efficiency that they are unable to step back and take part in the visioning process (Nanus, 1992). Mid-level managers can be leaders as well, but only if they are empowered to engage in the visioning process for their organization (Nanus, 1992).

**Entry-level employees.** Entry-level employees are those who are at the bottom of the organizational hierarchy, having no subordinates themselves to manage and generally with responsibilities that are narrower in scope. While these employees may not be responsible for managing others, they do implement and manage change on the front lines (Zaccaro & Banks, 2004), as they may be interacting regularly with constituents both inside and outside of the organization (e.g., customers). Jing et al. (2014) showed that effective vision communication leads to higher degrees of customer satisfaction. As employees are positively influenced by vision and experience greater job satisfaction themselves, the employee-customer interaction is likely to be enriched, thus enhancing the customer's overall satisfaction as well.

While entry-level employees may exhibit leadership characteristics and may even be looked to by others as leaders, they are still followers in a strict organizational sense. Interestingly, there is disagreement about the role that followers play within an organization. While some view followers as mere executors of organizational vision and mission, others view them as owners of the organizational vision and mission (Dvir et al., 2004). Wang and Rafiq (2009) stated that all organizational members, including entry-level employees, should be actively involved in the development, communication, and implementation of an organization's goal-setting. Even in the most authoritative and rigid of working environments where the vision and mission is developed by top leadership and passed down to employees, the life and spirit of the vision and mission will be carried in the hands of the organization's workers.

An employee's position on the organizational chart may dictate their role when it comes to vision communication. While some leaders may expect vision to trickle down from the top of the organization throughout every layer, others may take an approach that seeks buy-in from all members of its community through solicitation of input and facilitation of dialogue related to the firm's future. Ultimately, context is key when it comes to knowing how vision can be most effectively communicated within any organization. That is why it is important to explore the dynamics of differing contexts in regards to how vision can best be put into practice. One field of organizational study unique unto itself that requires special consideration is the field of higher education.

### **Vision in Higher Education**

Colleges and universities are distinct in that they are “a special kind of organization vastly different from corporations, governmental agencies or social-cultural foundations” (Taylor & Machado-Taylor, 2010, p. 168). Moreover, higher education institutions (HEIs) are undergoing “radical self-reinvention and [are] being challenged by issues of productivity, cost containment, quality improvement, outcomes assessment and the social relevance of their courses” (Taylor & Machado-Taylor, 2010, p. 169). Nearly a decade later, these same challenges still exist as HEIs continue to operate in increasingly high-pressure environments laden with increasing costs, intrusive federal regulations, and new competitors (Vedder, 2017). Given their unique structure, governance, and heightened expectations, it is appropriate to seek understanding of how HEIs both utilize and are impacted by vision.

**The unique structural hierarchy and context of higher education.** The field of higher education can be considered distinct from the corporate world with its decentralized structural hierarchy and its plurality of populations (Bük, Atakan-Duman, & Pasamehmetoglu, 2017), both



of which pose unique challenges to the dissemination of vision. A university is expected to serve and address a multitude of diverse audiences (Bük et al., 2017), from students, to faculty, staff, administrators, the board of trustees, alumni, external constituents and supporters, and so on. This unique composition makes communication throughout the HEI a multidimensional task whereby both the historical identity and the future-oriented strategy of the institution must be taken into account (Steiner et al., 2013). In the university context, Pekarsky (1998) maintained that in the absence of vision, “organizational patterns, curricula, and other critical dimensions of an educational institution are dictated by tradition, by fad, or by idiosyncratic ideas of particular players” (p. 278). In essence, Pekarsky contended that without an effective vision to guide the institution, colleges and universities will find themselves operating based on status quo and/or at the whims of those in positions of authority at any given time.

Higher education institutions face a special challenge as the environment in which they operate can be classified as increasingly volatile (Letizia, 2017; Zaccaro & Banks, 2004), competitive (Kosmutzky & Krucken, 2015), unclear, and even contradictory (Oertel & Söll, 2017). As Taylor and Machado-Taylor (2010) characterized it:

We are presently confronted with innumerable changes that occur at a more rapid pace than ever before. New models of organization, values, behaviours, knowledge and technologies are emerging. The present scenario characterized by accelerated mutations on the economic, social, and technological levels make it absolutely necessary to re-examine the role of . . . higher education. (p. 168)

Trends of internationalization and decentralization have led to increased competition for HEIs, leading to the emergence of business-like management (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Stensaker, 2015). In increasingly complex environments, Daft and Weick (1984) argued that it is the responsibility of top-level leaders to make interpretations within these environments, formulate a direction, and communicate that vision to organizational members. However, studies have

revealed gaps between promotion and practice when it comes to pursuing a singular vision on a college campus (Abelman et al., 2007; Wylie, 2017).

**The utilization of vision in higher education.** According to Abelman and Molina (2006), institutional vision “reflects the nature of the learning community within the college or university and defines the perceived purpose, priorities, and promises of the institution” (p. 5). For some institutions, the vision statement is a component of its mission statement (Abelman et al., 2007); but these statements have largely become ubiquitous (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Chait (as cited in Morphew & Hartley, 2006) professed the verbiage of institutional vision statements to be vague and vapid. Chait asked, after all, “Who cannot rally around ‘the pursuit of excellence’ or ‘the discovery and transmission of knowledge’”? (as cited in Morphew & Hartley, 2006, p. 459). While vision and mission statements are common among colleges and universities, perhaps, as Chait suggested, there is too much commonality among them to make any difference.

Vision is closely connected to organizational identity (Bük et al., 2017) as it definitively envisions “who” or “what” the organization intends to be. Organizational identity serves not only as a cultural tool to influence all stakeholders, but also as a tool to gain a competitive advantage within the market (Stensaker, 2015). Organizational identity is socially constructed through language (Fiol, 2002), meaning communication is the catalyst to constructing this vision-based identity. In higher education, references of institutional vision statements can often be found on websites, within recruitment materials, and/or within the president’s inaugural, convocational, or keynote addresses (Abelman et al., 2007). Furthermore, the mission statement and vision statement are often sought out by prospective students when considering their college selection (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009). Abelman and Dalessandro found a decade ago that although

most academic institutions have mission statements, only about one-third of all 4-year colleges have vision statements, with privates more likely to have them than publics. Ultimately, what the vision statement should be for the HEI is a “highly directive declaration” for the purpose of enhancing the quality of the institution (Abelman et al., 2007, p. 4).

An example of how strategic communication may serve to enhance a leader’s vision can be found in a longitudinal study performed by Farmer, Slater, and Wright (1998). Members of a midsize southeastern university were asked to rate their experience undergoing a change in leadership when a new chancellor assumed office at the university. Three surveys were conducted over the course of the new chancellor’s first year in office. Participants included faculty members and administrators. The findings support conventional wisdom in that the more well-informed members thought they were as it related to the chancellor’s vision, the more likely they were to report they agreed with it. In order to achieve this effect, the chancellor put forth his intention to flatten the communication hierarchy of the organization within his first six months in office. He did so by developing a *Chancellor’s Update* publication, within which he included his email address and encouraged organizational members to share their ideas directly with him, setting a new precedent in the university for non-hierarchical, two-way communication. He received 1,125 emails from employees at every level within his first six months. He also initiated surprise appearances at meetings with faculty, staff, and students, in order to establish open forums to discuss the university’s future. The survey results showed an increasing percentage of those that agreed with the leader’s vision over the course of the eight-month longitudinal survey. Farmer et al. determined that a more deliberate and intentional communication exchange between top leadership and others within the organization leads to greater buy-in from other stakeholders as they feel included in the ongoing formation of the leader’s agenda.

Despite vision's demonstrated positive effect on organizational performance, this relationship is not fully understood (Kantabutra, 2008), particularly in the field of higher education (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Studies have revealed that key units within the HEI are disconnected from institutional vision and, therefore, may not be pragmatically fulfilling the ideals of the university's mission, such as in academic advising (Abelman et al., 2007) and athletics (Nite et al., 2013). This leads to a divide between institutional promotion versus practice. When vision is misunderstood or neglected by key individuals on a college campus, the result may be situations of goal ambiguity; structural looseness which translates into cultural, identity-related tension (Fugazzotto, 2009); or competing logics, which are differing perspectives as to what is believed to be proper behavior (Nite et al., 2013; Seo & Creed, 2002).

The presence of multiple logics—the rationales and motives that serve to guide the behavior and decisions of employees—in an organization may present administrative challenges due to varying expectations (Seo & Creed, 2002) and inconsistent ideals of behavior and activity (Alvesson, 2002). As such, Nite et al. (2013) explored the strategies implemented by a faith-based university in the south to manage competing institutional logics, specifically as they related to its NCAA Division II athletic program. Through a qualitative case study design, Nite et al. interviewed university athletic and administrative staff to probe how the athletic staff managed pressures of not only balancing academic expectations on top of their athletic responsibilities, but also how they balanced the religious expectations of the university as well. Competing logics were observed by the researchers as winning was perceived as an indicator for success by the athletic department, but at the same time, the staff was expected to adhere to both unyielding academic and religious standards. This meant players were forced to miss important games due to attendance policies, and that coaches were required to give up their facilities for

religious-based events on campus during critical times of the season. While this case study does not explicitly address vision, it does explore the results of a lack of clear communication of the vision, mission, and priorities within the college context.

Abelman et al. (2007) explored the trickle-down effect of institutional vision through the academic advising units on a college campus. Academic advisors play a special role on the HEI campus, as they are able to have ongoing, one-on-one interactions with students as a dedicated collegiate representative. This means they may be seen as responsible for representing the institutional vision within these relationships. Senge (1990) asserted that “visions spread because of a reinforcing process of increasing clarity, enthusiasm, communication and commitment” (p. 227). However, this virtuous cycle can be slowed down by limiting factors, such as when members become disoriented from the guiding vision. Participants in the study included 109 institutions, which included various institutional types (i.e., public, private, and community college; Abelman et al., 2007). The chief advising officer at each institution was surveyed on the following items: accessibility to the vision statement, familiarity with the vision statement, accessibility to upper administration, utility of the vision statement, and evaluation of vision statement content. Abelman et al. discovered a “sizeable disconnect between institutional vision and academic advising operations” (p. 14). Approximately 65% of advisors reported a low to moderate degree of vision statement guidance when it came to advising practices. These findings led Abelman et al. to conclude that vision statements may not guide critical student service operations at institutions. Vision statements were perceived to be “inaccurate reflections of the actual models, methods, procedures, and protocols” utilized by advising units and by those who oversee them (Abelman et al., 2007, p. 14). Abelman et al. further concluded that the size of the institution, mode of operation (public or private), and ideology or theology may affect its vision

statement accessibility. Also, it appeared that smaller, private schools were better connected to institutional vision than larger schools. Finally, earlier researchers (Abelman & Molina, 2006; Pekarsky, 1998) had determined that private colleges and universities, specifically those of tribal, military, or religious-affiliation, are more vision-driven than their secular counterparts. In sum, Abelman et al. contended that “greater physical access results in greater familiarity and greater familiarity results in greater application” (p. 15). Naturally, it would seem then that awareness of vision is a necessary precursor to its transformational effects.

**Vision’s role in faith-based higher education.** There are numerous institutional types within the field of higher education, including public universities, private universities, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, military academies, vocational and trade schools, for-profits, and so on. One unique type of HEI is the faith-based institution. Unlike secular universities, religious HEIs offer another dimension to higher education—an educational enterprise permeated by spiritual purpose and promotion. For these types of institutions, a differing component of success can be defined by the fulfillment of the institution’s faith-based identity and activity as espoused by its vision and mission (Alford, 2006). Vision statements at these types of HEIs typically point members in a direction of an idealized future identity that includes some form of spiritual emphasis. Moreover, Abelman and Molina (2006) and Abelman et al. (2007) found that religiously-affiliated institutions tended to be more vision-driven compared to other types of colleges and universities.

For religious colleges and universities, it is an expectation to find some form of spiritual identity communicated within the institutional mission and vision statements (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009). Dosen (2012) contended that Christian mission and identity should be the

concern of the entire institution, and the effective transmission of an institutional vision throughout all layers of the university is a vehicle by which this can potentially be achieved.

In an environment wrought with increasing competition and complexity, faith-based HEIs find themselves “deeply imbedded in and accountable to two worlds, each of which [having] a distinctive culture: the world of higher education and the church world” (Henck, 2011, p. 196). This potential for schism in ideological allegiance “suggests to some that today’s religious colleges and universities are on the horns of a dilemma—maintain a distinctive religious identity or move toward a strong academic reputation” (Mixon et al., 2004, p. 400). As such, a tension exists for many faith-based institutions to conform to their secular counterparts. Reasons for this kind of compromise may range from a desire to gain greater academic credibility and reputation (Marsden, 2001; Mixon et al., 2004; Woodrow, 2004), to a strategy to strengthen financial positioning (Goldberg, 2018), to an intentional embrace of tolerance and diversity (Jones, 2013; Moehler, 2011), to compulsory compliance with federal and/or state mandates that may conflict with religious beliefs (Reynolds & Wallace, 2016). However, Marsden (2001) asserted that religious colleges and universities, “instead of feeling they are under pressure to become more like their secular counterparts, should take pride in the religious character of their education, attempting to strengthen it rather than weaken it” (p. 11).

In the context of higher education, a polarization continues to increase between academic prestige and biblical worldview (Glanzer, 2013; Hemmings & Hill, 2014; Woodrow, 2004). Colleges and universities have had to make decisions in the past to abandon one reputation for another. Many well-known Ivy League institutions, like Harvard, Dartmouth, Yale, Princeton, and Duke, once founded on Puritan theology, eventually chose a path that emphasized a greater academic reputation and subsequent financial gain over maintaining devotion to their religious

roots (Mixon et al., 2004). It is likely these shifts were gradual, taking place through the “idiosyncratic ideas of particular players” over a certain period of time, as Pekarsky (1998) described it (p. 278). Vision is uniquely connected to the idealized future identity of faith-based institutions and can act as an impetus for organizational purpose and culture and, if communicated effectively, can be a deterrent against falling down the “slippery slope of secularization” (Flory, 2002, p. 349).

On the other hand, institutions like Wheaton College, Calvin College, Liberty University, Patrick Henry College, and Brigham Young University are examples of institutions that appear to be clinging closely to their convictions and withstanding the tide of secularization (Goldberg, 2018). Religious colleges and universities like these may demonstrate their commitment to their values in numerous ways. For some, these faith-based practices may include requiring faculty’s confession of Christianity, continued religious training and socialization of students, a curriculum that requires Bible and theology, and behavioral expectations of students (Flory, 2002). According to Glanzer (2013), “Christian” institutions can be marked as:

Those universities or colleges that currently acknowledge and embrace a Christian or denominational confessional identity in their current mission statements and also alter aspects of their policies, governance, curriculum, and *ethos* in the light of their Christian identity (for example, required courses in Christian theology or the Bible; the presence of Christian worship at protected times that is supported by the institution, and a college-funded Christian chaplaincy). (p. 323)

Both Flory (2002) and Glanzer (2013) submitted that the inclusion of religious identity within the institutional mission is paramount to Christian college and university identity. Additionally, such is the requirement for all 180 member institutions of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). The CCCU requires its member institutions to abide by tenets central to faith-based education, including the formation and publication of a Christ-centered, board-approved mission statement (CCCU Membership Application, n.d.). As noted previously, vision



often goes hand-in-hand with mission. Interestingly, however, there is no requirement for Christian colleges and universities to claim their convictions or set their intentions within their vision statement; moreover, they need not publish a vision statement at all. Perhaps this is why only about one third of all “Christ-centered” HEIs possessed a vision statement as found in a study performed by Abelman (2014).

Vision statements within faith-based colleges and universities have also been empirically tested. One such study, led by Abelman and Dalessandro (2009), measured vision statement impact in a variety of facets at CCCU member institutions. The researchers found a significant difference between the institutional vision of Christian colleges and universities and their secular counterparts. The study utilized a content analysis to assess effectiveness of institutional vision statements through the lens of Rogers’s (2003) predictors of adoption of new ideas. Vision statements at these faith-based institutions were found to be less complex and have less relative advantage than secular institutions, meaning “they place less emphasis on informing stakeholders how their respective institutions or a religion-based education will successfully transform an educational experience into general or specific actions that will generate concrete and recognizable benefits” (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009, p. 105). Overall, Christian institutions were found to offer highly appealing and aspirational institutional visions, but were vague in application and personal benefit as compared with secular counterparts (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009). According to Abelman and Dalessandro, there is something left to be desired when it comes to the vision statements of Christian colleges and universities, particularly in the way of concrete, practical guidance in how to work towards achieving institutional vision.

At present, the religious higher education sector is grappling with the changing dynamics of a multigenerational workforce, and one that is less homogenous in its attitude toward social

issues than in previous history (Reynolds & Wallace, 2016). These changes are creating new tensions for leaders within Christian higher education (Reynolds & Wallace, 2016). Taking into account these kinds of changes and pressures within the external environment and within the institution itself, “articulating a clear and authentic vision remains an ongoing but essential challenge” for religious HEIs that are walking the line between two increasingly polarized domains (Cesareo, 2007, p. 18).

### **Summary**

Research demonstrates the positive effects of a well-conceived, well-crafted, and well-communicated vision (Baum et al., 1998; Carton et al., 2015; Jing et al., 2013). Effective visions are those that offer an image of a *better* organization. Higher education institutions are unique for their plurality of populations (Bük et al., 2017) and the ever-changing, volatile environment in which they operate (Zaccaro & Banks, 2004)—characteristics that can present real challenges for the communication of a clear vision within the HEI. While the content of vision has been a long time focus in empirical study, less attention has been paid to the approach in which vision is actually communicated, especially within the field of higher education (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009). A vision will be rendered inert without a robust diffusion process. The cited research and practitioner experience noted in this chapter indicate that deficiencies exist in vision communication on college campuses. By exploring how vision is currently being communicated within the HEI, leaders may know more as to how vision is being diffused throughout the HEI and what impact it has on employee morale and performance at various levels throughout the institution.

### **Chapter 3: Research Method**

The previous chapter provided an overview of the research and theory to date behind the topic of organizational vision, including an emphasis on the cruciality behind effective vision communication. The dynamics of vision communication were also reviewed at differing personnel levels within the organization, and within the unique context of higher education. Given their complexity and stakeholder diversity, how can higher education institutions (HEIs) work to ensure a coordinated, coherent effort? This study examined data on the ways in which vision is communicated to employees on a Christian HEI's campus, and examined the impact that vision has on organizational members at varying levels within the organizational hierarchy. Vision is largely viewed as a central tenet to leadership theory, but putting it into practice can be more complex than theory may prescribe.

The purpose of this study was to (a) explore how vision is currently being diffused throughout Christian HEIs and (b) explore how vision is impacting employees at various levels in the organizational hierarchy. I designed this study around the case studies of two private, faith-based universities. Through interviews and other secondary means of data collection, I examined the ways in which vision is being communicated on these campuses to personnel at multiple levels in the organizational chart, and I examined the impact that this vision has on these employees in their specific roles.

#### **Research Design and Method**

In order to investigate the nature and impact of vision communication at faith-based colleges and universities, I utilized a qualitative case study design. Purposeful and stratified sampling was used to select participants who could provide relevant experience to this particular vein of research. The primary means of data collection was through semistructured interviews

with participants at each case study institution; additionally, secondary data regarding the communication of vision were also pursued in order to triangulate findings.

I employed a qualitative multicase study research design to examine vision communication within two Christian HEIs in the southeastern U.S. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate in this context as it is the approach for “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). Qualitative inquiry is typically performed in an inductive style, as it “begins with specific observations and builds towards general patterns” in the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015, p. 64). Thus, I sought to learn more about how employees at various levels of the institution actually experience and make sense of vision by understanding how it may impact their personal and professional lives.

I utilized a multicase study design as research within the field of higher education is often and easily segmented into cases (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). Case studies are forms of inquiry designed to analyze a specific case (e.g., program, event, activity, process, individual, or group of individuals) and are typically bound by time, location, and activity (Creswell, 2014). Case studies must be understood on their own as they are not necessarily connected to larger trends (Patton, 2015). Each case is contextually unique, revealing nuanced dynamics and social phenomena of a particular environment (Aaltio & Heilmann, 2012). Multicase studies of two institutions were utilized because this methodology is typically viewed by researchers as more compelling than single case studies (Yin, 2003). When more than one case study is included, comparisons can be made between the different cases, creating an additional dimension for data analysis.

I adopted Stake’s (2006) relativist approach to case study research, an approach “underpinned by strong motivation for discovering meaning and understanding experiences in

context” (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). The relativist researcher plays a pivotal role in making interpretations (which may be subjective) within the context of the case(s) under study (Harrison et al., 2017). According to Stake (2006), “the first objective of a case study is to understand the case . . . The prime referent in case study is the case, not the methods by which the case operates” (p. 2). This means that the study must be viewed through the lens of the unique context of the bounded case itself. In my study, each case’s context was defined by the environment of each university. These bounded environments are integrated systems and have been said to have a *self* (Stake, 1995), an identity or persona all their own based on their unique combination of characteristics. The bounded systems for each university case study are described in more detail in the “Sample” section.

Aaltio and Heilmann (2012) said that “a rich and descriptive case of a firm or a person promotes learning by giving a practical framework for generalizations and theoretical explications” (p. 70). It is my hope that by providing descriptive case studies, readers may come to make naturalistic generalizations based on findings related to vision communication within Christian higher education. According to Stake (1995), naturalistic generalizations are “conclusions arrived at through personal engagement in life’s affairs or by vicarious experience so well constructed that the person feels as if it happened to themselves” (p. 85). This reflection takes place through the lens of the readers’ own experiences (Stake, 1995), an effective and experiential form of learning for the non-scholar practitioner. If the situation is found to be similar enough within the case study, generalizations may be warranted (Melrose, 2009). Moreover, small sample sizes, even single case studies, can still serve to inform and enlighten (Melrose, 2009). By studying two institutions within my own field of Christian private higher education, I gained insight into the nature and impact of vision communication on these

campuses, and I hope that my findings can be applied to other university contexts by higher education practitioners.

The data collected in this study included the perceptions and experiences of employees within the HEI as they relate to how vision is being communicated throughout the organizational chart. As interviews are the most common means for gathering data in case studies (Aaltio & Heilmann, 2012), semistructured interviews were conducted to ensure the basic lines of inquiry were pursued with each interviewee (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, as Patton (2015) advised, open-ended questions were used in order to obtain data that is richer in scope. Additional artifacts were sought (e.g., the university website, campus signage, human resource documents, and recruitment materials) in order to identify and triangulate other sources of the university's communication of vision. As noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), documents and other written artifacts may be especially useful in developing further understanding of the research setting. Data collection ceased once it was determined that thematic saturation relevant to this study's scope had been achieved.

### **Population**

The population of this study included universities that self-identify as Christian universities. These nonprofit private institutions have historic roots in Christianity and are currently Christ-centered in mission based on the explicit declaration of such through formalized statements such as their vision statement and/or mission statement. Religiously affiliated colleges and universities tend to have more vision-driven operations than other types of colleges and universities (Abelman et al., 2007; Molina, 2006). Thus, the study of vision communication within this special segment of higher education is particularly pertinent.

There are 4,298 institutions of higher education in the U.S. according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2018). Of that total, 1,687 are classified as private, nonprofit institutions (39.3%). While these private, nonprofit institutions may still widely vary in size, structure, and mission, a commonality exists in their privatized governance. A specialized segment of these private, nonprofit institutions is faith-based HEIs. There are 300 faith-related institutions of higher education in the U.S. (6.9% of the total number of HEIs in the U.S.), as reported by the NCES. While case studies must be understood within their own context(s), findings from my study may potentially be useful to other faith-based institutions or perhaps to other institutions of similar size or type (e.g., nonsectarian universities and liberal arts colleges, military academies, and tribal colleges and universities). As Melrose (2009) stated, generalizations from case studies may be applicable to other cases if the situation is similar enough.

### **Sample**

According to Marshall and Rossman (2016), establishing a sample size within qualitative research is contingent upon a host of complex factors. Site and sample selection should be designed around the researcher's comfort level, access, and abilities (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The sample for this study included employee participants within two Christian universities within the southeastern U.S. This geographic region was chosen because it grants suitable access based on my location, which made the study more feasible in consideration of time and resources. Within this region, I purposefully selected two institutions for case study. Purposeful selection is a sampling strategy used when the researcher purposefully chooses the sites or individuals for the study that will best help the researcher understand the problem and explore the research questions (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, I used purposeful sampling to

identify employees within each institution that matched the parameters of this study as explained in the remainder of this section.

**Case study institutions.** Two case study institutions were selected for this study; these universities have an explicitly Christian-based mission and are located in the southeastern U.S. Since faith-based universities often see themselves as beacons of God's *truth* and *light* in the world, the universities will be referred to as Veritas University (VU) and Lux University (LU) in order to maintain confidentiality.

**Veritas University.** Veritas University is home to just over 5,000 students and employs approximately 960 full-time employees. The university is located in the hills of a growing metropolitan city in the southeast with a population of just over 1.1 million. According to *U.S. News & World Report*, VU's 2017 endowment was valued at a sizable \$335 million. Veritas University has a strong brand name within the higher education sphere in the southeast and, because of that, has enjoyed over a decade of consistent enrollment growth.

**Lux University.** Lux University's enrollment peaks at just over 3,000 students and is home to approximately 460 full-time employees. Lux University is located in a city of approximately 66,000. *U.S. News & World Report* listed LU's endowment at just over \$40 million in 2017. While it has a respectable reputation in the field of Christian higher education, LU has experienced some financial challenges and has been trying to regain financial stability. Another distinguishing characteristic of Lux from Veritas is that Lux owns and operates three regional campuses in the state within a 150-mile radius of its main campus—a dynamic that was explored in relation to vision communication within this study. Finally, it should be noted that LU did not have a formalized vision statement at the time of my study. While vision can still



exist outside of an official vision statement, there is no guiding statement that encapsulates any such vision for this institution.

**Participants.** In order to assess how vision is diffused throughout a Christian HEI, a multiperspective approach was used in order to gain insight throughout the organizational chart at each university. Interviews were conducted within each institution through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling was defined by Yin (2011) as “the selection of participants or sources of data to be used in a study, based on their anticipated richness and relevance of information in relation to the study’s research questions” (p. 311). Using purposeful sampling, my study stratified personnel at three different levels within the organizational chart of the institution (i.e., senior-level, mid-level, and entry-level employees) in order to understand the dynamics of how vision may “trickle down” and impact employees throughout the hierarchical layers of the institution. Furthering the focus, participants were selected from the areas of academia, enrollment, and student affairs as individuals in these roles are serving on the front lines of the university, interacting with students as representatives of the university on a daily basis.

I began by contacting the president of each institution via an introductory email, informing him of my research intentions and requesting permission to interview university employees related to institutional vision. I made clear my intentions to maintain institutional and personal confidentiality. After the president gave his consent, I contacted the Institutional Review Board chair at each institution to receive their approval to conduct the study on campus as well. With the permission of the president and the IRB, I then established a contact on campus who helped identify individuals by each level (e.g., senior-level, mid-level, and entry level) and by each department (e.g., faculty, enrollment management, and student affairs) pertinent to this

study. Specifically, this contact provided me a list of multiple potential participants from each employee level and from each department. Once this list of potential participants was compiled, I established contact with these individuals via email, informing them of the purpose of my study and requesting their consideration to participate in a face-to-face, one-on-one interview. They were instructed to contact me, should they be interested, in order to set up an interview time. For those with scheduling conflicts, I arranged phone call appointments that followed the same semistructured interview procedure. Signed consent forms were collected from each participant before the interview was conducted.

A total of 36 individuals were interviewed: 18 at each case study institution. I primarily utilized purposeful sampling to select participants; however, participants would occasionally refer me to another individual within their own department, or another individual altogether (typically a senior-executive leader), who might have more knowledge or a different perspective about the university's vision and how it is communicated. This led to the use of a snowball sampling method, whereby multiple participants mention the same individual(s) as a potential source of information related to the research topic and the researcher includes the referee(s) within the data set (Patton, 2015). I ensured I interviewed multiple participants from each of the three stratified layers within the institution in order to more comprehensively assess the perception of how vision is communicated throughout the institution and how it impacts individuals in their role. By using a purposeful sampling strategy, the focus of my study was specifically placed on groups within the HEI that have some of the highest interaction with students, including faculty, enrollment practitioners, and student affairs personnel. Per each case study, I sought to include sufficient representation per employee level and per academic department, meaning I included *at least* three participants at each employee level, and I included

representation from each department function per employee level in order to trace vision communication throughout the organizational hierarchy. The breakdown in how participants were included per employee level and per department function can be seen in Appendix A. The following describes how the employee level and department functions were determined.

***Employee level.*** Personnel were stratified into three categories for this study: senior-level executives, mid-level managers, and entry-level employees.

***Senior-level executives.*** Senior-level participants include those at the top of the HEI organizational chart, such as the president and direct reports like vice-presidents or provosts. I do not include members of the board of trustees in this stratum as they are not heavily involved in the day-to-day operations of the university; their authority is delegated to the president, who can be considered as the chief communication officer of institutional vision (Argenti, 2017). It is important to assess the president and other members at this highest level of university leadership as top-level leaders who are ultimately responsible for defining, translating, and communicating a shared, strategic vision to the entire organization (Daft & Weick, 1984).

***Mid-level managers.*** Mid-level managers include deans, chairs, directors, or other similar roles. These individuals are imbued with a relatively high degree of authority within the HEI and are considered the “linking pins” between executive leadership and their own direct reports (Darkow, 2015, p. 11). Mid-level managers play a significant role in communicating and implementing the policies, missions, and goals of the organization (Rainey, 2003). These individuals are naturally both the receivers and disseminators of vision communication; therefore, they possess the potential to enable, delay, or harm the strategies and goals set forth by upper administration (Darkow, 2015). For the purposes of this study, those selected at this level had to have direct reports, or those with whom they had the opportunity to communicate vision.

*Entry-level employees.* Finally, entry-level employees are those at the bottom of the organizational chart who have a narrower scope of responsibilities and who have no direct reports and, thus, no inherent obligation to communicate vision internally. They may receive communication of vision from a direct supervisor and/or others within the organizational hierarchy.

*Departmental function.* Abelman and Molina (2006) defined institutional vision as a philosophical template—"a conception of a college or university at its very best and the kinds of educated human beings cultivated there" (p. 5). Ultimately, it "reflects the nature of the learning community within the college or university and defines the perceived purpose, priorities, and promises of the institution" (Abelman & Molina, 2006, p. 5). Within an HEI, there are a multitude of departments that play different roles in service to the campus community at large. The overall purpose of a college or university is to provide a quality educational experience to its students. With this in mind, I used purposeful sampling to narrow the focus of my sample to include organizational units within the HEI that have a high degree of contact with the lifeblood of any university—its students. These departments included academics, enrollment services, and student affairs. Members in these departments functionally serve to recruit, educate, and develop students in order to prepare them for and propel them into the post graduate world. These employees are on the front lines of the university, engaging in face-to-face interaction with students on a daily basis. If, according to Abelman and Molina (2006), institutional vision is directly tied to the kinds of human beings (students) the college or university is trying to cultivate, then this would suggest that those individuals with some of the highest interaction with students (i.e., faculty, enrollment practitioners, and student affairs staff) should have a clear understanding of the vision their institution is striving for in service to its students. While vision

can and should influence *all* stakeholders within an organization, faculty members, enrollment staff, and student life practitioners interact with students on a daily basis, putting them in a consistent role as representatives of the university.

It should be noted that a few exceptions to this department-specific sampling were made. Since senior-level executives are considered to be the chief vision communicators within an organization (Argenti, 2017), I included the president in the data set at each institution. Additionally, the chief strategy officer at VU and the former provost and current special assistant to the president at LU were included as a result of snowball sampling. Numerous participants at each institution pointed me to these individuals as prime sources of vision and its communication.

### **Materials/Instruments**

Patton (2002) succinctly asserted that “In qualitative inquiry, the researcher is the instrument” (p. 14). My role as the researcher was to collect the data and analyze it in order to provide findings in line with the research questions. Data on the nature and impact of vision communication within the two studies under examination were primarily collected through participant interviews. Semistructured interviews allowed the freedom to explore areas of interest that arose as a result of the baseline of questioning (Brinkmann, 2013). These semistructured interviews were guided by an interview protocol I created (see Appendix B). I abided by Brinkmann’s (2013) recommendations in designing the interview questions in a way that solicited open-ended feedback so that more personal, rich, and detailed responses could be collected that got to the heart of the research questions I desired to explore (Brinkmann, 2013). All interviews were audio recorded on a handheld recording device, so I could accurately transcribe each interview for subsequent coding and analysis.

## **Data Collection**

Data was primarily collected through interviews at both case study institutions. Additional data artifacts were also collected in order to triangulate findings related to the nature of vision communication.

**Participant interviews.** I conducted a total of 36 interviews—18 at each institution. Participants were primarily identified through a contact I established on each university's campus; that individual provided me a list of potential participants per each level and per each department that fit the study's parameters. The majority of interviews on each campus were conducted face-to-face (12 at Veritas University and 13 at Lux University) in a private room in the library over a two-day period at each university. However, busy schedules led me to conduct two interviews in participant offices at VU. Additionally, due to time restraints on campus and snowball sampling, I conducted additional interviews via phone shortly after my visit to each campus. In the initial interviews on campus, participants would occasionally refer me to other potential participants (outside of those I had already planned to interview) that would likely have special knowledge or insight into the university's vision. I followed up with these individuals requesting their participation and scheduling a phone interview in the following weeks if they gave their consent.

Brinkmann (2013) recommended quality over quantity when it comes to studies with interviews as the primary source of data collection, meaning a handful of in-depth interviews is preferable to a plethora of interviews superficially explored. This aligns with Wolcott's (2009) suggestion when it comes to determining sufficient interview quantity: "Do less, more thoroughly" (p. 95). Brinkmann maintained that, as a general rule, interview studies tend to have

around 15 participants, which allows for more feasible study by the researcher. I conducted approximately this many interviews per Brinkmann's recommendation, per institution.

As I conducted interviews, I recorded notes in real time on the common themes that presented themselves at each institution. After my personal visit to each campus, I immediately began transcribing the interview, but I continued to conduct phone interviews over the following two to three weeks. This gave me time to reflect on the themes as I was transcribing and also continuing to conduct phone interviews. Eventually, the same themes kept resurfacing, and I kept being referred to the same individuals and artifacts as sources of vision communication. At that point, I determined that thematic saturation had been achieved, and no additional interviews would provide any significant additional insight.

Even in qualitative study, the pinnacle of any data collection method is data saturation. Saturation is achieved when data collection yields no new contribution to the study (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbin, 2015). This means the researcher detects repetition in themes and information and senses that no new information will be gathered through additional inquiry. I concluded data collection via interviews once it was determined that thematic saturation relevant to this study's parameters had been achieved. In the end, a total of 36 interviews were conducted between the two case study institutions.

**Data artifacts.** In addition to participant interviews, other data artifacts were collected and examined in order to support how vision is communicated and reinforced to employees. Additional sources of data related to vision communication were used to corroborate, elaborate, or illuminate the research at hand (Rossman & Wilson, 1994) and helped ensure the rigor and usefulness of this study. These artifacts were sought after in order to triangulate findings. According to Patton (2015), triangulation of qualitative data sources offers "deeper insight into

the relationship between inquiry approach and the phenomenon under study” (p. 661).

Triangulation may highlight inconsistencies in findings which does not mean the results are invalidated, but rather provide the researcher an opportunity to explore “when and why differences appear” (Patton, 2015, p. 662).

These data artifacts were primarily collected through a reactive process in which I asked for direction from each participant for any other potential sources of the university’s vision. This led me to the university website, recruitment materials, campus signage, and other mediums of vision communication. The purpose of this data artifact collection was not to observe or evaluate the *content* of the vision or the channel in which it was communicated, but to confirm its communication based on participant interview data.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

After gathering the pieces of data in this manner, my role as a researcher was to provide interpretation of these pieces (Aaltio & Heilmann, 2012). By doing so, I became the primary instrument in data analysis. When reporting findings, Patton (2002) suggested a three-step process: assembling the data, constructing a case record, and writing a final narrative.

**Assembling the data.** The first step in this process was to assemble the raw data for each case study. This data consisted of all information collected about vision communication on each campus, which in this study primarily included data collected through interviews with select participants. Additionally, in each interview, participants were asked to identify channels of vision communication. Participants pointed me to the university website, emails from the president, new employee orientation, staff retreats, marketing and recruitment materials, campus signage, and so on. I endeavored to capture the physical artifacts either as copies (in the case of print or electronic material) or through photos of campus signage. The point of this collection of



artifacts was not to assess the content of vision, but to confirm that these identified sources of vision communication were actually present.

**Constructing a case record.** Once the data had been collected, the next step was to construct a case record per each institution studied. This process included the transcription of all interviews and the cataloging of other artifacts collected related to vision.

I transcribed, coded, and analyzed the interview data for patterns in content and theme. I abided by Saldaña's (2011) recommendation to transcribe as soon as I was able to after the interview concluded so that the details were fresh in my mind. By transcribing the interviews myself, I achieved a greater degree of data intimacy. Once transcripts were transcribed, I familiarized myself with the data by reading through the transcripts numerous times as advised by Patton (2015). In this process, I began to hand code data based on key terms, phrases, or ideas that emerged. Coding is a means of discovery for the researcher as it allows for themes and patterns to manifest (Saldaña, 2011). I did not have any predetermined codes as I began this process, meaning I allowed themes to be emergent in nature. This kind of inductive analysis is known as open coding and is common in qualitative inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Codes were developed as a result of "recurring regularities" (Patton, 2015, p. 555). From these "regularities," pattern and category construction took place as patterns and categories help us make meaning of larger bodies of information (Saldaña, 2011). My study's unique design allowed for patterns and themes to emerge among the personnel levels and department functions of the universities under study. Moreover, a multicase study approach allowed me to perform a cross-case analysis of the data as well (Yin, 2009).

**Results and final narrative.** As is advised in case study analysis, a thick and rich description of each case is provided, along with a discussion of the findings that include

implications and recommendations for application and further study. The narrative contains the descriptive details in the form of data (typically illustrated by quotations from participants) that reinforces and summarizes the observations made by the researcher. I used the content, themes, and quotes from the interviews, along with other communication artifacts, in order to reveal findings related to the nature and impact of vision communication on each university's campus. The line of questioning through the interviews helped assess the participants' perspectives on vision it related to their role within the university system.

As recommended by Patton (2002), the data was reduced and categorized to provide a narrative for the purposes of this study. The coding of qualitative data revealed patterns and categories that led to generalizations (Yin, 2009). Finally, this step included assertions made by the researcher in the form of observations, summaries, and generalizations that may be applied to future research or practice (Patton, 2002).

### **Methods for Establishing Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research typically receives greater scrutiny by positivists as validity and reliability cannot be confirmed in the same way as quantitative research (Shenton, 2004). By employing Stake's (2006) approach to case study research, I took on an interpretive role in the research process, making meaning of the data I collected, with special consideration of the context in which it was collected. For qualitative methods such as this, the concept of *trustworthiness* is used to describe qualitative work that is balanced, truthful, and neutral (Patton, 2015). Guba (1981) asserted four criteria, consistent with the positivist constructions, that should be considered by qualitative researchers in conducting a trustworthy study. These criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981). In order to limit bias

and establish trustworthiness in my own study, I abided by these four criteria as outlined by Guba.

**Credibility.** Credibility addresses the congruence of the findings with reality (Shenton, 2004). It answers the question: How much truth do the findings carry? This can be established through thoughtful research design, familiarity with the culture(s) and environment(s) to be studied, and the triangulation of data, all of which are means to ensure informant honesty (Shenton, 2004). This study sought to establish credibility through its multicase design (allowing for cross-case analysis); through its inclusion of data artifacts used to triangulate findings; and through my own work experiences in Christian higher education, which have given me insight into this specialized organizational culture.

**Transferability.** This entails the extent to which the findings of one study may be applied to other situations or wider populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is important to remember, however, that case studies must be primarily understood within their own boundaries. Still, the qualitative researcher can ensure a higher degree of transferability when they provide a thick and rich description of their methods and findings so that the study can be applied in other contexts or situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The two case study institutions included in this study may be similar to other Christian HEIs in regard to mission, scope, size, and organizational hierarchy. While application may not be directly transferable, generalizations from this study may be useful to other similar institutions.

**Dependability.** Dependability is the concept that, under the same circumstances, the same methods would yield similar results (Shenton, 2004). With qualitative case studies, by the changing nature of the phenomena under study, each case may yield differing results. However, Guba (1981) recommended that the qualitative researcher establish dependability by providing

generous detail of research methods so that the reader may evaluate the extent to which proper research protocol was followed. This includes in-depth description of the research design and implementation, the data gathering and coding process, and a narrative reflection of the data accumulated (Shenton, 2004). Included in this chapter is a thorough description of the research design and implementation and the data collection and coding process.

**Confirmability.** This concept measures the researcher's objectivity as a data collection tool (Shenton, 2004). Confirmability entails the admission of the researcher's predispositions and assumptions, and recognition of the study's limitations (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Shenton, 2004). Bracketing (Husserl, 2013) is one way in which a researcher can establish interpretive legitimacy by putting aside preconceptions. This allows the researcher to analyze the data on its own and disconnected from all context in order to discover the true, pure meaning of the data (Schwandt, 2001). By bracketing my potential biases in this way, I sought to minimize presuppositions based on my work experience in higher education. Moreover, I do not have a personal relationship with any of the participants at either university, which also minimizes the potential for bias.

### **Researcher's Role**

I have worked in Christian higher education (at a CCCU member institution) for nearly 13 years, so I am familiar with the context, mission, and structure of this particular segment of higher education. I did not have a personal relationship with anyone interviewed at either institution under study, which allowed for a higher degree of objectivity in the data collection and reporting process. As a practitioner in higher education, it is my desire to make my own contribution to the body of research on vision communication.

## **Ethical Considerations**

This study received approval from Abilene Christian University's (ACU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection and was classified as exempt from ongoing IRB oversight since there was minimal risk with participation being voluntary and anonymous (see Appendix C). Responses from participants (and their physical records) were kept confidential and the identities of both the institution and those interviewed were given pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality. All physical data (e.g., interview recordings) will be destroyed after this study is published. Electronic data will be kept on the researcher's password protected computer for up to three years after the study is published.

To satisfy the IRB's requirement for informed consent, participants were informed in writing of the purpose of this research, along with the benefits this research may provide. Additionally, I made clear my purest intentions to maintain confidentiality of the identities of participants and their institutions by assigning pseudonyms and by keeping all records contained and protected. I gained site permission to interview subjects in a top-down approach, beginning with the president.

## **Assumptions**

It is assumed that interview participants provided honest feedback as they understood their identities were kept confidential. If confidentiality was not guaranteed, participants may not have been as willing to share their true thoughts and feelings out of fear of damaging relations with others within the organization and perhaps jeopardizing their own jobs in the process. I emphasized confidentiality with each participant and required them to sign a consent form before I began the interview in order to minimize this potential effect.

## **Limitations**

One common pattern that presented itself was that participants oftentimes confused vision with mission, values, and/or institutional motto. As such, the topic of vision was sometimes a nebulous concept to discuss. I did not define vision (or differentiate it from mission) for participants at the beginning of each interview in order to explore their initial construction of the concept. However, in order to fully assess how institutional vision affects each employee, if necessary, I made it clear what vision is—and what it is not—as the interview progressed. However, even after vision was defined for each participant, some would vacillate between ideals found within the mission, motto, or core values when discussing vision. Moreover, one of the case study institutions included, Lux University, did not have a formalized vision statement. This was known when the institution was selected, but it did mean that vision was a particularly blurry concept for many of the participants to discuss. Vision was often understood as the university's mission and/or its values.

Another limitation is that the primary source of data collection in this study relied on participants providing their perception—and evaluation—of their university's vision and its communication. While I emphasized the confidentiality of the participants' responses, it is possible that participants may have altered their responses out of fear of repercussions. If vision was not perceived to be well-communicated or impactful by participants, they may not have been as candid.

Finally, I have spent over a decade working in Christian higher education. Because of this, bias may have been exhibited in interpreting the data and/or reporting the findings based on pre-existing assumptions about institutional vision or the Christian university context. This professional experience gives me insight into the unique environment of Christian colleges and

universities, but it is possible this same experience could have colored my impressions as well. While measures were taken in the methodology to minimize all of these factors and to ensure trustworthiness as previously addressed, these potential limitations must be accounted for.

### **Delimitations**

It should be noted that I did not endeavor to study the *content* of the vision or measure its *quality* in any way. Furthermore, I focused this study on select employees within the university's organizational chart: those at the senior-level, mid-level, and entry-level positions, and those specifically within academics, enrollment management, and student affairs. Studying other roles or levels within the institutional context may provide key insights to vision communication as well, but this study was limited in scope to these individuals in order to maintain focus and feasibility.

Another delimitation is that this research design utilized two case studies, so it cannot be counted as representative of all institutions of higher education. Only two universities were selected based on the feasibility of my resources. Also, a limited number of employees were sampled in each institution (18 employees per institution). Case studies are forms of inquiry designed to analyze a specific case (e.g., program, event, activity, process, individual, or group of individuals) and are typically bound by time, location, and activity (Creswell, 2014). Case studies must be understood on their own and not necessarily connected to larger trends (Patton, 2015) as each case is contextually unique. As such, results must be evaluated within the contexts of the two cases of the universities under study. Higher education institutions may vastly differ in size, structure, and operation, so the results of this study will likely not translate well at *every* college or university or even at every faith-based institution. However, if the situation is found to be similar enough within the case study, generalizations may be warranted (Melrose, 2009),

meaning practitioners at other institutions can perhaps apply generalized findings to their own unique contexts based on these exemplars.

### **Summary**

This chapter has provided a detailed outline of the methods implemented by the researcher in examining the nature and impact of vision communication on a faith-based HEI campus. Research has demonstrated the significant effects of a well-conceived and well-communicated vision (Cole et al., 2006; Jing et al., 2014; Stam et al., 2014), and has also highlighted the negative effects of a vision that is unclear, misunderstood, or neglected altogether (Baum et al., 1996; Bennis & Nanus, 1985). The methodology used to explore this phenomenon included a qualitative inquiry centered on two case study institutions. Purposeful sampling was used to stratify employees into three layers of the organizational chart, as well as focus on those employees with the most direct, ongoing interaction with students. Through semistructured interviews and other secondary means of data collection, I was able to assemble a thick and rich description of how vision is communicated and how it impacts these employees. By examining this data at two institutions, and by segmenting employees at three different levels and by three different departmental functions, I was able to trace themes across multiple lines. Such findings may not necessarily be transferable to all other HEIs, yet they may have implications beyond these specific contexts. The following chapter provides the results of this study, including the themes identified per each case study institution related to the research questions.



## Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative study explored the nature and impact of organizational vision within the context of Christian higher education. Specifically, two case study institutions were selected, Lux University (LU) and Veritas University (VU), and 36 employees were interviewed in order to better understand how vision is communicated and how it influences individuals at varying levels within the university context. In addition, vision-related artifacts were collected in order to triangulate the communication of vision. This qualitative multicase analysis was guided by two research questions:

**Q1.** What is the nature of communication used to disseminate vision to constituents across a Christian higher education institution's (HEI) campus?

**Q2.** How does institutional vision impact the work of personnel at various levels (i.e., senior-level, mid-level, and entry-level) within a Christian HEI?

By asking these questions, I endeavored to shed light on how vision was transmitted on Christian college campuses and how organizational vision influenced the work of employees at various levels within the institutional hierarchies.

This chapter details the themes and findings aggregated from the data collected at both Veritas University and Lux University. First presented is Case Study 1: Veritas University. In this section, I provide the overarching themes that emerged from the data collected at VU relative to vision communication based upon VU's unique characteristics and context. Second, I provide the same kind of theme presentation for Case Study 2: Lux University. Third, the overarching themes identified at both institutions are reported in a cross-case analysis. Next, findings are presented based on the two research questions for this study, which ask how vision is communicated to and from individuals at varying levels in the organization and how

individuals at these levels and in differing roles are influenced by vision in their work. In chapter five, these findings are discussed in relation to the literature on vision and its communication, followed by a discussion of the study's limitations and recommendations for practical application and future research.

### **Case Study 1: Veritas University**

The following are the overarching themes related to vision communication that emerged from the data specific to vision communication at Veritas University.

**Theme 1: The vision statement was generally confused with other organizational identity statements.** Veritas University's vision statement emphasizes VU's Christian and denominational moorings, communal aspects, the integration of faith and learning, commitment to values, and, perhaps most poignantly, a proclamation that the world will know—and be better for—the mission and values behind VU. It is a relatively verbose vision statement at four sentences in length (69 total words). Not a single participant, including the president, was able to recite the vision statement verbatim when asked. Moreover, there was general confusion between VU's vision statement, mission statement, core values, and its cleverly-crafted, pithy, three-part motto. A conglomeration of all these statements was given when each participant was asked about VU's vision. However, most participants understood the core essence of these organizational statements that encapsulates VU's faith-based identity.

The general understanding of the vision was that VU is a university where faith and learning are equally upheld and valued. As Skyler, an entry-level enrollment employee, put it:

To be honest with you, I don't have [the vision] committed to memory or anything like that. I mean, obviously, [Veritas] is a Christian institution. I think that's a huge part of it. I think that the vision, as I would interpret it, is that [Veritas] is called to be in equal parts an institution that seeks Christ [and] an institution that seeks intellectual development.

Samuel, a senior-level executive, framed Veritas's vision in this way:

I think our vision does a pretty good job of understanding that our core purpose in life is to be a university. That is our noun. Our adjective and our distinctive is our Christian ethos. And what does that mean to us and how do we implement it? That's a whole separate discussion. But I think the two are invariably infused together in our vision.

From the top of the organizational hierarchy to the bottom, the majority of participants were able to provide the same sort of description of their university's vision. The overall identity of VU was widely understood, but most of the participants had difficulty in articulating the actual vision of Veritas.

**Theme 2: The president is the main source of vision.** President Vines was attributed as the primary source of vision communication at Veritas. He had served at the helm of VU for 13 years at the time of the interview. It was clear that President Vines was highly regarded by the Veritas community, from members of his executive council to the most recently hired employee. One faculty member, Emma, described President Vines as "future-oriented and a visionary."

When asked about his philosophy on why an organization should have a vision, President Vines said that, to him, vision is for driving strategy, shaping culture, and improving the present state of things for the organization. President Vines was commended by many of the participants for doing these exact things through his consistent communication of vision found both in his writings and through regular speeches and interactions with those he encounters. President Vines said vision will come out:

Almost daily [in the] sidewalk conversation that you have with the person you're encountering on the most macro level. It's a challenge to not grow weary of it or to, you know, think I [have] to be developing new themes here, you know. The significance of it is the over and over and over and over again.

President Vines understands the importance of intentional, repetitive dissemination of vision.

One of the main ways President Vines communicates VU's vision is through his Monday Mission emails. This act of strategic communication by President Vines was repeatedly referenced by VU employees. Every Monday morning, President Vines personally writes and sends an email that tells a brief story about a VU person—a student, alumnus, faculty or staff member, a donor—and connects it back to VU's identity. This email is sent every week to all VU students, faculty, and staff. External constituents may also subscribe to these emails via VU's website. Along with the vignette, President Vines includes the mission statement, core values, and vision statement of VU at the bottom of every Monday Mission email. President Vines said, "And often . . . I will pull out a specific reference to some of those core values or elements of the vision and mission and those are embedded in the story." This email series has served as a continuous iteration of VU's identity through storytelling and repetition. It can be considered a ritual form of vision communication in that the purpose of these emails transcends the mere dissemination of information; these emails serve as a ritual form of vision-based communication intended to further solidify the shared values of those found within the organization of VU (Carey, 1989).

**Theme 3: Vision is communicated in other ways outside of the president.** The president was not the only source of vision communication identified by participants. Some mid-level managers cited their senior-executive leader as a source of vision, albeit not always as an explicit source of vision. For example, meetings regularly occurred between senior-level executives and mid-level managers where day-to-day operations and decisions were discussed, but there was no explicit mention of how that tied into the vision of the university. "It's likely that the discussion was very much vision-driven, and you never mentioned vision or anything related to it, but in hindsight, it was clearly related," said Marcus, a mid-level enrollment

manager at VU. Harrison, the vice-president under which Marcus serves, held the same viewpoint:

Very seldom do we say, “OK, here’s the vision statement, here are the goals, let me remind you who the campus is.” I would say, from my direct reports, I’ve got people who have been here 20 plus years, and I’ve got someone who has been here six months. The vast majority have been here double-digit years. And so that’s easier in a way that I don’t have to do all the communicating.

Harrison feels he does not always have to circle the conversation back around explicitly to vision. When work is future-oriented, this often occurs naturally. This is especially true with longer tenured employees, like Marcus, who are able to look back and see how decisions and strategy connect to the larger vision.

Vision is communicated through other means on Veritas’s campus. In print, it was found on the university’s website and in marketing materials disseminated to both internal and external audiences. Furthermore, President Vines referenced New Employee Orientation as a venue for vision. At each monthly New Employee Orientation session, he is on the agenda to give VU’s newest hires an overview of the mission, vision, and values of Veritas University. Another instance of vision communication takes place during staff retreats. It was said that time is taken during the summer each year to reflect on the past and refocus on the goals ahead. Brady, a mid-level enrollment manager, said:

The summer time is a really great time to hit the reset button on what we are doing, why we are doing it, what are some of the things that need to be tweaked, [and] how can we go back to our core competencies.

Brady said that it is during these times that vision, mission, and values are often reviewed by their entire staff.

**Theme 4: Most units have created their own formalized guiding statement(s) to apply vision.** Most of the offices represented by the participants had forged their own formalized office mission statements. A mission statement—how an entity defines how it operates in the

*present*—was largely the default over an office-specific vision statement here. The School of the Arts, the School of Business, and the offices of Student Affairs, Student Leadership & Involvement, Residence Life, and Admissions all reported to have developed their own individual mission statements. These office-specific statements serve to construct and interpret for the entire unit its unique approach to fulfilling the university’s mission and/or vision. However, some units have implemented these more successfully than others.

***Academics’ application of guiding statements.*** Both the School of Arts and School of Business developed their own unique mission statements to lead their internal employees to higher levels of purpose. According to Bill, the Dean of the School of Business, their mission emphasizes quality teaching, meaningful scholarship, and servant-oriented relationships underscored by VU’s Christian mission. Bill said that the School of Business has “a very clear vision, a very clear mission, and a very clear set of core values that guide us and it’s really not ambiguous at all.” He said that the majority of employees within the School would be able to paraphrase the mission and would likely understand the parameters of the School of Business: quality teaching, meaningful scholarship, and servant-oriented relationships.

The School of Arts crafted its own mission statement as well. The Dean of the School of Arts, Geoff, said he and his faculty spend a lot of time reflecting on the vision and how they might fine-tune their direction year after year in pursuit of it. Brandon, a first-year faculty in the School of the Arts, affirmed this. According to Brandon, Dean Geoff goes beyond simply addressing bullet points on an agenda at regular staff meetings: He regularly asks if the decisions, the programs, and the language they are using in the School of Arts is fulfilling the School’s mission and vision for itself. As Brandon sees it, fulfillment of this vision in his role at a Christian university is not always about

. . . unpackaging the gospel message at the end of everything. In fact, very rarely is that really the purpose. But it's about showing glimpses of Christ and what He does and how to use our talents, how to help our students, more importantly, use their talents to have artistry with soul.

Statements like these demonstrate how academicians like Brandon and Geoff are attempting to infuse their work with meaning and purpose through vision-related discussion and application specific to their own work within the university context.

*Student affairs employees' application of guiding statements.* The Division of Student Affairs is comprised of multiple departments that cultivate the student experience at VU. Some of these departments include the offices of Campus Life, Greek Life, Residence Life, Spiritual Life, and Student Development & Support. The Division of Student Affairs had its own mission statement; however, several of its sub-departments, like Residence Life and Student Leadership & Involvement, had created their own mission statements to help focus their activity as well. The effect of these guiding statements on the participants in student affairs was not as profound as compared to those in academics or enrollment management. When asked about Student Activities & Events' mission statement, one mid-level manager said, "I'm not a huge fan of that. Personally, I just think it's like kind of silly because nobody knows what it is or cares. So, I'm like, why are we spending time on this?" She later went on to say that she cared about the ideas that go into a mission statement, but cared less about if anyone has it memorized. Another mid-level manager mentioned that he did not believe that VU communicated its vision very well. He said he focused more on the mission and vision of his particular office. When subsequently asked about his office-specific mission, he said, "I don't know exactly what it is. [I] can't quote it to you."

Most of the student affairs staff felt the vision of the institution to be more obscure. Many questioned the future of the university, unable to articulate where exactly VU is heading. The

overall impression received from most of the student affairs staff was one of harried busyness.

Ross, a mid-level manager, commented:

In terms of the vision, a lot of times we're just trying to keep our head above water. With Residence Life, we have a lot of turnover . . . So, we talk about a lot of those vision-type things, but here lately, in the last few years, it [has] not been so much, "Hey, let's go in this direction," it's more, "Let's just keep doing what we're doing in terms of making sure that residents want to live on campus. "

Others in student affairs, like mid-level manager, Vera, when searching for meaning and direction, have had to create it for themselves. Vera was not very clear about the future direction of VU and did not believe the future was communicated very well. In this void, as a mid-level manager, she felt she had to define a vision for her team:

I've had to help even my direct reports and say, "OK, I don't think we can depend on other people to infuse our work with grandeur. We're going to have to do that ourselves. We're going to have to lean into the Holy Spirit. We're going to ask God to give us a vision that requires faith. Because we know we can't do it in isolation or apart from His participation. " And I think there are times that I . . . it feels like the last couple of years we're just maintaining the status quo; we're not really growing other than enrollment.

Much of her disillusionment comes from a lack of communication related to the success the university has experienced in terms of enrollment. Veritas University has a strong brand name within the higher education sphere in the southeast, and it has enjoyed over a decade of record enrollment growth. That growth has significantly impacted her role in student affairs as she is responsible for fostering an experience that cares for and develops students. According to Vera, she had not received the support or additional resources she felt she needed to do her job with excellence. Vera noted the lack of vision across all of the offices in student affairs as a whole. "It feels incredibly disjointed, and I think one of the things that vision does is it brings harmony to a group even if you're singing very different parts," she said. Even on a university-wide scale, Vera did not believe VU had effectively communicated its vision. "In terms of there being a



unified approach of deans of schools, of VPs . . . I don't see there being a culture of vision," said Vera.

*Enrollment services employees' application of guiding statements.* The Office of Admissions also penned its own mission statement related to its work in recruiting and enrolling students into the university. Brady, a mid-level enrollment manager, said that it supported the primary mission of VU, but it provided more context to the specifics of their work in recruitment. According to Brady and others in enrollment, the mission and motto of VU are the most widely known by admissions personnel because that is what they are selling to prospective students and families—it is how they are differentiating VU from competitor institutions.

Overall, the enrollment participants were very aware, accepting, and articulative of VU's mission and vision. As Brady put it, "[Our] work is not produced through the creation of a product or service; it's created through the communication of who we are as an institution." Another characteristic of the enrollment staff may explain this heightened awareness. Skyler, an entry-level employee, pointed out that most of the admissions staff attended VU as students, meaning there could be a more innate understanding of the vision of the institution within the unit as a whole. Moreover, most of the staff also graduated within the last five years, so they likely possessed a more contemporary understanding of it, as well, she said. According to Skyler:

Admission offices across the country are probably unique in that you do have to have a pretty good finger on the pulse of what the institution is at its core. Because you are the front line of telling people what it is. And if you equivocate, they sense that you don't know what you're talking about.

With numerous years of consecutive record-breaking enrollment, the enrollment team seems to have mastered this ability to tell Veritas's story.

While there may be a broad overarching vision that has been established for VU, members in each of the departments referenced their own office-specific mission statements that

helped to keep them focused on their own, departmental, day-to-day activity. Each unit sought to interpret and apply the vision as it fits their work within the institution. Some have defined their own departmental vision and missions out of a void, and some out of an intention to further their focus.

**Theme 5: Participants feel a responsibility to share the vision, and this is expressed in differing ways.** Most of the participants said they felt responsible to communicate vision with others in their line of work. Deans of VU, Geoff and Bill, understood the importance of communicating vision to their faculty. According to Bill, Dean of the School of Business, one of his ways to communicate vision was by publicly celebrating the tangible accomplishments of vision along the way. In faculty meetings, he reported that he likes to take time to pause and recognize individuals, decisions, or activities that are helping the School of Business achieve its vision for quality teaching, meaningful scholarship, and servant-oriented relationships underscored by VU's Christian mission. Geoff, Dean of the School of the Arts, indicated that he spends time discussing vision with faculty on a regular basis:

We spend a good bit of time breaking that down. We do talk a lot as a faculty about, in the School of the Arts, about what they think about the vision in front of them today versus what it was a year ago. How does it need to modify? Where do we need to fine tune our direction? A lot of the School of the Arts convocation time, meeting time, is focused on these things whereas departmental it's often focused on the day-to-day curriculum and that kind of thing. So, it's actually at the School-level that we're able to have some of those more pithy conversations about the philosophy of who we are and why we are and where we are going.

Geoff continued to say that even though thoughtful conversations are had about vision and everyone may be on the same page, oftentimes the harder part is in taking that back to one's role and building mechanisms to stay in alignment with this agreed upon vision.

Serena, an entry-level student affairs professional, attempted to center her work around VU's vision and strove to instill that same mindset into her students. Serena said:

I don't have any employees that report to me, but it's important to me to work with our student assistants regularly and make sure that everything we're doing matches up to [Veritas's] vision and also kind of the mission statement of our office, specifically. You can get really off track if you start to do things just to do things.

Serena saw this kind of mission—or vision—drift a lot with her students leading clubs and other organizations on campus. By virtue of her position in the Office of Leadership & Involvement, she regularly engaged in conversations with students about how to lead their organizations.

Serena said:

They'll come in and be struggling with their organization and be like, "I don't know, we're falling apart," and I always try to point them back to even their own mission of their organization. Like, what does your constitution say? How are your events pointing back to what you say your goals are? And so, I do that kind of work with students a lot.

As an entry-level employee, Serena had grasped the concept that many senior-level leaders are charged with—ensuring her followers are staying focused on the purpose of their organization and intent on advancing in the direction as defined by vision.

Others, like Marianne, felt a sense of responsibility to share vision with others, but sometimes felt too caught up in the frenetic day-to-day activity to do so. She was one of several student affairs mid-managers at VU who wrestled with this. Marianne said she felt a sense of responsibility in sharing vision with employees underneath her, but said:

Do I do it? Probably not. You know, I think it's my job as a leader to make sure our team . . . has a map to follow and is going towards something. Do I do it very well? Probably not. Are you in the midst of an issue or just day-to-day routine? I'm like, just do this because it will help...and I don't always have the time to articulate, "Hey, this is what we're doing."

Marianne, like the other student affairs personnel, feels that she should be sharing vision with others, but feels as though she has not really received that vision herself and is just trying to survive on a day-to-day basis.

President Vines had the acute perception, as in the case with Marianne, that this is likely to happen for many mid-level and entry-level personnel. According to President Vines, some people are just in a better position to communicate vision than others. He stated:

Those skills just aren't . . . they just are not for everybody. And I have to say, I don't consider myself an exemplar on any of this. I am better on it than I was a quarter of a century ago, but most people on a university campus, especially in staff positions, they [have] to be executing all the time. And so, it's good for them to come up for air every once in a while and think about what the larger vision is. But on a day-to-day basis, most of them are figuring out, OK, how to recruit another student or how to deal with whatever student problem that they're facing or how to balance a budget and all of those things.

There is an understanding from VU's chief leader that not everyone is gifted or in a position to communicate vision. Mid-level managers and entry-level employees are often busy executing strategy passed down from senior leaders, said President Vines. This was evident especially in the participants from VU's Division of Student Affairs. They felt like they were so harried they did not have time to think about vision, or they felt like they were not receiving vision clearly on how their work aligned with the direction of the university. Regardless, the student affairs participants at VU still felt the need to share vision with others, despite these challenges.

**Theme 6: The faith aspect of the vision at VU is widely supported.** Virtually all participants voiced that the reason they chose to work at Veritas University was because of its Christian identity. By extension, this includes its faith-focused mission and vision. Even though the future of VU (and how to get there) may be unclear to some, there was wide support for VU's vision based on its claim of Christian identity and intention.

Because such strong value congruence exists based on the faith-focus of the university's vision, many have passed on greater opportunities and higher pay outside of their university in order to remain at a place with congruent Christian values. Geoff, a dean at VU, said, "It's why I came and why I stayed. There have been opportunities to go on to what some might see as higher-level opportunities, but I'm just so content working in this kind of environment." Emma,

a professor, echoed similar sentiments, saying that the Christian aspect of VU's vision is the reason she works at VU:

I could go to another university and make more money and have greater benefits, but the Christian culture here, it fits with my belief system. So, I'm able to be who I am openly at work and at home, and there's no difference.

Others, like Vera, a mid-level manager, see Veritas's purpose and direction closely aligned with their own beliefs on what is important: "The primary influence of my work is really my ideas about the Kingdom of God. I work at [Veritas] because I think their vision and mission is in alignment with bringing the kingdom of God to earth now." With their personal beliefs aligned with that of the institution's, participants like Bill, Emma, and Vera find a higher meaning in their work, which deepens their commitment to the university and its forward direction.

**Theme 7: The vision is open to a certain degree of interpretation.** Another major theme that presented itself at VU is the idea that the vision is and could be individually interpreted by people depending on their roles. This interpretation was not always clean or clear. Joan, a mid-level manager in academics, said, "I think the vision is very clear in terms of the model of the mission. I think where the difficulty comes in is in the interpretation and the application of that." For example, Joan said that VU's vision may highlight global engagement as a goal, but she has not always been given the resources she felt she needed to be successful in this area. Joan acknowledged that the university is a business with limited resources, and she understood that everyone is vying for limited resources for their own unit. The challenge for her, and others at VU, was understanding how those resources were prioritized in relation to fulfilling the university's vision and goals.

Skyler, an entry-level employee in enrollment, mentioned she would like to see roundtable discussions or something similar on the different elements of the vision. "I think that

that would help us better critically think about what it is and how it applies and how we can communicate that to families,” she said. She also said, “I think that could be a really interesting thing, to see how people interpret different aspects of the vision.” For example, the word and concept of *Christian* can have a host of interpretations, even among those in the same singular church. In fact, all three senior leaders pointed out that there is no homogeneous definition of Christianity. What, then, does it mean to be a *Christian university*? A variation of interpretation is likely to exist here on one of the key components of VU’s vision, as senior-level executives noted. For example, Serena, an entry-level employee in student affairs, stated that she understood that VU is a conservative Christian university in the south, and sometimes she must reconcile decisions VU makes in this light against her own notion of Christianity. “I have to be OK with having a little dissonance sometimes,” she said.

Several participants saw this openness of interpretation as a positive. Skyler commented on how a university like VU maintains its vision amidst a diversity of interpretations:

I think having a little bit of friction allows us to have that ongoing conversation of who is [Veritas]? How do we respond to these things? How do we go back to our mission? How do we go back to our values and look back into ourselves and respond? . . . I think it causes a more constant reflection on who we are called to be and responding in kind to that.

Skyler believes that this margin for interpretation creates the space for deeper conversations and critical thinking to take place about the mission, vision, and values of the organization.

Harrison, the Vice-President of Student Affairs & Enrollment Management, appreciated this flexibility as well. “For me,” said Harrison, “it’s invigorating to think how can I interpret the vision for myself personally and then how can I deliver that to my staff with creative ideas about how they do the same thing in different ways.” Harrison referenced the coordinator of VU’s Parent Program in this light. He said she “completely understands” who VU is, but what is also

important to him is the future-oriented aspect of “How do we interpret where we are going and how that links for her?”

Even though the vision statement could not be readily recited by participants within this study, each person was able to articulate the common core of who Veritas is—a university that equally promotes academic excellence and commitment to the Christian faith. While many offices and individuals have attempted to define and apply that vision in their own line of work, this margin for interpretation was even acknowledged—and accepted—by the president.

President Vines said:

We don't have [the vision statement] on bumper stickers, and we don't tattoo it on people's heads, you know. Everybody is going to have a little different way of expressing that, and I'm fine with that...It's a university for crying out loud, and people want to use their own words, and they want to think a little bit independently, and I'm fine with that.

President Vines is reconciled to the fact that everyone will likely not see vision through the same lens. According to him, he is fine with individuals across campus expressing the vision in different ways. When an organization, like a university, is comprised of so many individuals doing so many different types of work—recruiters, professors, registrars, student affairs practitioners, administrators, resident assistants—the same vision may very well be received, interpreted, and applied in various ways.

**Theme 8: Putting vision into practice can be complicated.** Even if a vision is clear and supported, many of the participants of VU said that implementing the vision in the complexities of the ever-changing environment can be a challenging task. Once vision is cast, if there is no subsequent communication on how to implement it, the result can be a frustrated workforce. Veritas University has experienced tremendous success over the last decade in enrollment. Though enrollment goals are clear, it would seem other units within the university are experiencing growing pains as a result of a swelling student body size. Specifically, for

participants in student affairs, unanswered questions and a lack of clear direction have led to growing frustrations and a “just get it done” mentality. This has developed out of a lack of communication around how to manage the continued growth of the student body. The struggle for many at VU lies in the gap between the philosophy and promotion of the vision versus putting it into practice. For the most part, the intent of the vision was understood and accepted, but what was less clear was how to apply it in the complexities of everyday operation. Harrison, Vice-President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, nodded to this challenge:

I think [the vision is] clear to me, yes. How do we quantify that sometimes? Not as easy because it varies. How does the vision statement or how does the president’s vision for where we’re going impact housing numbers? Well, it may not impact it that much, but it may impact more importantly the programs that RAs do in a certain way. That they need to touch more on this particular element of who we are as an institution.

Vera, a mid-level student affairs manager, reflected on vision in this manner:

What’s happening is, I think the vision is pretty clear. I think the pursuit of the vision is where it gets . . . or the communication of the vision is . . . again I think the mission is more regularly and clearly communicated than the vision. So, I think I’m clear that [Veritas’s] vision is to be a vibrant, relevant force for the Christian faith and the academic mind.

Vera understands the heart of the vision, but what is less clear is the “pursuit” of that vision, or the communication of *how* to pursue that vision. This same murkiness was expressed from other employees at VU, like Joan, a mid-level manager in academics, who has wrestled with how resources are prioritized in light of the vision. Joan said about the clarity of VU’s vision, “I think it’s very clear in terms of the model of the mission. I think where the difficulty comes in is in the interpretation and the application of that.” Joan referenced a part of the mission statement that emphasizes student success, one of the areas she oversees at VU. However, there has been disagreement over how resources are spent. For example, she has vied for resources for tutoring, an activity clearly tied to student success, but claimed she has not received those resources.



Instead, she was given justification for the renovation of a new student center because, as it was rationalized to her, “that’s going to feed into student success.” Despite the vision emphasizing areas Joan is responsible for, the communication around how these ideals were prioritized was allegedly lacking. A vision statement may entail multiple ideals or noble pursuits, but practically prioritizing those ideals and allocating resources accordingly can be less than clear.

Another clash of promotion versus practice involved Derek, the entry-level multicultural recruiter. When he was hired, Derek was charged as the only multicultural recruiter to lead the Office of Admissions in proactive, strategic initiatives towards recruiting diverse student populations. The vision statement of Veritas University explicitly declares its intent to be “a diverse community.” Two years ago, President Vines announced to faculty and staff in a public speech that Veritas would aim to increase diversity from 20% to 25% within the next 3-5 years.

Serena recounted:

So [President Vines] talked about his goal for increasing our racial diversity by like 2022 or something from like up to 20% maybe . . . I don’t exactly remember. He communicated that, and then I didn’t hear much, so then I was like so how are we going to do that?

Derek asked himself this same question as he, too, was sitting in the audience, hearing that goal announced for the very first time. According to Derek, there was no conversation held with him or any other individual working directly with minorities about this new initiative, which included an Officer of Intercultural Initiatives and an Assistant Provost for Diversity. “We were all taken aback,” said Derek. No input was solicited from Derek or any of his contemporaries.

Not only was Derek not included in the casting of a vision that would largely be his responsibility, but he also felt he has not received sufficient direction or support required to fulfill the goal.

According to Derek:

Since that announcement has been made, we have not added more staff in either area, no resources have been given, not a person of color in our Student Affairs and Campus Life, and so you know . . . people are working, specifically myself and partners in our Office of Intercultural Initiatives, and it's almost as if we are responsible for this that has been projected as our vision, but not necessarily receiving the input and support as a whole. And so, I can only speak from my case in that I'm having . . . to remind people who are working with these directives that this is what we said we were going to do, and so we need these resources to be able to do such. And the only way that you'll be able to do good on your public statement is that I'm going to need resource allocation.

Derek is in support of the vision, but has been frustrated by the lack of communication surrounding how to actually accomplish the initiative. Furthermore, as an entry-level employee, he does not have the positional authority to drive change. "I'm the only person in our office that has specific responsibilities but does not have the position clout concerning that position," said Derek. Not only did Derek feel like he has not been given the resources to increase the diversity of the class, he also says there is a lack of follow-through when it comes to vision in supporting these minority students on campus by creating places and individuals for students to go to for support. Ultimately, while the vision of increasing VU's minority population is a noble one and one that Derek can get behind, the lack of communication surrounding how to practically accomplish the vision has been a real frustration for Derek.

Part of the challenge and complexity of putting VU's vision into practice stems from its sustained growth over the last decade. As the student body grows, resources must be rechanneled to accommodate that growth. With this shuffle, a reprioritization of resources generally occurs; however, practical direction has not been as clearly articulated here as the heart behind VU's vision. Even President Vines nodded to the gap that can be found between promotion versus practice. According to President Vines:

There's a massive difference between what the overall vision is as it relates to hoping and praying and working towards Christ-centeredness and achieving the highest level of

academic performance that we can, you know those overarching things, there's a vast difference between that and then the strategies and tactics of navigating the current and future environment. So, you have to kind of operate with this is "who we are" and this is "who we're going to be" up here and then down here you're trying to figure out how to pick the lock every day.

According to President Vines, vision, mission, and core values are the overarching ideals that guide the institution. They are the defined attributes of organizations that people strive to live by and for. The hard part, as President Vines said, is figuring out how to maintain and apply those ideals as one tries to navigate the complexities of everyday decision-making and activity.

**Theme 9: The growth and success of the university has blurred the vision for some.**

Several disconnects were identified in relation to vision communication on Veritas University's campus. This was especially true for many of the student affairs staff. Teresa, a middle-manager in student affairs, said she felt like she had to seek out vision in order to find it. "It's there, but, you know, not like in front of our faces all the time...It's like a 'get the job done' kind of environment," said Teresa. Part of the problem for Teresa is that she feels there is a disconnect within The Division of Student Affairs. "We don't see each other a lot. We don't really know what everybody else is doing or why they're doing it," commented Teresa. Now supervising someone herself for the first time, Teresa is struggling with how to pass on a vision that is unclear to her. She feels she is not necessarily receiving clear, effective vision from those above her, and, consequently, those underneath her may be unclear on vision, too, as a result of this broken link. Teresa also pointed to a constrained budget and staff size as to why she and others around her feel short-sighted when it comes to vision. People are just trying to get their work done and survive the day, according to Teresa.

Despite VU's marked enrollment success, many of the participants brought up a restriction of resources, be it budget and/or personnel. With its sustained growth, several new

building developments have likely put a strain on cash flow and caused some growing pains with an increase in the number of students—something that directly impacts student affairs professionals. One mid-level manager said her department feels like they are expected to do more and more with no additional provision of resources. As previously mentioned, Ross, a mid-level manager of Residence Life, affirmed this same feeling: “In terms of the vision, a lot of times we’re just trying to keep our head above water.” According to Teresa, there is not a lot of transparency surrounding this issue:

I think there's kind of this, there's an underlying dark cloud that we don't get to hear about. And I think if we were a little more honest about the things that are holding us back, we might be able to move past them a little more.

Vera, a mid-level manager in student affairs, has felt this same pressure:

I challenged some messaging in some conversations with people this past year . . . saying we keep increasing enrollment every year and we’re not increasing student affairs staff. We don’t have any more staff now than we did 10 years ago, but yet we’ve got a lot more students, which means we have a lot more students at risk, a lot more students that need accommodations. So that’s where I’m like, “Oh, I think we might have a vision to grow, but I don’t know that we have a plan to support that growth.” And that to me says maybe there’s vision at the upper-level that has not really informed other levels of leadership and certainly that vision hasn’t necessarily trickled down into the financials or things like that.

Vera feels that VU has a real “vision vacuum” in the sense that she does not feel the vision is clearly communicated. Her discontent lies in how the vision connects the various units across campus. Vera and others attributed this lack of vision to an administration in which most members were nearing the end of their careers. President Vines was purportedly within a few years of retirement, and many of the senior leadership team were nearing the same points in their careers. On this subject, Vera said:

That’s some of what I think our challenge might be as an institution. That all of our senior leadership have been doing what they’ve been doing for a long time. And the gap between them and not just our students, but our students’ parents, it’s getting wider and wider. And I think that that is not a fault at all, it’s just a reality. And I think it’s . . . I

mean, when you have people who are coming to the end of their career, it's hard to be a visionary, I think.

Veritas University has been riding a wave of growth and success over the last decade. The frustration from Vera and others could be a result of growing pains and the fact that, perhaps, leadership is still trying to figure out exactly where this wave of enrollment success will take VU. Student affairs personnel were not the only ones to point out this vision disconnect. Bill, an academic dean, also saw VU's vision to be cloudy. Bill said:

We are struggling, and we have not done a great job in recent years with coalescing that into a *university* vision. We have shared values or desirable values that I think are well-known and widely embraced, so it's not a case of not having values. But I don't think we have a clear aspirational vision. For instance, if you [asked] me where should the university be, what should it look like five years from today, I think we're struggling with that, and I think we've been struggling with that for a while . . . We have a campus-wide vision statement, but if people have told you that it's widely understood and embraced, I would not agree with that statement.

According to these accounts, it is not that the employees of VU lack an understanding of organizational identity or values, but there does seem to be a lack of clarity and unity as to where VU is heading largely based on its continued enrollment success.

**Theme 10: Vision has a positive impact on most employees.** At VU, some participants found a sense of inspiration in their work in pursuit of the vision. For Brady, a mid-level enrollment manager, this inspiration comes from defining the reason behind his work. He stated:

As much as we care about the numbers—and we care about numbers a lot, we have goals and are very competitive in what we do—all of that should be built on top of an underlying foundation of the *why*.

Joan, a mid-level manager in academics, framed the vision in relation to her leadership role in student support services. The way she sees it:

Every student comes in at a different point on the graph. They all come in with different abilities, different knowledge, different skills, different intelligence, different past experiences. Our responsibility is to make sure in their time here they have a positive slope to that line, that they leave better than they come.

Others, like Courtney, an entry-level employee in enrollment, found the vision to be personally encouraging. “It’s a huge driving force for me [and] it gives me motivation,” Courtney said. The vision of VU gave her the determination to power through each day:

If you had an absolutely terrible day, parents yelling, whatever it might be, I’ll always have [the vision]. I feel like even if I worked somewhere else, and I wasn’t behind the mission or vision, I wouldn’t have as much of a backbone in the way I feel about different interactions in just the day-to-day. It’s something I think about every day . . . good days, bad days, regardless. It’s very, very important. Even if I can’t recite it . . . it’s the concept of it in general that I know drives me.

While Courtney may not have memorized the vision, the general concept of it is what compels her to persist on even in the most difficult of days.

Another entry-level employee, Serena, was also compelled in her work by Veritas’s vision. Specifically, for Serena, there is a portion of the vision that resonates more strongly with her that drives her in her interactions with students:

Yeah, from my personal beliefs and values, I think it’s really important for Christians as a whole and especially like college students that are developing their ethos and theology of things to understand that it’s important for us to engage the culture that’s around us and not be insulated from it. And so, I appreciate that part of [Veritas’s] mission, that we should be learning but also be a part of our communities and be a part of our professions.

A part of VU’s vision statement directs the organization’s members to be “sensitive to global issues.” Certain ideals found within the vision can resonate more strongly than others depending on the individual’s past experiences or current roles within the organization. Serena continued:

So, that inspires me to work with my students to make sure that they are engaging what’s going on in the world and not ignoring that. Like, I know when I was in school I probably missed everything that happened for four years in the world because I was, like, so insulated . . . but I think it’s really important that our students are aware of what’s going on globally and I appreciate that about [Veritas’s vision], that they want our students to be a part of that and so that really drives me to have those conversations, to ask students, “Did you hear about the shooting at Virginia Beach?” or “Did you hear about you know the pro-life marches in DC?” or, like, help them engage and think well and thoughtfully about how we ought to be involved in that.

Serena has personally connected VU's vision to her own line of work within the institution.

Serena continued in reflection:

As Christians, we should be moving the needle forward. We should be promoting the common good and not just focusing on other Christians. So, that inspires my conversations in provoking our students a little bit to think outside of themselves.

This connection to vision is largely tied to Serena's faith, like most of the other participants.

Senior-level executive, Samuel, was another, like Serena, who had consecrated their work with the particulars of VU's vision. In fact, Samuel's position is inextricably linked to the vision as the Chief Strategy Officer of Veritas University. Chief Strategy Officers are not common positions in higher education. He was almost certain that he is the first to hold such a position in the field. His job is to work with the various units within the institution to strategically move the institution forward in concerted pursuit of the mission and vision. Samuel described his role in this way:

I think my role has to be acutely aware of vision so that not only in terms of the strategies we develop as being highly consistent with the vision and the mission of the university, that they are also symbolically so because on issues particularly, in my opinion, related to faith and in delivering what it means to be a Christ-follower. How you say it and the tangential meanings of what you're doing matter a great deal. So, my role as Chief Strategy Officer, I think, is . . . to say I'd be *guardian* would be overinflated, but to be highly, highly, highly aware of that vision, because I'm overseeing strategies where we are bringing that vision to life.

Samuel has allowed the university's vision of an idealized future, one in which Veritas is making its mark on the globe, to inspire his conceptualization of his work. Samuel asserted:

We have to figure out how to take more of [Veritas] to the world. The world needs more of what [Veritas] has to offer. And there are other institutions, so don't think I'm raising us above everybody else, but my job is to take us to the world.

Inspired by the university's vision, which proclaims that the world will be made better for

Veritas University, Samuel has infused his role with a grandeur, not out of vanity but out of

aspiration. His interpretation of his role in relation to vision has him, as chief strategy officer, taking Veritas to the *world*.

### **Case Study 2: Lux University**

The following are the overarching themes related to vision communication that emerged from the data specific to vision communication at Lux University.

**Theme 1: Without a vision statement, there was no clear, collective concept of vision.** While Lux University has a mission statement, four core values, and a statement of faith, what Lux lacks, conspicuous to this study, is a vision statement. This was known when LU was selected as a case study institution as vision can still exist even outside of a formalized statement. In the absence of a vision statement, it is important to know more about LU's other existing organizational identity statements in order to understand the themes and findings that emerged in the data.

LU's mission statement is succinct—just one simple, direct sentence signaling its Christian focus (18 total words). The statement of faith, the longest of all its statements, in ample detail outlines the tenets of its Christian creed. What seemed to be the crown jewel of these identity statements was its four core values. The structure and categorical quality of these four core values makes them easily memorable. In fact, every single participant referenced the core values. To put it plainly, these core values are the crux of Lux. They were found in recruitment materials, hanging as banners on light poles around campus, and were reportedly often referenced in the president's speeches.

Many participants believed the core values and/or mission to be the vision of the institution. Mitch, a mid-level manager in enrollment, said, "I guess it's possible to have a mission statement and a vision statement, but ours is all about the mission here." Senior-level



student affairs executive Trent said about LU's vision, "I would say, primarily, [the vision is] kind of encapsulated with the mission of the institution." Heather, an entry-level enrollment employee, said, "I think that to spit out a vision statement, I could not do that. To broadly know where we are headed, I couldn't do that. We have our four core values, and that's what I tend to remember." Without a formal, guiding, future-oriented vision statement, some participants were left guessing what the vision actually was, like Oscar, an academic dean, who said, "I know what our mission is, right, which has to do with developing students for service to church and society. But our vision? I could tell you what I *feel* it was." Another academician, Timothy, speculated, "Well, I think those core values are . . . I think that's the vision, that's our broad goal. We want to be those four things."

There was a high degree of uncertainty about what, exactly, the vision of LU is. No one could articulate it clearly. Many said the mission and the vision were one in the same. Others pointed to the four core values: the tenets that members of the LU community were most familiar with. The impression given was that LU employees knew who LU is based on the present-day Christian-centered mission and values, and whatever the future may hold, LU will continue to abide by its mission and values. Most often, however, this was conjecture rather than assertion. Mid-level manager in student affairs, Dave, described vision this way:

I think our vision is to continue to be, you know, a high-quality academic and convictionally faith-based institution that provides Christ-centered education and character for development in service to church and society. And so, to continue to be distinctive in our intellectual rigor, to be distinctive in the integration of faith and living and learning, and then to continue to be distinctive as a convictionally faith-based institution.

Dave's use of the phrase "to continue" three times in this response underscores the fact that LU seems to be, at least in Dave's mind, communicating more of a conviction to cling to *who they are* rather than envisioning and articulating *what could be*. However, despite the confusion

surrounding future-oriented vision, there was a high degree of awareness among the participants of who Lux *is*.

According to Lux University's president, there is some intentionality behind LU not having a vision statement. The way he sees it, LU is operating through a "living mission." Future-oriented planning and aspirations exist, but for LU, these come in the form of the strategic plan, the Master Planning Committee, and the current development of a new comprehensive fundraising campaign. "We think of it as more fully realizing, more fully embodying those things—the mission and the core values," said President Lucas when it comes to vision for Lux University.

It should be noted that the Master Planning Committee (MPC) had recently been commissioned to design a plan to reorganize, renovate, and build on Lux's campus. Numerous employees referred to this working group when asked about the vision of LU. According to the committee chair, the MPC is planning what campus will look like, both from building structures to how people experience the campus over the next 20-30 years. Over half of the participants mentioned this committee in connection to vision for LU. So, while a formal vision statement does not exist, many associated the future direction of LU to this MPC process of physical space and resource planning.

**Theme 2: The president is the main source of vision.** All 18 participants cited President Lyle Lucas as the primary source for vision communication on campus. He was described as highly relational and a "student magnet." "Like, if [President Lucas] were here, and he walked by here, he'd jump in and talk to us. He's just a real person," said Timothy, a professor. Many of the longer tenured employees referenced the contrast between President Lucas and his predecessor, Dr. Broome. Dr. Broome was described as a "visionary" and a "big

spender,” while President Lucas has purportedly taken a more financially conservative approach in his five years at LU. One academician viewed this conservatism as President Lucas’s attempt to put finances back in order from the previous administration, which left the institution short on cash flow. Dr. Broome reportedly communicated in a very top-down fashion where information was not as freely shared. As he transitioned out of LU, it was discovered that LU was not in as favorable of a financial position as might have been portrayed. Understanding this past puts President Lucas’s leadership style into focus.

Many of the participants described President Lucas’s leadership as highly transparent. President Lucas has worked to instill this transparency in a myriad of ways. His relational nature serves to open natural avenues of communication as he regularly engages students, staff, and faculty around campus. In a physical move to demonstrate transparency, President Lucas moved the president’s office to the front of the presidential suite, rather than in the back where it had formerly been located. This reduced the physical—and symbolic—barrier between him, as president, and the people of LU.

Another significant part of the transparency ascribed to President Lucas comes in the form of monthly town hall meetings. These meetings have supported an open forum-style gathering led by the president. Even regional campus employees are invited—and expected—to attend via videoconferencing. One entry-level employee described town hall meetings as “the constant thread” in the intentional way that vision, mission, and purpose are articulated. While upcoming events and ongoing initiatives are discussed, much of it is tied back to mission and identity and LU’s four core values. The president typically has given opening remarks at each town hall meeting before offering the microphone to LU’s campus community to ask questions and have open, honest dialogue surrounding agenda items or anything else about which LU

members may inquire. Town hall meetings are “interpersonal, relational, transparent,” as described by one senior-level executive. These regular meetings have served as a platform for President Lucas and others on his senior-executive leadership team, known as the executive council, to continue to maintain the “transparent culture” that has been established and to connect LU’s decision-making and activities to its mission and values.

For mid-level managers like Dave, town hall meetings are opportunities for President Lucas and others on the executive council “to say here’s what’s going on and here’s where we’re going, or here’s how we’re responding to this.” Senior-level executive Doug said town hall meetings are one of the primary ways how the transparent culture has been created, and this has been an ideal platform for the communication of vision. Another senior-level executive, Charlie, summed up the transparency of President Lucas’s administration in this way:

I think our vision, or the vision that the leadership has tried to cultivate, is one of transparency and commitment to our core values, so that everybody knows where we are and where we’re going. The transparency and our commitment to our core values is the way we’re going to achieve our mission. And so, vision, for our organization, the vision seems to me to be much more about everybody understanding where we are and where we are going and there aren’t a lot of things that are hidden from the people.

President Lucas’s relational nature and strategic attempt to be open and honest with everyone at LU has garnered a high level of likability and trust for LU’s leader. The town hall meetings are an excellent means by which vision can be communicated, and a welcome ritual according to the participants in this study.

**Theme 3: The vision is communicated in ways outside of the president.** At LU, the senior leadership team is known as the executive council and consists of the president, vice-presidents, and the provost. Members of the executive council were often attributed to being a secondary voice for vision. President Lucas has pressed upon these leaders and others to consistently communicate LU’s identity. President Lucas said:

I think both the president and the senior leadership—I also include deans in that, but also our mid-level managers, department heads—we need to consistently and constantly be talking about mission and core values. Again, for us that’s critical.

As President Lucas sees it, the onus of communicating LU’s identity is shared among all leaders within the institution.

Since many participants credited the mission and values of the institution to be the vision, the communication of this vision was found in other ways throughout campus. The university website contained a “What We Believe” webpage that displayed its organizational identity statements (absent, of course, a vision statement). Furthermore, LU has an on-campus marketing department that generates and disseminates messaging that frequently contains the mission and core values of the institution. The four core values, which were the most well-known of the organizational identity statements, could be found around campus printed on colorful banners connected to dozens of light poles. Additionally, the on-hold message when calling in to LU was recorded messaging that recites the four core values.

**Theme 4: Participants felt a responsibility to share the vision of LU with others.**

Most of the participants at LU said they felt a responsibility to share the university’s vision with others, be it other employees, current students, or prospective students. Participants believed that vision could be communicated in various ways.

For example, Heather, an entry-level enrollment employee, oversees a team of student workers. At the beginning of each year, she invites President Lucas to her initial meeting with these students to review the core values. Heather likes for President Lucas, as the chief communicator of vision, to “set the tone” and “to give the language to start building the foundation for everything else that we’re going to do the rest of the year.”

Jake, an entry-level employee in student affairs, also works with student workers and realizes the importance of continuously recasting vision. At the beginning of each semester, Jake holds a staff meeting with his student workers in order to have a “very focused reorientation.” In this meeting each semester, Jake makes it a point to review the mission and vision. Jake mentioned that he does this every semester not only with new employees, but even with those students who have been employed for four years because he realizes how critical it is to refocus on these central tenets.

Senior-level executives felt a responsibility in sharing vision with their divisions as well, but there are differences in how participants viewed this being carried out. Vice-President for Student Affairs, Trent, said that at LU vision is passed on through the executive council. The way he sees it, some of the responsibility of this leadership team is to both create and communicate vision. “I would say that’s done with decision-making, policy-making, vision-casting, whether that be programmatically or university-wide,” said Trent. This means that the leadership body at LU collectively decides on the direction of the institution as defined by its mission and core values. That vision is then enacted through much of the day-to-day operations and activities found in each vice-president’s division.

Charlie, a senior-level executive and former provost at LU, saw vision communication in another light altogether. According to Charlie, “the most, I think, pointed effort at preserving, cultivating, and promoting vision is in the hiring process.” In his time as provost at LU, he hired approximately 50 new faculty members. He said it is critical to hire with the vision, mission, and values of your organization in mind. Charlie understands that an organization can lose its mission one hire at a time, but he counters with the opposite truth: You strengthen your mission one hire at a time. “So, it’s a pretty heavy burden in a good sense. I don’t mean that it was

burdensome, but it was an important burden that the provost feels that need to communicate, cultivate, and support the mission and vision,” said Charlie.

These participants and others realize the weight of sharing LU’s vision with others and have been working to incorporate that into their own individual lines of work. Some do this through purposeful orientations that highlight the vision, mission, and values of LU. Others see vision being worked out through decision-making, policy-setting, and through thoughtful hiring.

**Theme 5: The faith-based vision was widely embraced.** Participants at LU expressed a high degree of affective commitment to the university based on its Christian mission and focus. Even though the vision was undefined, the idea of a Christian university was very desirable and attractive to participants. Eva, a professor, said the faith component of LU’s vision was critical to her because “that is . . . the core of who [Lux University] is.” For Eva, the vision and the identity of the university go hand in hand. Others, like Meredith, an entry-level enrollment employee, have worked in secular workplaces prior to LU and have come to value the difference between the working environments. According to Meredith, she appreciates the fact that she can now incorporate her faith into her work in a public manner. Harper, another entry-level enrollment employee, said he could secure another job with greater salary and benefits, but he chooses to remain at LU for the Christian-focus of the institution. Harper said that without a faith-infused mission and vision like LU’s, work would not be as fulfilling for him.

In sum, the Christian identity of LU, and by extension its mission, vision, and core values, were highly supported by the participants. This identity is a strong force for participants, like Joseph, a professor, who said, “It’s the whole reason I’m here.” Not only does it attract people like Joseph and others, but it is perhaps the primary factor that keeps them working at the institution, as well.

**Theme 6: When vision is unclear, employees make assumptions.** Without a formal vision statement, what was found between the promotion versus the practice of the vision at Lux University was, oftentimes, assumption. President Lucas believes the vision of LU is to more fully embody the mission and values of the institution as time goes on. Some participants provided a similar notion of the vision, but this was more guesswork on their part. Assumptions were provided rather than concrete confidence in the direction of LU. Mitch, a mid-level enrollment manager, said that “I think people see that mission and those four core value as where we’re headed . . . I think they are intended to guide toward the future, to show the future.” Meredith, an entry-level enrollment professional, said, “I have this sense of I know where we’re going, but it’s really not that clear.” Otis, a mid-level manager in student affairs, said, “I think when you tie together like our core values, when you outline those four things, and you get behind them and explain like they’re not just four sets of words, then that’s sort of the vision.” Dave, a mid-level student affairs manager, said:

I mean, I don’t know that I have a clear picture of what specifically we are striving for as far as like a rubric or numbers or timeline or that sort of thing. I think our strategic plan guides us in that . . . As far as like what is our target, it feels a lot like our target is, “Let’s continue to be who we are and let’s be fiscally sustainable and let’s be ensuring that we are diversifying our student population and employee population.”

This same issue presents itself here in Dave’s assumption, or feeling, of what he thinks the vision is. For him, it is a perpetuation of present identity. Based on statements such as these by Mitch, Meredith, Otis, and Dave, there seems to be a lot of guesswork when it comes to the vision at LU.

Dean Oscar said, “I know what our mission is, right, which has to do with developing students for service to church and society. But our vision? I could tell you what I *feel* like it



was.” He later stated about the vision, “I think it has just been assumed that we’re continuing on the same track.” Provost Barry said:

If we’re not articulating what our vision is, we are relying way too much on assumptions. And when we rely on assumptions, usually at some point we wake up and find out we’re not all assuming the same thing anymore.

This is one way in which an organization can experience mission or vision drift—when there is no unified cognizance of direction, people begin to create their own paths.

Participants could not confidently articulate the vision of LU. Phrases such as, “I think,” “I guess,” and “my assumption” were commonly used. In the gap between promotion versus practice at LU lies a lot of supposition, which, as Barry pointed out, can eventually lead to a significant variance in what is to be understood as the vision.

**Theme 7: Academicians voiced the greatest concern over an inexplicit vision.** Many of the participants were aware that LU does not have a formal vision statement, but it was the academicians who voiced the strongest desire to have some form of future-oriented direction. Joseph, a professor, compared the vision of the former administration under Dr. Broome to that of the current administration. In attempting to describe the vision for LU, Joseph said:

This was a whole lot clearer under the [Broome] administration than the current administration. Under the [Broome] administration, it was “integration of faith and learning.” In the last five or so years of the [Broome] administration it was “reclaiming the Christian intellectual tradition.” Both of these things functioned as mantras, you might say, but also were explicit and implicit ways of guiding faculty and staff attention and energies and what not towards identifying what our shared common purpose was. Under the current administration, while there’s lots of ways in which those two pieces continue to happen, I wouldn’t say there’s any kind of one organizing phrase, principle, mantra, etc. that provides that same kind of distillation of institutional mission. And so, there’s at the very least, I think, for many of us the *appearance* that there isn’t as tightly organized of an organizational vision. Now, I think there’s lots of things that the current administration holds dear, holds valuable, thinks are important, but all of that is so diffuse and so diverse that it’s harder to hold in view and to be able to recite as a part of our regular routine and planning and assessing and things.

Joseph recounted a time when there were clearer mantras and themes that guided him and the rest of LU's campus community. According to Joseph, these statements served to make activity and direction more perspicuous at the time for both faculty and staff. While Joseph does not question that the current administration has good intentions and noble ideals, he said that without guiding statements, a certain level of independence exists for all others when it comes to purpose and direction.

While Joseph and other academicians are hungry for a more tangible vision, benefits were also pointed out in working within this wider margin. Joseph explained further:

On the one hand, it's kind of liberating because I feel like I have the space to operate in my little corner of the university in ways that seem to be consistent with this kind of diffuse and hard to define vision that we currently have. But on the other hand, it makes it harder to sort through on an institutional priority level, or I should say as a unit priority level, right? What are the things we ought to be focusing on now?

Another professor, Timothy, echoed the same sentiment in relation to working without a formal vision statement: "I think my perception is that [it] gives me some freedom in my area to have some control over the vision." As both of these faculty members see it, there are both advantages and disadvantages to a lack of a clearly articulated vision. Both feel they have more latitude in their work, more creativity, and, perhaps, less accountability. At the same time, however, they recognize this may lead to inconsistencies with the university's idea of what they should be doing as employees.

When asked if a lack of a formal vision impeded his work, Oscar, an academic dean, said, "I guess I would just say that I think the lack of formal vision necessarily drives you to focus on day-to-day operations, as opposed to how you would change for the future." Oscar said that without a clear vision, the default tends to be a more present-focused rather than future-directed mode of operation. Furthermore, Oscar said that vision should be constantly renewed and recast

because, over time, employees grow older and become more set in their ways; meanwhile, new employees enter the system without the same memories or experiences connected to initial vision casting. Without a well-defined vision, academicians like these expressed that they are working in a more present-focused, open-ended mindset, many times having to work off of assumptions as to the direction and prioritization of their work.

**Theme 8: Leaders are envisioning and preparing for financially challenging times ahead.** Another theme that was evident within the LU participants was a foreboding sense of financial uncertainty for the field of higher education, in general, and, specifically, for LU as a faith-based institution. Eleven of the 18 participants mentioned the difficulty LU would likely face in the future due to rising costs of higher education and the increasing pressure from the government to compromise on faith-based convictions.

Most of the concern centered around the uncertain future that LU would face, specifically, as a Christian institution. Members of every layer (i.e., senior-level executives to entry-level employees) and in every department (i.e., academics, enrollment, and student affairs) expressed this same kind of disquiet. Joseph, a professor, put it most plainly when asked where he saw LU in the future: “Um, there’s two options: It’s either going to be closed, or it’s going to be flourishing.” His concerns, like others, revolve around the financial sustainability of LU in the face of several different mounting threats to faith-based, liberal arts colleges and universities.

One concern for these types of institutions is that tuition continues to rapidly outpace inflation in the U.S. As price points for HEIs continue to steadily—and steeply—climb, university leaders are questioning how to keep their doors open and attract students as costs continue to rise and state and federal funding shifts and shrinks. This is a significant threat to existence, especially for tuition-driven, faith-based institutions like Lux University. Moreover,

many senior-level executives and mid-level managers at LU foresee increased government scrutinization based on discordances over certain issues like offering benefits to same-sex partners of employees. If a faith-based institution chooses not to offer these benefits based on their religious convictions, the penalty could one day be a severance of federal funding. Trent, a senior-level executive, filtered this through the lens of vision at LU:

I don't think the future of private Christian higher education is clear. I think it's going to change. You take away state and/or federal aid, it's going to change, and it's going to change drastically, and so I would separate longevity, organizational structure, from vision or vision statement. I would tie it directly to our mission and what we're doing. That's not going to change. Who we are, our core values, the level of education that we provide will remain consistent.

Trent suggests that the reason an explicit vision has not been established for LU is that, given the rapidly evolving nature of higher education and specifically that for private Christian education, "in some ways, I think, it would be foolish to say this is the target we're going for." Lux University is living in anticipation of this threat, but not only that, LU is making preparations to survive in this event.

Every senior-executive leader participant was keenly aware of this issue and mentioned initiatives already in place to seek alternative forms of funding if federal funds were to be cut off. Doug, Vice-President for Enrollment Management, reported that the president had pressed him and the other executive council members to find alternative sources of funding in the event that federal funding is repealed, enrollment declines, or if public institutions of higher education are made even more economical. President Lucas has forecasted the challenging times ahead and with that kind of vision, alternatives for financial sustainability are being evaluated. This demonstrates a forward-thinking mindset, rather than a come-what-may attitude that may seem apparent in an organization that has not articulated an explicit vision. The identity of LU—its

mission and values—remains at the heart of this conversation. Leadership is adamant about remaining steady in their creed and convictions no matter what the future may hold.

### **Cross-Case Analysis**

While an individual case study may produce significant insights and findings, the use of multicase studies is typically viewed as more compelling than single case studies as they offer additional data that can be compared (Herriott & Firestone, 1983; Yin, 2003). By comparing both Veritas University and Lux University in relation to vision communication, additional themes emerged common to both universities.

**Theme 1: There is variation in how participants perceived and understood their institution's vision; most often it was seen as a practical plan rather than an aspirational image.** The majority of participants at both VU and LU had a good grasp of the concept of organizational vision and why it is beneficial to have one. There was variation in how participants perceived vision, however. Some saw vision as a simple tool for guidance and unification, like Serena, an entry-level employee at VU, who said vision is used “to get everybody on the same page.” Marcus, a mid-level manager at VU, said vision is used to “provide a picture, a snapshot, a direction. It's a tool used to get people to buy in.” Mitch, a mid-level manager at LU, said vision is “a clear direction of where you want to head, where you want to go, what's the future look like.” Teresa, a mid-level manager at VU, said that “you can get by without [vision], but it brings a lot of meaning.”

Some participants provided a more philosophical reflection on vision, like Brandon, a professor at VU, who said, “Vision will impact your character as an organization and character will impact your vision as an organization.” Geoff, dean at VU, said that vision establishes a unity of purpose. Geoff said, “we each come to this place with our own hopes and dreams, but

we need to find a collective vision that we can all gather around and work towards or else we find ourselves working at cross purposes.”

Others saw vision as a guide that keeps the organization within the proper lanes of business and operation, like Bill, Dean of the School of Business at VU, who said that vision should provide the rails that guide resource acquisition, allocation, and determination. Ultimately, it helps the organization decide what it wants to be and, consequently, what it does not want to be. Barry, the provost at LU, said that vision keeps the organization focused and prevents it from being sidetracked, or experiencing mission drift. Eva, a mid-level manager at LU, said she saw vision as a lens by which the organization should make all major decisions. For example, if her school wanted to add a new academic program, leaders should ensure, first, that it fits within the scope of the university’s vision.

Some participants connected vision to a source of intrinsic motivation, like Courtney, an entry-level enrollment employee at VU, who said, “I think the great benefit of having a strong vision . . . is morale. I think morale is so important. It helps your sustainability. It helps you want to stay somewhere longer. It makes you want to work hard.” Vision was also credited for being an impetus for spiritual direction. LU employees Jake and Heather referenced the Biblical Proverb: “Without a vision, people will perish.” “An organization without a vision, without a direction, we tend to stagnate. And then, unfortunately, you know, it’s been said. . . You either go forward or backward, but you tend to go backward,” said Jake.

The purpose behind organizational vision was generally understood by the participants in this study. Most understood it as future-oriented (therefore, separating it from mission). There was a recognition of its need to not only guide daily decisions and actions of the university, but some saw it as that extra spark of intrinsic and/or spiritual motivation as well. What is

interesting, however, is that visions typically portray an idealized, yet attainable, image of the organization. While future-directed clarity, cohesion, and coordination were often cited as the purpose for organizational vision by the participants, only a small handful of the participants described it as some *idealized* or *aspirational* version of the organization to work towards in order to continuously improve. More often than not, vision was seen as more of a practical plan for the future. For example, at LU, over half of the participants referenced the Master Planning Committee when asked about vision for the university. At VU, those participants that were less clear on vision and demonstrated higher degrees of frustration expressed a strong desire in knowing exactly *how* to fulfill the vision put forth by the institution.

**Theme 2: There is much confusion surrounding what the vision, mission, values, and motto are for the institution.** Even though vision was established as future-oriented by participants, employees often vacillated between the concepts of vision, mission, core values, and the motto in conversation. For example, when asked specific questions about their institution's vision, participants at both institutions would often reference ideas or phrasing contained in other identity statements, such as the mission statement, motto, or the core values. Ultimately, the majority of participants clearly understood the general *identity* of their institution—who it is and what it stands for—but lines were often blurred in participant minds when it came to the distinction between vision, mission, motto, and values. This made vision a very fuzzy topic to discuss.

At Veritas University, not a single employee, including the president, was able to recite the vision statement verbatim when asked. Moreover, there was general confusion between VU's mission statement, vision statement, core values, and motto. Participants presented some conglomeration of all of these when trying to articulate VU's vision. Oftentimes vision, mission,

and the university motto were used interchangeably. However, every participant was able to communicate the essence of the identity contained in all of these organizational statements—that VU is a university committed to providing a high-quality education intertwined with its Christian values.

One mid-level manager in student affairs, Teresa, said she is not so much concerned if she or others can recite the vision, but what is important to her is the ideas that comprise the vision. Samuel, a senior-level executive, acknowledged employees' inability to recite the vision, asserting:

While people can't recite [the vision] to you, they can tell you what it's all about. I would much rather have people who can tell you from a visceral level what our vision is than necessarily just recite the words.

Perhaps this is not accidental. As President Vines put it:

I want so almost desperately for people's innate understanding of the purpose they find in their work to be, which is certainly an element of vision, I want it to be so authentic that I am probably always extra cautious about trying to give them the words to use.

What President Vines is saying is that he, too, accepts the fact that VU employees may not be able to readily recite the vision verbatim. He wants them to define it for themselves, in a sense, and that allows them to have some freedom so that it can become more authentic to the individual in their role.

At LU, no one was able to articulate exactly what future LU was specifically aiming for because there was no coalescence of vision. Many iterated that LU's vision is "to continue" to stay true to its mission. There was strong, widespread support and understanding of LU's more present-focused mission and core values. This meant that the concept of vision was an especially nebulous subject to talk about with LU participants compared to those at VU; the conversation almost always came back to mission and/or core values. Many felt the university's mission and



core values sufficiently served as the vision in the sense that they were confident that LU will maintain these convictions and values no matter what the future may hold.

**Theme 3: The president is the primary source of vision communication, particularly through his own form of ritual communication.** Another theme that emerged at both institutions is that participants primarily attributed vision communication to the university president. More specifically, vision communication was attributed to the president's use of a ritual form of communication. Ritual communication is a type of recurrent communication that is said to do more than simply transmit a message; it is intended to share value and solidify membership within an organization (Carey, 1989).

At VU, President Vines personally sends what he calls Monday Mission emails each week to the members of the campus community. These emails contain two parts. In the first part, President Vines relays a short vignette of a person of VU and connects it back to VU's identity or purpose. "We're a very story-rich institution and we tend to talk in a lot of parables here," said President Vines. The second part of the email includes the mission statement, vision statement, and core values of the university. Typically, said President Vines, these stories will contain a specific reference to an element found in the mission, vision, or core values. This email series has served as an excellent reiteration of VU's identity through storytelling and repetition.

Thirteen of the 18 participants pointed to the Monday Mission emails in explaining how vision was communicated to them in their role. Brady, a mid-level manager in enrollment, said that these emails are a consistent, effective way that points him back to purpose. "For me, it's a sense of nourishment," said Brady. These stories are examples of Veritas's mission and vision lived out, but then it is spelled out—quite literally—just after each of these stories in the inclusion of these formal identity statements. President Vines has been sending out weekly

emails like this for 22 years. He admitted he knows all recipients may not read these emails consistently, but it is one of his chief ways of reiterating Veritas's purpose to its people. Some, in fact, did admit to skipping over the vision/mission/core values at the bottom of each email, and only reading the story. Either way, the emails have become an easily accessible and consistent reminder of who VU is and where it is going. "It seems that the cumulative impact of that over a sustained period of time does kind of, perhaps, influence culture," ruminated President Vines.

At LU, President Lucas facilitates monthly town hall meetings that have served as a primary platform to deliver vision to his campus constituents. Part of the transparency ascribed to President Lucas is traced back to these monthly meetings. Town hall meetings are where LU employees meet for an open forum-style gathering, led by the president. While upcoming events and ongoing initiatives are discussed, much of it is tied back to mission and identity and LU's four core values. These regular meetings serve as a ritual form of communication for President Lucas and others on his executive council to continue to maintain the "transparent culture" that has been established and to connect LU's decision-making and activities to its mission and values.

**Theme 4: Vision is communicated in other ways outside of the president.** While the president of each university was cited as the primary source of vision, other channels of vision were also identified. Some employees pointed back to their direct supervisor, most often a vice-present or another senior-level leader. As Marcus, a mid-level enrollment manager at VU, pointed out, oftentimes conversations are had with his supervisor on goals and daily operations, and it is not until he looks back in hindsight to see that it was vision-focused all along. At LU, President Lucas commented that it was the job of every member of the executive council and other key leaders across campus to frequently engage in discussions on mission and vision.

Outside of the president and other senior-level and mid-level leaders, other channels or instances of vision were cited for both campuses. These alternative channels serve to reinforce institutional vision.

***The university website.*** VU's vision statement was located on its "About" webpage, under "Mission, Vision, and Values." On LU's homepage, under "About Us", was a "What We Believe" webpage. No vision statement was included, but a statement on identity, the mission statement, core values, and a statement of faith were presented.

***Marketing departments.*** Both universities house marketing departments which oversee university branding and messaging. Much of this was tied back to university identity, including mission, vision, and values. These departments are often responsible to craft and deliver university-wide themes connected to vision and/or mission that drive messaging throughout the year or particular seasons.

***New employee orientation.*** At VU, President Vines recently made a change in the New Employee Orientation, which allows him about 30 minutes to address new hires on VU's mission, vision, and core values. He also includes a story or two to illustrate these identity statements. New employees are invited a couple of months later after this orientation to a reception in his office along with other vice presidents where senior leaders can follow up with new employees and have another avenue to reinforce VU's identity as outlined in his New Employee Orientation address.

***Staff retreats.*** For enrollment employees at both universities, it was mentioned that summers are often used for retreats and annual training sessions where vision and mission are recast and reviewed. Brady, a mid-level enrollment manager at VU, said:

The summer time is a really great time to hit the reset button on what we are doing, why we are doing it, what are some of the things that need to be tweaked, [and] how can we go back to our core competencies.

The cyclical nature of higher education, with summer typically being the break in between academic cycles, lends itself to an ideal time for many offices to regroup, refresh, and refocus on vision. At LU, the executive council takes a quarterly retreat off campus. According to President Lucas, these retreats provide the team an opportunity for the leadership team to remove themselves from the day-to-day and intentionally think more long-term strategy and vision.

***Banners.*** On the majority of the light poles at LU, I noticed colorful banners that contained one of the four core values, which some saw as the vision.

***Telephone on-hold messaging.*** At LU, the on-hold message when calling in to employees was recorded messaging centered around their four core values.

Vision is reinforced in a variety of ways on both campuses. The president is attributed as the primary voice of vision, with his senior-executive leadership team also iterating this vision and connecting it to the variable functions of their individual areas. Other efforts are being made to communicate vision, such as through the messaging of marketing departments, in new employee orientation, and during staff retreats.

**Theme 5: All participants indicated a feeling of responsibility in sharing the vision with others and expressed it in varying ways.** All participants at both campuses indicated they felt a responsibility to share vision with others in their lines of work. This communication is expressed in differing ways, however.

At VU, Dean Geoff and Dean Bill strive to communicate vision to their respective faculty. Geoff said he ensures that vision is regularly included in faculty discussions, specifically “those more pithy conversations about who we are and why we are and where we are going.”

Likewise, Bill strives to communicate and reinforce vision by publicly recognizing and celebrating the tangible accomplishments of vision along the way. In student affairs, entry-level employee Serena works with student leaders, and she said she endeavored to align her work with the vision and mission of VU. This is exemplified in her work when student leaders come to her for guidance with their student organizations. Serena said she always points them back to their organization's identity statements, so they can remain focused.

At LU, senior-level executives like Trent and Charlie see vision communication through another kind of lens. For example, Trent believes that he and others on the executive council communicate vision through decision-making and policy-setting. Charlie believes vision can be communicated through the hiring process. As he put it, you can strengthen or weaken the organization's mission (or vision) one hire at a time. In enrollment, Harper, an entry-level employee, feels a duty to articulate Lux's vision to prospective students when recruiting in order to set LU apart from competitor institutions. "[Lux] is not cheap," said Harper, "and I want them to know what they're getting with a [Lux] education."

Some employees desire to share the vision, but can either feel too bogged down or too unclear to actually communicate it. Marianne, a mid-level student affairs manager at VU, admitted to feeling too overwhelmed to slow down and share vision with her direct reports. Others, like Heather, an entry-level enrollment employee at LU, also feel responsible to share the vision, but are unclear on what to exactly share. This was especially the case at LU where the vision was less explicit. In trying to articulate the vision, Heather said, "as far as an institution as a whole, where are we going in the future? I don't know if I could...I don't think I could give you an answer."

Overall, employees felt that they do have a responsibility to share their institution's vision with others who work underneath them. Each approach reinforces the vision in a significant way that can be publicly experienced by employees. Ensuring that employees understand the purpose and ultimate goals of their work takes additional thought and time. As VU mid-level enrollment manager Brady put it, he is glad to spend extra time with an employee explaining the reasons behind their work. He welcomes questions and conversations around this, even if it may slow down his own work. "It's really cool when someone does get it, and it clicks for them, and I think if it's received correctly, you're going to get a better employee," Brady said. In the end, a well-communicated—and well-understood—vision is worth the effort.

**Theme 6: Faith is a common ground for a shared vision.** Virtually all participants at both institutions expressed how the university's faith-based values aligned with their own personal values, establishing a firm, common ground between the university and its employees. As Bill, a dean at VU, put it, "a lot of [the vision] is in congruence with my own personal ethos, if you will, or philosophy, value system." Bill went on to say, "I consider the most attractive aspect of my employment at [Veritas], or my association with [Veritas], the fact that I get to live my faith as a part of my vocation." Many other participants expressed similar feelings, like Emma, a faculty member at VU, who said, "I'm able to be who I am openly at work and at home, and there's no difference. And we're a community here, so everything's not great at work all the time, but a bad day at [Veritas] is a good day."

The presidents of both VU and LU expressed the same kind of fidelity. President Lucas said, "I won't preside over [Lux] if it's not faithful, so we don't just have convictions, we have the courage of our convictions." Similarly, President Vines asserted, "I wouldn't even think about being here, or, really, I wouldn't want to spend a whole lot of time at an institution that

didn't have the overtly Christ-centered commitment. We feel a calling to these places." From the top of the organizational chart to the bottom, Christian faith was the common denominator for participants. With this common ground established, a faith-inspired vision gained stronger traction in the hearts and minds of faith-led employees.

**Theme 7: When effective, vision has a powerful, positive influence on employees.**

When vision is perceived to be clear and compelling, employees are able to find deeper meaning in their work and can be driven to higher levels of service to their organization. This effect was found in participants at both VU and LU.

At VU, participants found fulfillment and motivation in their work based on the meaning they found in their institution's vision as a faith-based university. As previously cited, Brady is driven by the *why* behind the work he does; Joan is inspired when she sees students develop over time within the university; and, for Courtney, the vision is a source of motivation to push through particularly challenging days. Others, like Serena and Samuel, have found that portions of the vision statement resonate more strongly with them based on their line of work and on their experience. A portion of VU's vision statement directs the organization's members to be "sensitive to global issues." For Serena, it is important for Christians to "engage the culture that's around us and not be insulated from it." She has used this portion of the vision to inspire her work in influencing students to be more thoughtful and compassionate about global issues. Samuel, as VU's chief strategy officer, also has linked his role to a particular part of the vision statement that seeks to put VU on a world platform. As Samuel sees it, "my job is to take us to the world." By virtue of his position, he is tasked with strategically advancing VU, but it is the vision that has fueled his aspiration to operate with this global mindset.

At Lux University, it cannot be said that the vision was a source of inspiration since there is no explicit vision or defined aspiration for the university. Instead, there was more of a contentment with the resolute continuation in who LU is as defined by its mission and core values. Even so, many are still inspired and compelled by the mission and identity of LU. Like Dave, for example, the mid-level student affairs manager, who said he remained at Lux because of shared values and his belief in the mission:

I have a stressful job, and I'm never off, you know. Always on call or always working on things, and I just . . . it's not possible to get everything done that needs to be done in eight hours while I'm at work. So, there are times where I'm like, "Alright, so, why am I doing this?" [laughter]. And there are times where I think maybe I would like to teach, maybe I'd like to do something else. But I still come back to, especially with our traditional undergraduate students, that the transition that they go to from 18 to 22 or 23 or even 24, you know, is such a . . . the experiences that they have and the relationships that they build and the community that they live in has an opportunity to impact them in a way that cannot happen at any other time of life in any other situation . . . and so I think that's why I'm still here, is that I believe that who we are and who we hope to remain to be is what is needed.

Dave finds meaning in his work and this meaning compels him to remain in his high-demand job. He is able to focus on the impact that his work has on the students of LU, and, for him, that is enough.

**Theme 8: When vision is ineffective, employees are negatively impacted.** When vision was perceived to be ineffective, the result was frustration, primarily from a lack of clarity. Oftentimes, this led to the participant feeling like they should define their own sense of purpose and direction in the absence of an effective vision.

At Veritas University, the struggle with finding inspiration as it is influenced by the institutional vision was primarily found among student affairs participants. Ross, a mid-level manager, admitted that vision provided little inspiration to his work. "My role day-to-day stays pretty much the same no matter what the vision is or who's coming up with it." When it comes to



what drives him in his work outside of the university vision, Ross said, “I would say it’s just my personal beliefs of this is what I’m supposed to be doing. That’s what keeps me moving, but I wouldn’t say it has anything to do with the university.” Vera, a mid-level manager in student affairs, also finds herself dissatisfied from a lack of a clear, cohesive vision, despite a strong desire to be influenced by vision. Vera said she sees a stronger emphasis from administration on operations and managing crises over delivering a unifying, well-communicated vision. “It’s just not been as inspiring as I had hoped,” said Vera.

Student affairs employees were not the only ones at VU who questioned the vision and its application. Employees outside of student affairs at VU shared similar perspectives. Bill, an academic dean, relayed that while he believes VU is committed to its values, he did not agree that the university has articulated a coalescing, aspirational, future-oriented vision. He was not sure an answer currently exists to the question: “What should VU look like in five years?” This was concerning to Bill and something he intends to address as he will soon be transitioning into a broader administrative role in the university. In enrollment, Derek, the multicultural recruiter, had become disillusioned as well. He is supportive of VU’s vision to increase diversity on campus, but he has been frustrated with the lack of communication and resource support surrounding the charge.

At Lux University, without an explicit vision, some participants are having to define and evaluate their own paths toward their own conception of what the future should look like. Like Heather, for example, an entry-level enrollment employee, who said:

If we’re looking at the future . . . because I create my own [vision], like just within my job because I’m working on next year, I personally take it upon myself to evaluate and to plan for the future and create a diverse group of people to help me do that. I’m doing that on my own, though. Not everybody’s going to do that. So, I’m doing that on my own, but I’m also doing that with those values as our foundation and just hope that it’s good.

Heather said she is creating a vision for own role, a vision that is inspired by LU's values, but she is relying on assumptions and "just hopes" it aligns with LU's vision. Another entry-level employee in student affairs at LU, Jake, said that he does not feel that the university considers his department important to the institution. He often feels it is an afterthought and that there is an expectation that it can operate based on status quo. However, Jake has defined "excellence" as one of his core operating values in his department and seeks to apply this to his work, despite what he believes to be the university's perception. In response to how the vision influences his work, Jake said, "I think a lot of it is more like the vision I have for the department, less so the organization, the university's vision." Jake relies on the vision as he sets forth in his own unit, rather than being compelled by some overarching vision of the university. While the mission and values may very well serve to inform the definitions of vision by employees like Jake and Heather, there seems to be more room for interpretation—and assumption—based on the absence of a formalized vision statement.

### **Summary of Themes**

These themes illustrate the unique institutional characteristics and perceptions related to vision and its communication at both Veritas University and Lux University. In sum, vision can be a nebulous concept based on its interchangeability with the concepts of *mission*, *core values*, and *motto*, or based upon a lack of a vision statement altogether. The president at each institution is viewed as the primary source of vision communication, but there were other sources of vision communication, including other senior-level executives, as well as print and electronic mediums. The positive effects of a well-communicated vision were noted, primarily through its Christian-focus based on the participants' shared beliefs and values. Likewise, there were negative impressions when vision was not clear. It is important to understand these emergent themes as

they constitute the context for each university when it comes to organizational vision. Findings from this study's research questions can best be understood within these contexts. These findings are reported in the remainder of this chapter.

### **Findings for the Nature of Vision Communication**

The first research question in this study is: What is the nature of communication used to disseminate vision to constituents across a Christian HEI's campus? By interviewing 36 employees from the top to the bottom of the organizational structures at two Christian university campuses and through the collection of vision-related artifacts, I was able to gain insight into how institutional vision is transmitted to and through individuals in their individual roles. The following are the findings that related to my first research question.

**Finding 1: The president is the primary source of vision communication.** It is very clear at both Veritas University and Lux University that the president is the primary source of vision communication to all employees. The majority of participants immediately traced vision back to the president. Moreover, participants most often accredited receiving this vision through a distinct, ritual form for vision communication enacted by each president.

At Veritas University, vision is regularly communicated through what President Vines calls his Monday Mission emails. For mid-level enrollment manager Brady, these emails have become "a source of nourishment." For professor Emma, it's a source of reiterated purpose. "It's always in front of us," she said.

At Lux University, the President holds monthly town hall meetings where current events, initiatives, and decisions are discussed, oftentimes connected back to mission, vision, and core values. All of the LU participants that mentioned town hall meetings noted how much they appreciate the forums and the sense of transparency they have created. Senior-level executive

Charlie said, “The town hall meetings, I think, have been a welcome addition to the way in which the vision is communicated.” According to President Lucas, these meetings are also ways to highlight and celebrate who LU is. Stories may be told about recent accomplishments of LU’s students, faculty, staff, or administrators. These stories are told in a way that they are framed by LU’s mission and/or core values, said President Lucas. Storytelling like this helps leaders animate the identity and virtues of their organization.

The flatter organizational structures of both VU and LU also offer the president more immediate access to the people throughout the university. “Our president communicates directly with employees and students, and so for certain things there’s not as much of a need for middle administrators to be conduits of information,” espoused Joan, a mid-level manager at VU. At LU, senior-level executive Charlie noted how the previous president he worked for took a more top down approach in communication, but now the new administration under President Lucas is more communal in how information is shared. The structure and size of faith-based institutions like VU and LU allow the presidents to have a greater degree of influence, but it is up to the president, as Charlie pointed out, as to what kind of approach is taken.

**Finding 2: Vision is communicated through other senior-level executives as a secondary means of vision communication.** Senior-executive leaders outside of the president were often attributed as secondary sources of vision communication. These leaders echo, enact, or reinforce institutional vision in their own division’s specific domain of work. Sometimes communication through these leaders is explicit and sometimes it is more implicit. Vice-President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management at VU Harrison said that his role is to help the varying departments in his division interpret the vision according to their work. According to one of Harrison’s direct reports, Marcus, a mid-level enrollment manager, rarely is

the vision statement referenced in meetings, but in hindsight, discussions and strategies are clearly related to vision.

At LU, many mid-level and entry-level participants referenced their vice-president as an additional source of vision outside of the president. Vice-President for Student Affairs Trent noted that he sees his vision communication emanating out of his and the rest of the executive council's policy-setting and decision-making. Charlie, the former provost, stated the way he communicated vision was by the conscientious and strategic hiring of employees who fit the university's identity and goals. As he put it, you will strengthen—or weaken—your vision one hire at a time. These senior-level executives outside of the president serve as secondary voices of vision for their universities. As outlined above, however, there can be varying ways of how these leaders see themselves as communicators of the vision.

**Finding 3: Vision is communicated through other channels as a tertiary means of vision communication.** Vision was found to be communicated in other ways outside of senior-level executives. These alternative channels most often serve to introduce, reiterate, or reinforce institutional vision to employees. Vision was found to be communicated in this manner through:

- The university website
- Marketing department materials and messaging
- Recruitment materials
- New employee orientation sessions
- Staff retreats
- Campus signage
- Telephone on-hold messaging

These tertiary forms of vision communication provide additional channels for leaders to disseminate vision to university constituents. These alternative forms present themselves in print and electronic media (i.e., website, banners, and marketing efforts) or through gatherings where vision may be presented or reemphasized (e.g., new employee orientation and staff retreats). Participants primarily ascribed vision to the president or other senior-level executives, but these means were also identified as sources of vision communication.

**Finding 4: All participants feel responsible in sharing the vision with others.**

Virtually all participants in this study indicated they felt responsible to share vision with others in their spheres of work, be it with subordinates, current students, or prospective students. Vera, a mid-level student affairs manager at VU, feels a great responsibility in sharing vision with her staff, but since Veritas's vision is not clear to her in her role, she feels she has to manufacture that vision for her department herself. Emma, a faculty member at VU, said she feels the responsibility to share vision first and foremost with her students. She said she shares the vision, mission, and core values with them at the beginning of each course, but admittedly refers to vision as "mission." "I mean, that's not correct, but I probably do it just to simplify it, and students seem to understand that," noted Emma. Likewise, Heather, an entry-level employee at LU, oversees a team of student workers and said she incorporates the four core values (LU's version of vision) into every meeting with her students. In their roles of recruitment, Harper at LU and Skyler at VU stated they use organizational vision as an institutional differentiator when working with prospective students.

There were some participants, specifically those in student affairs at VU, who admitted to feeling responsible in sharing vision, but feel so overwhelmed by the busyness of their jobs that they feel they are unable to do so. President Vines acknowledged this kind of challenge for mid-

level and entry-level employees. He understands the difficulty and complexity in their individual roles but believes it is good for everyone to step back and refocus on the larger vision from time to time.

### **Findings for the Impact of Vision Communication**

The second research question in this study is: How does institutional vision impact the work of personnel at various levels (i.e., senior-level, mid-level, and entry-level) within a Christian higher education institution? The following are findings related to how vision influences individuals in their specific roles in the university.

**Finding 1: Faith is a common ground for a shared vision.** Vision is closely connected to organizational identity as it definitively envisions “who” or “what” the organization intends to be. The shared, faith-oriented values found between the university and the employee have established a fundamental common ground for vision to take root. Despite the potential for greater opportunity and pay outside of the university, and despite the professional frustrations that may exist with the institution’s communication surrounding vision, the faith-oriented aspect of the vision is so highly valued that many make sacrifices to remain at an institution that is more closely aligned with their own belief system. With this established value congruence, the faith-focused vision of each institution is readily embraced. While there may be a lack of clarity surrounding the vision for some (i.e., how to put it into practice or where in the university will be in the coming years), the participants broadly supported the visions of their institutions *because* the vision is faith-based. As Geoff, academic dean at VU, put it:

There is a joy in knowing that the university is trying to pull the same direction that I am that I feel like God is . . . I’m just so content working in this kind of environment that feels like it’s aligned with my soul and my hopes.

For Geoff and many others, the Christian component of the institutional vision is something that can easily be rallied behind based upon a shared foundation of convictional beliefs.

**Finding 2: There is a difference between promotion versus practice when it comes to vision.** It is one thing to communicate or promote an idealistic, crowd-unifying vision. It is another to put it into practice in everyday life. The pursuit of a vision can become complex when trying to apply it in the real world. When there is a lack of clarity in what the vision is or how to implement it, there may be negative effects. At VU, the effect was primarily frustration by those who feel isolated and unsupported in managing the growing numbers of the student body. Others questioned the prioritization of resources when it comes to vision-directed activity. President Vines acknowledged the challenge in having a lofty vision. While it can be a high-level source of guidance and motivation, applying it in the everyday workplace is not always clean or clear. If efforts are not made to clarify the vision or specifically address how to put it into practice, there are likely to be negative effects within the workforce.

At VU, participants in all three departments (i.e., academics, enrollment management, and student affairs) felt unclear on two fronts. Some participants did not believe there was a unified vision for where the university was heading. This primarily stemmed from VU's continued enrollment success. Others struggled with how to specifically apply their institution's vision in their work. For those participants who wrestled with these questions, this has led to unanswered questions, a deflated morale, and professional frustration. The problem is not that participants do not understand or support the heart of the vision, but rather there is a lack of clarity in the "pursuit" of that vision, or the communication of *how* to pursue the vision.

At LU, without a formal vision statement, participants often based their notion of the university's vision on assumptions that guided their everyday work. Participants at every level



and in every department equated LU's vision with its mission and/or four core values, typically using phrases like "I think," "I guess," and "I assume." Most of these assumptions, however, were not unfounded. President Lucas said his vision for LU is to more fully embody the mission and four core values of the institution as times goes on. However, there was a lot of guesswork here on the employees' part rather than concrete confidence in the direction of the institution. When there is not a clear, coalescing ideal to offer long-term goals or guidance to all constituents within the institution, people begin charting their own courses or merely focusing on the day-to-day rather than the larger picture. Provost Barry pointed out the dangers of relying too much on assumption in this way, stating this is what leads to mission (or vision) drift.

**Finding 3: Vision, when supported, drives some to higher levels of work, commitment, satisfaction, and fulfillment.** When a vision is effective, it generates enthusiasm and stimulates stakeholders to transform the vision into meaningful activity. This can result in employees going above and beyond the call of duty for the sake of an emotional and/or convictional belief in the work that they are doing in service to a higher calling or purpose. This was evidenced in a variety of ways.

At VU and at LU, most participants cited the institution's Christian identity (and in that, its mission and vision) to be a powerfully compelling force, particularly as it influences affective commitment. As pointed out, some are forgoing greater professional opportunities for the sake of their institution's vision. At VU, mid-level manager Joan ascribed meaning to her work through particular values found in VU's vision statement—values that serve to better the student and prepare them to positively impact the world. Other participants mentioned how vision is a source of motivation—the vision of the institution is what helps employees like Courtney at VU make it through the more challenging days.

Another example of how vision positively impacts employees is found in Chief Strategy Officer Samuel at VU. Samuel views his role as an overseer of vision at Veritas. His job is to work with the various units within the institution to strategically move the institution forward in concerted pursuit of the vision. Samuel finds personal inspiration in the part of VU's vision statement that the world will know and be better for Veritas University. As Samuel put it:

We have to figure out how to take more of [Veritas] to the world. The world needs more of what [Veritas] has to offer. And there are other institutions, so don't think I'm raising us above everybody else, but my job is to take us to the world.

Samuel has connected, personally, to a particular facet of the vision, and one that compels him to towards a grand, world-reaching aspiration. For him, this is far more than launching a new online program or rebranding the institution, he said, but it is applying the vision "in a deeper way in which we can engage the world."

**Finding 4: Vision, when ambiguous, can result in frustration and/or attempts at self-defining purpose and direction.** When vision was perceived to be unclear or ineffective, there was a negative impact on participants. At VU, this was common among many of those participants within student affairs. A decade of consistent growth would signify a movement toward vision-fulfillment for some. However, student affairs participants were most dissatisfied in the lack of interdepartmental unity in working towards that vision. Moreover, without provision for additional personnel to manage the growing student numbers (and without a communicated rationale behind this), many of these participants felt isolated, demotivated, and too busy to think about the larger vision. This has occurred in other areas outside of student affairs, as well. Similar sentiments were shared by Derek, the multicultural recruiter, who has a primary responsibility for increasing the diversity of VU's enrollment but was neither consulted

in the establishment of this vision nor was he given much in the way of resources or direction in how to accomplish it.

At LU, the lack of a clear vision has had a different impact on participants. In the void of vision, some participants are having to define vision for themselves and their own work. While the mission and values were widely accepted, the future was less than clear to most of the participants at LU. For example, an entry-level employee, Heather, said that she feels she has to create her own vision for her work and evaluate that because nobody else is doing it. She uses the core values as her guide and hopes that it is good enough, she said. The academicians at LU expressed the greatest concern about the absence of a formalized vision. While they admitted to enjoying a greater latitude in their work without a coalescing image of what the future should look like for LU, they also sometimes question if their own prioritization of their work is in alignment with the overall vision of the university. Oscar, the academic dean, asserted he would strongly prefer to have an explicit vision statement. Such was the case under the former president, and his use of vision-based themes and mantras helped clarify and focus the work for faculty and staff, as pointed out by another faculty member. Barry, the provost, aptly pointed out that when people start working on assumptions, one day they wake up and realize that everyone is not assuming the same thing any more. When vision is not clear or well-communicated, the resulting frustration, demotivation, and/or lack of direction can be of great detriment to the employee and, ultimately, the organization.

### **Summary**

This study sheds additional light on the “trickle-down effect” of vision communication within the higher education context. The president at each university was found to be the well-spring of institutional vision and was critical to its dissemination. Each president utilized a

different ritual means of communicating vision to constituents across campus. As that vision is filtered throughout the organization, however, it can become cloudier, which can lead to second-guessing, self-interpretations, and even frustration and dissatisfaction. There were many reasons as to why vision was stymied in this way, from employees feeling too busy to pause, reflect, and to think long term, to a lack of explicit vision-based messaging. Even success itself can create challenges in communicating vision to employees as the organization changes over time. Despite the challenges and uncertainties surrounding vision identified in this study, it can be said that culture is strong, Christian commitment is shared, and identity is well-understood at both Veritas University and Lux University. The following chapter offers a concluding summary based on this study, along with recommendations as to how professionals in the field can apply these findings to practice.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

This qualitative, multicase study evaluated both the nature and impact of vision communication within the organizational structures of two faith-based universities. By stratifying personnel at three different levels (i.e., senior-level executive, mid-level manager, and entry-level employee) and categorizing employees by the type of work they do within the university (i.e., academics, enrollment, and student affairs), I was able to identify patterns and themes that emerged from this unique design. Data were collected through interviews conducted with a total of 36 employees between the two case study institutions, Veritas University and Lux University. Additional data artifacts were collected to confirm sources of vision communication. Themes and findings from the study were presented in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I analyze the findings through the lens of previous literature. Furthermore, I identify the limitations of this study, as well as provide recommendations to practitioners in how to apply the findings to the field and make recommendations for further research on the topic at hand.

### Discussion

The two research questions that guided my research are: (1) What is the nature of communication used to disseminate vision to constituents across a Christian higher education institution's (HEIs) campus?, and (b) How does institutional vision impact the work of personnel at various levels within a Christian HEI?

**The nature of vision communication.** The first research question was chosen as a means to identify how vision is communicated on a Christian university's campus. More specifically, through what individuals and through what channels is vision disseminated? The following is a summary of the findings discussed through the literature on the topic of vision communication.

*Concepts of vision.* In order to assess the nature of vision communication, it was imperative to first assess participants' concepts of vision. Most participants demonstrated a general understanding of vision and acknowledged it as a future-oriented plan. Interestingly, however, only a few participants described it as an idealized or aspirational version of the organization to work towards in order to continuously improve. Visions are generally lofty and grandiose in aspiration according to Conger (1989) and Covey (1994). The participants in my study predominantly saw vision as more of a practical plan for the future. Present-oriented institutional mission and values were closely aligned with employees' personal values; however, only a few reported drawing on the future-oriented vision to infuse their work with grandeur or aspiration.

Even though vision was established as future-oriented, participants often vacillated between the concepts of vision, mission, core values, and the motto in conversation. For example, when asked specific questions about their institution's vision, participants would often reference phrasing or ideals contained in another identity statement entirely, consistent with Kantabutra (2008), who asserted the concept of mission and vision are oftentimes used interchangeably. Not only that, but vision is frequently used synonymously with goals, strategy, values, and principles as well (Baetz & Bart, 1996; Kirkpatrick, 2017b). Overall, most participants clearly understood and supported the general identity of their institution, but lines were often blurred in participants' minds when it came to the distinction between vision, mission, motto, and values.

At VU, no one was able to recite the vision verbatim, including the president. While virtually all participants were familiar with VU's overall identity as an institution, most confused the notion of vision with mission and the university's pithy motto. Many of the participants

would cite an element of the mission or motto when directly asked about the vision. However, both President Vines and Chief Strategy Officer Samuel said they were not necessarily surprised by this, stating that they would prefer the people of Veritas to be able to articulate an authentic, visceral response to vision rather than provide some rote recitation of it.

At Lux University (LU), the concept of vision was obfuscated altogether by the absence of a formalized vision statement. The university's mission statement and its four core values were well known by participants, and many perceived these ideals to be the actual vision of Lux. According to President Lucas, LU's mission is a "living mission," and the way he sees it, the vision is to further embody that mission and the four core values as time goes on. Numerous other participants guessed that that was the case, but there was no real concrete sense of confidence here. Discussing the concept of vision with employees led to a lot of assumptions on the employees' part in that the work they are doing is in alignment with the unstated vision of the institution.

It was also found at both institutions that participants viewed vision as more practical than aspirational. Visions are often idealized or aspirational in nature (Conger, 1989; Covey, 1984). Stam et al. (2014) said that vision is the idealized conceptualization of the organization's "collective possible self" (p. 1172), meaning vision can be seen as a picture of the organization's best version of itself. At VU and LU, vision was thought more of a practical plan or a tool for management, rather than an aspirational image. At LU, over half of the participants nodded to the Master Planning Committee as a driver of a vision. This committee had been commissioned to plan the physical space for the university for the next 20-30 years. At VU, participants often confused vision with its other organizational identity statements, and with the sustained growth in enrollment, several participants felt unclear on where the university was headed. This was

primarily the case with student affairs personnel who were having to manage the influx of students without provisions for any additional staff. This lack of communication in how to practically navigate these challenges as a side effect of a vision to “be known and acknowledged worldwide” has created dissatisfaction and frustration for some.

*The president is the primary source.* Senior-level executives are regarded as the chief communication officers of organizational vision, as posited by Argenti (2017). This was supported at both institutions as the two presidents were directly credited with being the primary source of vision for participants, from senior-level executives to entry-level employees. More specifically, vision was tied to a specific form of vision-related communication employed by each president at their institution.

For VU, this comes in the form of President Vines’ Monday Mission emails. These weekly emails are sent to all constituents on Veritas’s campus, and they embody elements of storytelling and repetition. The vignettes, penned by President Vines himself, tell stories of VU stakeholders, and these stories almost always serve to underscore the mission, vision, or core values of the institution. President Vines noted that Veritas is a story-rich institution and that he likes to use parables in sharing the vision. Orr and Bennett (2016) found that the use of storytelling is ideal for evoking emotion among followers and providing them a creative means for sense-making of organizational realities. Domm (2001) and Westley and Mintzberg (1989) highlighted the importance of reinforcing vision through repetition. The emails serve as an easily accessible, recurring mode of reinforcement of VU’s purpose and direction.

At LU, President Lucas has established town hall meetings as a platform to disseminate mission and vision. While, technically, there is no formal vision to rally around, it is in these monthly meetings where mission and values are reinforced and where vision for the future is



shared with the option for attendees to dialogue with leaders. These open forums have created a tremendous sense of transparency in leadership, which is something greatly valued by the people of LU. President Lucas said that he will often use these gatherings as opportunities to recognize an LU individual—a student, a faculty member, a staff member, or an administrator—who has exemplified an aspect of the mission or one of the core values, which is seen by many as the vision at LU.

Both the Monday Mission emails and the town hall meetings serve as a primary platform for vision communication to constituents across each campus. These forms of communication are what Carey (1989) referred to as ritual communication. According to Carey, there are two alternative conceptions of communication—a transmission view of communication and a ritual view. In the more contemporary transmission view of communication, communication is defined as “sending,” “transmitting,” or “giving information to others” (Carey, 1989, p. 2). The purpose of this kind of communication is to transmit “signals or messages over distance for the purpose of control” (Carey, 1989, p. 2). The alternative form of communication, according to Carey, is ritual communication. Ritual communication is the more ancient view and is held in lower esteem by modern scholars compared with the transmission view.

If transmission communication is the dissemination of messaging with the intent to inform and/or control, ritual communication, on the other hand, is associated with “sharing,” “participation,” “association,” “fellowship,” and “the possession of a common faith” (Carey, 1989, p. 5). According to Carey (1989), ritual communication “exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms ‘commonness,’ ‘communion,’ ‘community,’ and ‘communication’” (p. 5). Carey asserted that “a ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting

information but the representation of shared beliefs” (p. 5). Coincidental yet appropriate to this study, both of these views have Christian roots. The transmission view of communication derives its name from the word *transportation*, which in early America was viewed as a means for “the establishment and extension of God’s kingdom on earth” (Carey, 1989, p. 3). According to Carey, the ritual view transcends the transmission view in that “it downplays the role of the sermon . . . in order to highlight the role of the prayer, the chant, and the ceremony” (p. 5).

In light of Carey’s (1989) approach to communication, there is much beneath the surface of President Vines’s Monday Mission emails and President Lucas’s town hall meetings. These ritual forms of communication do more than simply promulgate the university’s vision. These are the platforms by which the greater campus community can be motivated and strengthened on a recurring basis. According to Carey, communication acts such as these serve “not to alter attitudes or change minds but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process” (p. 5). Casting a vision to inspire a university in a competitive marketplace can be just that—a means to invigorate a fragile social process—and these ritual forms of communication employed by each president have established regular channels of communication that maintain/sustain the communities of both Veritas and Lux University.

***Other forms of vision communication.*** Other channels outside of the president were identified as sources of vision communication by participants. Primarily, participants identified vision as verbally communicated through presidential speeches and in meetings and conversations with supervisors, and through text form found in presidential emails, on the university’s website, and in messaging from the marketing department. This supports Bass (1985) and Gioia and Chittipeddi’s (1991) assertion that vision is primarily disseminated through

oral and written form (Bass, 1985; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Furthermore, Bass (1985) noted how leaders motivate followers through speeches and pep talks in a way that encouraged them to pursue the organization's vision. President Vines and President Lucas were both attributed to sharing vision through public speeches and addresses. Some noted this takes place at university-wide convocations or other gatherings. It also occurs through new employee orientation at VU when the president addresses each new set of hires and talks about VU's vision, mission, and core values.

Vision can be communicated and reinforced in nonverbal ways, as well. Nonverbal, vision-reinforcing communication may include dramatic gestures or acts, role modeling, and the way leaders hire, train, and reward employees (Kouzes & Posner, 1987; Locke et al., 1991). Charlie, a senior-level executive at LU, noted how he believed the strongest way to preserve, cultivate, and promote vision was through the hiring process. According to Charlie, the organization can either strengthen or weaken its vision one hire at a time. Selecting, training, and rewarding employees in alignment with vision can be just as powerful as communicating vision from behind a podium.

Other senior-level executives besides the president were identified as sources of vision. This supports Argenti's (2017) assertion that all senior leaders within an organization can be viewed as chief communicators of organizational vision. Senior-level leaders at both institutions were viewed as supplemental sources of vision outside of the president. For example, Trent, a senior-level executive at LU, was referenced as a source of vision by three of his direct reports who participated in this study. According to Trent's perspective, vision is carried out through the decision-making, policy-making, and communication of the executive council.

Outside of the president and other senior-executive leaders, vision was found to be communicated through text form in several ways. This included the institution's website, recruitment materials, and banners. This is in alignment with Abelman et al. (2007) who said that vision within higher education is often found displayed for recruitment and marketing purposes, such as on the university website and in admissions publications.

*The trickle-down effect.* It was not unexpected that employees near the top of the organizational chart were more knowledgeable and equipped to communicate the institution's vision than those found farther down the chart. Regardless, both mid-level managers and entry-level employees play important roles in vision communication and fulfillment. Dynamics unique to each institution, however, served to blur the vision for some of these employees.

*Mid-level managers.* Way et al. (2016) said that mid-level managers determine the level of alignment with the organization's espoused vision and values. As the critical nexus for much of the organization's messaging and strategy, mid-level managers have the opportunity to not only communicate and carry out vision-based initiatives, but they have the ability to delay or harm organizational strategies as well (Guth & MacMillan, 1986; Mayfield et al., 2015). At VU, some of the mid-level managers in student affairs felt too overwhelmed by day-to-day activity to focus on vision. Their source of disconnect and discontentment stemmed from repeated record enrollments over the last decade. While this is an enviable achievement for most colleges and universities, student affairs and other units on VU's campus felt they have not been given much in the way of direction or support in how to manage the influx of students. Several mentioned they have not had an increase in staffing in years, putting increased pressure on those charged with caring for and developing the growing student body. With so many unanswered questions

centered around the vision of the university, this left some mid-level managers unsure of how to pass on that same vision to others.

These professionals' frustration can be supported by Nanus (1992), who said that mid-level managers can experience so much pressure to produce short-term results and efficiency that they are unable to step back and take part in the visioning process. Furthermore, Nanus (1992) also cited a common complaint of mid-level managers that they often feel they are treated as managers rather than being developed into leaders. One of the practical ways Chief Strategy Officer Samuel at VU would like to enhance vision communication at VU is through the creation of a middle manager development program where mid-level managers at all levels could be given the education, training, and cultivation needed to develop leadership skills valued by the university. This would include the ability to step back, see the vision, and ensure efforts are aligned in aim of achieving that vision.

*Entry-level employees.* All of the entry-level employees expressed feeling responsibility in sharing institutional vision with others, even without having direct subordinates. Zaccaro and Banks (2004) said that these types of employees implement and manage change on the front lines. The participants of this study were chosen because of their direct interaction with students by nature of their work (i.e., academics, enrollment, and student affairs). By regularly interacting with customers—or students—it is imperative that entry-level employees be “bought in” to institutional vision. Studies show that when employees are positively affected by vision, the result is not only greater job satisfaction for themselves, but also an enhanced customer satisfaction, as well (Jing et al., 2014). This might translate into greater student satisfaction in the context of the university. Overall, entry-level employees felt a responsibility in communicating

vision to others, be it their students in the classroom, prospective students visiting campus, or within student-led organizations.

**The impact of vision communication.** The second research question in this study sought to understand the effect that institutional vision has on employees at differing levels and in varying roles within the same institution. According to Bennis and Nanus (1985), through vision casting and communication, visionary leaders can harness emotional and spiritual resources within the organization and channel these into greater efforts towards a more desirable future state. Many studies have identified those attributes common to effective vision statements (e.g., brevity, clarity, challenge, and future orientation; Baum et al., 1998). One such researcher, Pekarsky (1998), provided a simpler framework by which to categorize the characteristics of an effective vision that includes a vision that is shared, clear, and compelling. A vision of this kind is agreed upon by all members of the organization, easy to understand, and moves individuals towards an improved state.

**A shared vision.** Pekarsky's (1998) first attribute of an effective vision is that which is shared. A shared vision comes through the communicative processes between leaders and their followers (Alford, 2006; Jing et al., 2014). The result is a mutually-agreed upon direction for the organization: One that is in alignment with everyone's goals. A shared vision can be invoked through transformational leadership in which the leader presents a vision and sense of mission to their employees that is congruent with their employees' values (Bass, 1990; Bass & Riggio, 2006). This transcendent vision is understood not only to serve to further the organization, but to serve to grow the employee as well as they devote additional energy and resources toward accomplishing goals (Bass, 1990; Bass & Riggio, 2006). When goals are accomplished, vision

becomes a value-based motivational compass for stakeholders within an organization, as well as a guide for strategic decision-making for employees.

The shared faith-based values between the institution and the individual was found to be a particularly unifying force in the two case institutions. Many participants said it was the faith-based values that were embodied in the university's mission and vision that attracted them to their institution. Others mentioned how they have passed up on better professional opportunities and increased pay in order to remain at their institution due to this shared creed. Prior research has consistently shown that when values are shared between the employee and the organization, the employee is likely to experience greater job satisfaction and affective commitment (Edwards & Cable, 2009; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Ostroff, Shin, & Kinicki, 2005). At faith-based institutions like VU and LU, where institutional visions are value-based (in this case, inclusive of Christian ideals), participants found it easy and desirable to align themselves with the direction the institution is heading.

Research (Avery, 2004; Carton et al., 2015, Dvir et al., 2004) has demonstrated the positive impact of a shared vision. At institutions like VU and LU, the faith-based identity and ethos was a firm, common ground for many of its employees to accept the university's vision. All of the organizational identity statements found at each institution stringently promoted its Christian worldview. This kind of faith-based identity serves as a powerful gravitational force for employees. It is a specialized identity, different from many other places of work, that draws people in and keeps them there. Despite frustration with the organization and/or its communication or pursuit of vision, these values had a powerful impact on employees. In sum, the participants expressed a strong connection and commitment to their institution, and this was almost always linked to the university's faith-based identity. Institutional vision was seen as an

extension of this identity. The participants enjoyed the freedom to exercise their religious beliefs at work, like Emma, a professor at VU who said, “I’m able to be who I am openly at work and at home, and there’s no difference.”

Recent research in the vein of vision has shifted the focus to followership as the key to effective vision (Avery, 2004; Kohles et al., 2012; Stam et al., 2010). Jing et al. (2014) said that a shared vision produces a type of psychological ownership for all employees, meaning buy-in from across the organization is when vision may gain its greatest traction. On a fundamental level, the vision was shared at both institutions in that participants supported a faith-forward direction or aspiration. The actual vision itself, however, was clearer to some more than others. Despite frustration with incomplete communication of vision or blurrier pictures for what is ahead, participants generally expressed a strong shared sense of faith-based identity, belief, and direction.

***A clear vision.*** Getting multiple employees to envision and pursue the same goal can be a challenging task. That is why clarity of vision is of critical importance. Baum et al. (1998) and Pekarsky (1998) asserted that *clarity* was an attribute of an effective vision. A clear vision is “unambiguous, easy to comprehend, and not convoluted or abstract” (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2008, p. 225). Only a handful of participants across both institutions thought their vision to be clear. The majority of participants had a more difficult time articulating the concept of their university’s vision. This supports Ryu’s (2015) assertion that despite consistent efforts of vision communication, many leaders have found that their employees are not familiar with their organization’s vision and goals. This lack of clarity was pervasive at both VU and LU, but based on two different circumstances.



When vision was not clear to participants, this led to second-guessing, self-interpretations, and even frustration and dissatisfaction. Such was the case at VU for many of the student affairs personnel who felt unsure and unsupported in how to practically manage the success of the institution, or other personnel who questioned the prioritization of resources when vision makes no provision for prioritization. Likewise, at LU, many were less than confident of what exact future the university is striving to achieve. This often led to second-guessing and assumptions. The LU participants wanted to know what was ahead, whether it was the aspirational goal or the practical plan to manifest that vision into a reality, so that they could feel included and secure in contributing personally in that direction.

The dissatisfaction found in the student affairs personnel at Veritas University was not because they did not understand or accept the vision. In fact, participants were generally very supportive of the content and the intent of the vision. What challenged the student affairs personnel and others is the lack of clarity and communication in how their role fit in the pursuit of the institution's vision, or in how resources were being prioritized to implement the vision. The participant responses demonstrated that leaders should work to more thoroughly communicate when it comes to the strategies and tactics surrounding vision. In a study conducted by Kirkpatrick (2017a) that included interviews with 30 organizational leaders on the topic of vision statements, leaders emphasized the importance of communicating not only the vision, but strategy behind the vision and short-term and long-term goals as well. As evidenced by VU, this communication should occur whether the organization is experiencing hardship or whether it is enjoying great success. Vision is often a lofty, idealized version of the reality the organization hopes to create for itself (Conger, 1989; Covey, 1984; Stam et al., 2014). Helping employees understand how to apply vision-pursuing tactics in the day-to-day is "picking the

lock,” as President Vines called it, in figuring out how to apply the ideal within the context of the ever-changing, complex, and uncertain environments in which HEIs operate (Zaccaro & Banks, 2004).

At Lux University, its members wrestle with the clarity of vision for a different reason. For one, the university has not encapsulated its vision in a singular statement, leaving vision to be more diffuse and conversational. One senior-level executive, Trent, said that most leaders on the executive council frequently discuss vision and the future of LU, however, Trent also acknowledged that those same conversations are likely not happening further down the organizational chart. Moreover, the academicians expressed they would prefer to have a clearer distillation of vision. This included, Joseph, a professor, who commented, “we seem to have a whole number of things that we think are important, and we’ve not provided any kind of coalescing image to bring all of that together in a pithy and memorable way.” As Joseph pointed out, LU lacks what Collins and Porras (2008) called a tangible image, or image-based rhetoric, that allows all organizational stakeholders to mentally grasp what it is the organization is aiming for. Without it, people are left with their own conceptions of the future.

***A compelling vision.*** Pekarsky’s (1998) third attribute of an effective vision is that which is compelling. Bligh et al. (2004) said that a compelling message is one that is optimistic and inspirational. When a vision is compelling, it generates enthusiasm and stimulates stakeholders to transform the vision into meaningful activity. This oftentimes results in employees going above and beyond for the sake of an emotional and/or convictional belief in the work that they are doing in service to a higher calling or purpose.

What is most compelling about the visions of VU and LU is their Christian-focus, rooted in the institution’s faith identity. Vision is closely connected to organizational identity (Bük et

al., 2017) as it definitively envisions “who” or “what” the organization intends to be. For virtually all the participants, it was the chief attractional force that drew them to work at their institution and is what keeps them there. As a general rule, affective commitment is positively correlated with value congruence (Ryu, 2015). The distinct Christian values found between institution and employee established an especially high commitment to the institution.

Institutional visions were inspiring to participants in other ways as well. Joan, a mid-level manager at VU, for example, found great meaning in living out VU’s vision of helping students grow and develop over their time at Veritas. For others, certain aspects of the vision resonate more strongly on a personal level. For example, a part of VU’s vision statement directs its members to be “sensitive to global issues.” This part of the vision is particularly appealing to Serena, an entry-level student affairs employee at VU, and it drives her interactions with students to challenge them to be more thoughtful about what is going on in the world. Dave, a mid-level student affairs manager at LU, works a frenetic job with long hours, but when he reflects on the impact he gets to make on students, the meaning in his work compels him to continue to work for the mission and vision. Overall, the participant accounts supported Jing et al.’s (2014) finding that when vision is effective and positively impacts employees, the result is a more engaged, committed, and satisfied workforce.

Ineffective vision is that which is perceived to be unclear or under-communicated. Such was the case at VU where some participants felt there was a lack of communication surrounding vision-based initiatives, like Derek, the entry-level multicultural recruiter. Though he supported the vision cast by President Vines to increase diversity on campus, he was frustrated due to a lack of communication with him in how to practically achieve this goal given his resources. At LU, Jake, an entry-level employee in student affairs, believed the university considered his

department to be an afterthought, given little in the way of attention or resources. Jake shares in the vision and values of the university based on its faith identity, but said he relied more on the vision he feels he must create for his own department rather than the university's overarching vision.

Assessing the visions of Veritas University and Lux University through the lens of Pekarsky's (1998) attributes of an effective vision, the strongest attribute found was the sharedness of vision at both VU and LU based upon commonly held Christian values between the university and the employee. As such, these institutional visions were widely supported. The biggest problem expressed was the clarity of these visions. At VU, participants struggled with the ambiguity in where the institution was heading and expressed frustration over how to manage the day to day of the organization as it pursues its vision. At LU, the lack of clarity came from an inexplicit vision, which left many participants to make their own assumptions about the direction of the institution. Finally, each institution's vision was found to be compelling by most of the participants, primarily due to its faith-focus. Most participants found great satisfaction in working at their institution because of its faith identity; however, some were disillusioned based on a lack of communication relating to how to practically carry out the vision.

### **Limitations**

At both institutions, the concept of vision was often confused with mission, values, and/or institutional motto. As such, the topic of vision was sometimes a nebulous concept to discuss. Participants often referred to components of other organizational identity statements when referring to the vision. Moreover, at Lux University, no formal vision statement exists, and the mission and core values are considered by many to be the institution's vision. I knew that LU

did not have a formal vision statement when I selected it as a case study institution; however, this did mean that vision was a particularly blurry concept for many of the participants to discuss.

Another limitation is that the primary source of data collection in this study relied on participants providing their perception and evaluation of their university's vision and its communication. While I emphasized the confidentiality of the participants' responses, it is possible that participants may have altered their responses out of fear of the consequences. If vision was not perceived to be well-communicated or impactful by participants, they may not have been as candid.

Finally, I have spent over a decade working in Christian higher education. Because of this, bias may have been exhibited in interpreting the data and/or reporting the findings based on pre-existing assumptions about institutional vision or the Christian university context. While this professional experience gives me insight into the unique environment of Christian colleges and universities, it is possible this same experience could have colored my impressions, as well. Measures were taken in the methodology to minimize all of these factors; however, these potential limitations must be accounted for.

## **Recommendations**

This study was motivated by the paucity of prior research on the subject of vision communication once it is transmitted from the top of the organization and “joins the organizational discourse” (Kopaneva, 2013, p. 2). Findings reveal several opportunities that university leaders in the Christian university context can capitalize on in strengthening vision communication, and also key areas of weakness when it comes to disseminating a shared, clear, and compelling vision. In the following, I lay out recommendations for practical application in communicating vision in the university context, followed by suggested avenues for further

research that would be helpful in better understanding vision communication in the higher education context.

**Recommendations for practical application.** Findings from both case studies provide practical implications for higher education leaders and practitioners in how to enhance vision communication. The following are key strategies and tactics that could improve vision understanding and communication in the university context.

*Break the silos.* Colleges and universities are known for their plurality of populations (Bük et al., 2017). It is common to find many departments working in silos on a university campus based on the various natures of work performed. This was pointed out by several participants in this study. Differing departments serve differing functions in these organizations that in many ways resemble small cities. It can be easy for an individual to focus on their own area of work and not crossover with others in other areas. If vision is about moving organizational members in a coordinated effort towards some aspirational goal, senior-level executives might consider establishing regular crossover opportunities for employees across campus. This desire was expressed by several mid-level and entry-level participants at VU, in particular.

Research supports the importance of ensuring that all members of the organization are aware of, understand, and support the vision. Way et al. (2016) said that mid-level managers determine the level of alignment with the organization's espoused vision and values. Dvir et al. (2004) said that all organizational members, including entry-level employees, should be viewed as the owners of organizational vision. Furthermore, a strong link has been established between vision and employee performance (Cole et al., 2006; Jing et al., 2013; Nanus, 1992) and motivation (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996; Nanus 1992). While there are

multiple reasons why these types of crossover events may be beneficial, regular corporate gatherings could be an ideal opportunity to reinforce vision to all constituents, especially in some form of recurring ritual communication.

***Leverage presidential influence.*** The president should recognize that he or she has a tremendous amount of influence with employees on a university's campus. This influence may, perhaps, be greater at smaller, private institutions where organizational structures are flatter in nature. This provides the president with a higher level of accessibility and visibility, and so he or she should be cognizant of opportunities to share vision in both formal and informal settings. As the vision-setter (Hart & Quinn, 1993), the president should make the most of this opportunity to nurture a vision that is shared, clear, and compelling. There is no one correct way to do this and the president should employ communication strategies that cater to his or her own personal style of leadership. Furthermore, both presidents in this study employed a regular form of ritual communication through which vision was consistently communicated. Having this infrastructure for communication provided each president a natural forum for regular discourse on the topic of vision. If viewed through the lens of ritual communication (Carey, 1989), leaders may use these channels to do more than cast vision in one-way communication, but also invite others to personally accept, interpret, and apply vision in their own working contexts.

***Communicate the practical and the aspirational.*** When future direction is not clear, employees may begin grasping for meaning and direction out of frustration and assumption. People want to know the plan for what is ahead, both on a practical level and on an aspirational level. A study conducted by Kirkpatrick (2017a) highlighted the importance of communicating not only the vision but also the strategy, the short-term goals, and the long-term goals associated with pursuing that vision. Casting a vision should involve elements of both the practical and the

aspirational. A practical vision that lacks aspiration can become mechanical. An aspirational vision without a practical plan to back it becomes a pipedream. It is important that vision communication encompasses and addresses both ideals—the aspirational and the practical—so that a greater level of buy-in may occur. This may require focused, individual conversations with employees or entire units that address how their work—at a granular level—carries out the vision of the institution. If people do not know where the organization is headed or how to get there, they may find themselves disenchanted with the organization itself.

*Incorporate a model for vision diffusion.* Institutions like VU and LU could benefit from the application of a more systematic communication of organizational vision. One approach would be to adopt a communication model by which to disseminate vision more strategically. One such communication theory that could be adopted is motivating language theory (MLT; Sullivan, 1988). MLT helps leaders develop a "more versatile strategic leader language repertoire," so that these leaders can "better engage, motivate, build commitment, and create a shared organizational vision with workers, thus improving firm-level performance and quality of work life" (Mayfield et al., 2015, p. 99).

Mayfield et al. (2015) built upon Sullivan's (1998) theory, providing a more directed conceptual framework to operationalize MLT for the communication of vision and values. MLT is comprised of three dimensions: direction-giving, meaning-making, and empathetic language (Mayfield et al., 2015). This model suggests, when communicating vision and values, the use of language that is clear, concise, and goal-oriented (direction-giving); language that elicits buy-in and support (meaning-making); and language that expresses appreciation of and sensitivity to followers (empathetic language; Mayfield et al., 2015). Additionally, Mayfield et al.'s framework



included a feedback process so leaders can better understand stakeholders' "values, aspirations, and needs" (p. 113).

This framework not only "provides a theoretically grounded framework for examining the content of top leaders' strategic vision and values communications," but further suggests a three-step process that would help diffuse the vision throughout the organization (Mayfield et al., 2015, p. 98). In order to diffuse vision through this framework, senior-level leaders, acting as role models, should use motivational language to "inspire favorable stakeholder attitudes and behaviors," and inspire "lower level leaders to adopt [motivational language]" (Mayfield et al., 2015, p. 112). Secondly, Mayfield et al. (2015) recommend using social exchange theory (Blau, 1986; Miles, 2012), so top level leaders can incentivize mid-level managers to use motivational language themselves through intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Third, it is recommended that senior-level executives require all managers within the organization undergo formal motivational language training. Mayfield et al. posited that these three vision-promoting processes would lead to "higher organizational performance and other improved key outcomes, including enhanced stakeholder motivation, work relations, and quality of work life" (p. 115). In the cases of VU and LU where vision was less clear to some mid-level managers and entry-level employees, this kind of communication model could help senior-level executives diffuse vision more effectively by establishing a shared, inspired language for vision-oriented activity and direction, requiring training for all levels of leadership, and through the creation of feedback channels.

***Celebrate along the way.*** It is critical that leaders recognize instances when vision is being properly pursued and/or fulfilled by members or departmental units on their campus. Public displays of recognition or celebration help reinforce these activities to the campus community at large. By reinforcing the vision in this celebratory way, employees may be more

inclined to pursue the vision in their own line of work. Recognition or celebration of this kind could signal how vision is valued on campus. This draws attention to vision fulfillment and may generate motivation in others to do the same.

*Further emphasize faith in order to strengthen commitment to vision.* Participants expressed an overwhelming degree of alignment with the university's identity as a faith-based entity. In a lot of ways, these shared values seemed to eclipse challenges or frustrations with vision and its communication. The institution's expression of faith identity is what brought many participants to the university, and it is what keeps them there. Therefore, when trying to establish a shared vision, the aligned faith-based values of the institution and the faith-based values of the individual is a good place to start. Several participants mentioned they have turned down better external opportunities and higher pay in order to remain with their institution. If, as Bennis and Nanus (1985) said, vision has the power to harness the emotional and spiritual resources within the organization, leaders at Christian colleges and universities should recognize this opportunity and work to further emphasize and develop the faith-based work and experiences of employees. This could come in a variety of forms. Perhaps deeper discussions are warranted on vocational calling as it relates to each employee in their role, or perhaps it is in highlighting stories of faith-influenced impact and life change within the university. Maybe it is having purposeful discussions on what it means to demonstrate faith through the individual's specific line of work. Additionally, holding regular events centered around prayer, worship, or fellowship may serve to further entrench and invigorate employees in their service to the institution. For faith-based universities like VU and LU, high value congruence should be acknowledged and capitalized on in a way that strengthens stakeholders' commitment to the institution and, ultimately, its vision.

*Formalize vision.* The purpose of this study is not to prescribe whether an institution should or should not have a vision statement. As this study revealed, in an institution without an explicit statement or collective understanding of vision like at LU, there is a greater margin for guesswork when it comes to how to best contribute to the future-directed goals of the university. According to President Lucas, the vision of LU is to further embody the institution's mission and core values. This was especially clear to him as he foresees significant financial threats for LU and other faith-based universities like it. However, this was less than clear to mid-level managers and entry-level employees. Most guessed the vision of LU to be the mission and four core values, but without any real sense of confidence. Whether an institution has an actual vision statement or not, research supports the benefits of the communication of a vision to all constituents of an organization.

Some of the participants believed that repetitive, guiding themes or mantras would help focus attention and efforts towards the university's vision. Such was the case, pointed out by some academicians, under the previous president. When vision is clear, the organization, the employee, and the customer are all likely to experience greater benefits. There is no question that President Lucas and the other LU participants are familiar with and deeply committed to LU's Christian mission. However, while vision statements serve to complement mission, they transcend them in aspiration (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009). Alford (2006) pointed out that "vision translates mission into action . . . and allows institutions to successfully confront the future" (p. xii). In an organization living in such clear anticipation of financial jeopardy, perhaps a more explicitly articulated vision would help supply employees with more motivation, inspiration, and confidence in working towards LU's vision of itself as a thriving Christian university.

**Recommendations for future research.** Findings from this study point towards additional opportunities for research on the topic of vision communication in the university context. The following are recommendations for future research.

1. An effective vision has been linked to higher overall profitability for the organization (Baum et al., 1998; Gulati et al., 2016). How does this translate for colleges and universities? Additional research may connect the efficacy of an institution's communication of vision to overall financial profitability, ranking, enrollment, or other key quantifiable metrics of success.
2. This study could be replicated at other institutions outside of the faith-based context. For example, larger secular institutions could also be explored in the same way and may yield unique results. It would be especially interesting to assess the impact of vision at a public institution where faith-based values are not as widely shared.
3. While vision can exist outside of a vision statement, sometimes this can become an ungainly concept to grasp. This was especially true for employees towards the bottom of the organizational chart at Lux University. Abelman and Dalessandro (2009) found that only about one third of all 4-year HEIs had a written vision statement. It is recommended that further research explore how universities with a formalized vision statement compare to those without a formalized vision statement. Some dynamics to explore between the two scenarios could include enrollment trends, profitability, student satisfaction, employee tenure, reputation and ranking, and so on.
4. It is also recommended that vision communication be explored through

the dynamic of leadership transition. At Veritas University, the president and many of the senior-level executive council were reportedly just a few years away from retirement. Concern was expressed by some over what is next for VU. Longitudinal research on how vision is communicated in the final years of a leadership's administration, during the transition period, and in the startup years of a new leadership would help us better understand how vision communication is affected in this critical process of transition.

5. There is no one prescribed way to communicate vision (Kantabutra, 2008); however, there could be much learned from those institutions that are being positively impacted by strong vision communication. It is recommended that further case study research explore vision-driven institutions that are considered exemplars in the field. Knowing more about the nature of vision communication at these institutions may shed additional light on best practices to enacting an effective vision.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the nature and impact of vision communication throughout the context of a Christian university. More specifically, how do employees receive, perceive, and communicate vision at varying levels within the university context? The study also endeavored to reveal how employees are influenced by vision communication in their specific roles. This is important for leaders to understand; as Fairhurst (1993) put it, "it may be precisely . . . in the discourse between leaders and members where a vision succeeds or fails" (p. 366).

Findings revealed that vision was a concept often equated with institutional mission, values, and motto. These concepts were indistinct in many participants' minds. Furthermore,

vision communication was predominantly attributed to the president at both case study institutions—Veritas University and Lux University. Vision became cloudier to participants lower in the organizational chart for reasons specific to each institution. At VU, some participants believed that the future of the university was unclear based on its growth and expressed frustration in managing the day-to-day challenges of a changing university. At LU, vision was unclear due to the lack of an explicit vision statement, leaving it to be more diffuse and conversational; as a result, many participants relied on the assumption that the vision is a continuation of the work they are currently doing.

Based on my findings, I am able to offer recommendations for practitioners and avenues for further research. Recommendations for practice include: recognizing and leveraging positional power the president has as the chief communicator of vision; ensuring that vision-related communication addresses both the aspirational and the practical facets of vision pursuit; establishing an infrastructure for regular vision communication; and, for faith-based institutions, emphasizing the connection of the institution's faith-identity to its vision in order to further inspire employees to commit to the vision. Recommendations for further study include: application of this study to nonsectarian institutional contexts; exploration of other metrics or dimensions in how organizations without a formal vision statement compare to those with a more explicit vision; and a longitudinal study of vision communication and its impact over the course of a transition in presidential leadership.

## References

- Aaltio, I., & Heilmann, P. (2012). Case study as a methodological approach. In A. J. Mills, G. Durepos, & E. Wiebe (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of case study research* (pp. 1-15). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Abelman, R. (2012). The verbiage of vision: Mission and identity in theologically conservative Catholic colleges and universities. *The Catholic Social Science Review*, 17, 83-108.  
doi:10.5840/cssr2012178
- Abelman, R. (2014). Reviewing and revising the institutional vision of U.S. higher education. *Review of Communication Research*, 2(1), 30-67. Retrieved from  
<https://www.rcommunicationr.org/index.php/articles/volume2-2014/finish/13-volume-2-2014/21-abelman-r-2014-institutional-vision-of-u-s-higher-education>
- Abelman, R., Atkin, D., Dalessandro, A., Snyder-Shuy, S., & Janstova, P. (2007). The trickle-down effect of institutional vision: Vision statements and academic advising. *NACADA Journal*, 27(1), 4-21. Retrieved from  
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4a6e/686feab3da9ca83f460d1ce187dec2c746f4.pdf>
- Abelman, R., & Dalessandro, A. (2008). An assessment of the institutional vision of Catholic colleges and universities. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 12(2), 221-254. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1005831.pdf>
- Abelman, R., & Dalessandro, A. (2009). Institutional vision in Christian higher education: A comparison of ACCU, ELCA, and CCCU institutions. *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, 18, 84-119. doi:10.1080/10656210902751792
- Abelman, R., & Molina, A. (2006). Institutional vision and academic advising. *NACADA Journal*, 26(2), 5-12. doi:10.12930/0271-9517-26.2.5

- Alford, D. M. (2006). *A comparison of organizational vision management in most and least effective Christian colleges and universities* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Digital Dissertations & Theses Global. (3224163)
- Alvesson, M. (2002). *Understanding organizational culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Argenti, P. A. (2017). Strategic communication in the c-suite. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 54(2), 146-160. doi:10.1177/2329488416687053
- Avery, G. C. (2004). *Understanding leadership*. London, England: Sage.
- Avolio, B. J., Waldman, D. A., & Einstein, W. O. (1988). Transformational leadership in a management game simulation. *Group & Organization Studies*, 13(1), 59-80. doi:10.1177/105960118801300109
- Awamleh, R., & Gardner, W. L. (1999). Perceptions of leader charisma and effectiveness: The effects of vision content, delivery, and organizational performance. *Leadership Quarterly*, 10, 345-373. doi:10.1016/S1048-9843(99)00022-3
- Baetz, M. C., & Bart, C. K. (1996). Developing mission statements which work. *Long Range Planning*, 29, 526-533. doi:10.1016/0024-6301(96)00044-1
- Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Bass, B. M. (1990). From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision. In T. J. McMahon (Ed.), *Leadership Classics*, 256-272. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Bass, B. M., Avolio, B. J., Jung, D. I., & Berson, Y. (2003). Predicting unit performance by assessing transformational and transactional leadership. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 81, 827-832. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.88.2.207



- Bass, B. M., & Riggio, R. E. (2006). *Transformational leadership* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Baum, J. R., Locke, E. A., & Kirkpatrick, S. A. (1998). A longitudinal study of the relation of vision and vision communication to venture growth in entrepreneurial firms. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 83*(1), 43-54. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.83.1.43
- Bennis, W., & Nanus, B. (1985). *Leaders: The strategies for taking charge*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Berlew, D. E. (1974). Leadership and organizational excitement. In D. A. Kolb, I. M. Rubin, & J. M. McIntyre (Eds.), *Organizational psychology: A book of readings* (2nd ed., pp. 265-278). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Blau, P. M. (1986). *Exchange and power in social life*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction.
- Bligh, M. C., Kohles, J. C., & Meindl, J. R. (2004). Changing the language of leadership: A methodological investigation of President Bush and the crisis of 9/11. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 83*(1), 43-54. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.89.3.562
- Boyd, A. M., Clark, J. S., & Kent, S. S. (2017). Strategic thinking in pharmacy. *American Journal of Health-Systems Pharmacy, 74*, 1103-1108. doi:10.2146/ajhp160356
- Brewer, G. A. (2005). In the eye of the storm: Frontline supervisors and federal agency performance. *Journal of Public Administration and Theory, 15*, 505-527. doi:10.1093/jopart/mui031
- Brinkmann, S. (2013). *Qualitative interviewing: Understanding qualitative research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bryman, A. (1992). *Charisma & leadership in organizations*. London, England: Sage.

- Bük, T. B., Atakan-Duman, S., & Pasamehmetoglu, A. (2017). The university identity: Communication of identity themes. *International Business and Accounting Research Journal*, 1(2), 55-70. Retrieved from <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/45224>
- Carey, J. W. (1989). *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society*. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.
- Carton, A. M. (2018). "I'm not mopping the floors, I'm putting a man on the moon": How NASA leaders enhanced the meaningfulness of work by changing the meaning of work. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 63(2), 323-369. doi:10.1177/0001839217713748
- Carton, A. M., Murphy, C., & Clark, J. R. (2015). A (blurry) vision of the future: How leader rhetoric about ultimate goals influences performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 1015(1), 10-36. doi:10.5465/amj.2012.0101
- CCCU 2017 Annual Report (n.d.). Retrieved from [https://www.cccu.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2017-Annual-Report\\_WEB\\_pages.pdf](https://www.cccu.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2017-Annual-Report_WEB_pages.pdf)
- CCCU Membership Application (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.cccu.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Membership-Application-2018.pdf>
- Cesareo, F. (2007). Can Catholic colleges exist today? Challenges to religious identity in the midst of pluralism. *Journal of New England Higher Education*, 22(20), 17-18. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ793927.pdf>
- Codreanu, A. (2016). A VUCA action framework for a VUCA environment: Leadership challenges and solutions. *Journal of Defense Resources Management*, 7(2), 31-38. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316967836>

- Cole, M. S., Harris, S. G., & Bernerth, J. B. (2006). Exploring the implications of vision, appropriateness, and execution of organizational change. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 27, 352-367. doi:10.1108/01437730610677963
- Collins, J. C., & Porras, J. I. (2008). Organizational vision and visionary organizations. *California Management Review*, 50(2), 117-137. doi:10.2307/41166438
- Conger, J. A. (1989). *The charismatic leader: Behind the mystique of exceptional leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Conger, J. A., & Kanungo, R. N. (1987). Toward a behavioral theory of charismatic leadership in organizational settings. *Academy of Management Review*, 12(4), 637-647. doi:10.2307/258069
- Covey, S. R. (1994). *First things first: To live, to love, to learn, to leave a legacy*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Daft, R. L., & Weick, K. E. (1984). Toward a model of organizations as interpretation systems. *Academy of Management Review*, 9, 284-295. doi:10.5465/AMR.1984.4277657
- Darkow, I. (2015). The involvement of middle management in strategy development -- Development and implementation of a foresight-based approach. *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, 101, 10-24. doi:10.1016/j.techfore.2013.12.002
- Domm, D. R. (2001). Strategic vision: Sustaining employee commitment. *Business Strategy Review*, 12(4), 39-48. doi:10.1111/1467-8616.00191

- Dosen, A. J. (2012). Maintaining ecclesial identity in Christian higher education: Some thoughts from the Catholic experience. *Christian Higher Education, 11*(1), 28-43.  
doi:10.1080/15363759.2012.624444
- Dvir, T., Kass, N., & Shamir, B. (2004). The emotional bond: Vision and organizational commitment among high-tech employees. *Journal of Organizational Change Management, 17*(2), 126-143. doi:10.1108/09534810410530575
- Edwards, J. R., & Cable, D. M. (2009). The value of value congruence. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 94*, 654-677. doi:10.1037/a0014891
- Emrich, C. G., Brower, H. H., Feldman, J. J., & Garland, H. (2001). Images in words: Presidential rhetoric, charisma, and greatness. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 46*, 527-557. Retrieved from <https://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~soc186/AssignedReadings/Emrich-ImageUse.pdf>
- Fairhurst, G. T. (1993). Echoes of vision: When the rest of the organization talks total quality. *Management Communication Quarterly, 6*, 331-371. doi:10.1177/0893318993006004001
- Falsey, T. A. (1989). *Corporate philosophies and mission statements: A survey and guide for corporate communicators and management*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Fiol, C. M. (2002). Capitalizing on paradox: The role of language in transforming organizational identities. *Organization Science, 13*(6), 653-666. doi:10.1287/orsc.13.6.653.502
- Flory, R. W. (2002). Intentional change and the maintenance of mission: The impact of adult education programs on school mission at two Evangelical colleges. *Review of Religious Research, 43*(4), 349-368. doi:10.2307/3512003
- Fugazzotto, S. J. (2009). Mission statements, physical space, and strategy in higher education. *Innovative Higher Education, 34*(5), 285-298. doi:10.1007/s10755-009-9118-z

- Gentles, S. J., Charles, C., Ploeg, J., & McKibbin, K. (2015). Sampling in qualitative research: Insights from an overview of the methods literature. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(11), 1772-1789. Retrieved from [http://www.miguelangelmartinez.net/IMG/pdf/2015\\_Gentles\\_Sampling\\_Qualitative\\_Research\\_\\_TQR.pdf](http://www.miguelangelmartinez.net/IMG/pdf/2015_Gentles_Sampling_Qualitative_Research__TQR.pdf)
- Gioia, D. A., & Chittipeddi, K. (1991). Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation. *Strategic Management Journal*, 12(6), 433-448. doi:10.1002/smj.4250120604
- Gioia, D. A., & Thomas, J. B. (1996). Identity image and issue interpretation: Sense making during strategic change in academia. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 370-403. doi:10.2307/2393936
- Glanzer, P. L. (2013). Dispersing the light: The status of Christian higher education around the globe. *Christian Scholar's Review*, 42(4), 321-341. Retrieved from <https://go.gale.com/ps/anonymous?id=GALE%7CA349114551&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=00172251&p=AONE&sw=w>
- Goldberg, A. (2018, March 15). A tragic abandonment of identity: The secularization of America's religious colleges and universities. *The Witherspoon Institute Public Discourse*. Retrieved from <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2018/03/20951/>
- Gray, A., Phillips, V., & Normand, C. (1996). The costs of turnover: Evidence from the British National Health Service. *Health Policy*, 38, 117-128. doi:10.1016/0168-8510(96)00854-8
- Guba, E. G. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *Educational Communication and Technology Journal*, 19, 75-91. Retrieved from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/8d32/23ed3c76cc4066ec894b5aca51c4f4028b7e.pdf>

- Gulati, R., Mikhail, O., Morgan, R. O., & Sittig, D. F. (2016). Vision statement quality and organizational performance in U.S. hospitals. *Journal of Healthcare Management, 61*(5), 335-350. doi:10.1097/00115514-201609000-00007
- Guth, W. D., & MacMillan, I. C. (1986). Strategy implementation versus middle management self-interest. *Strategic Management Journal, 7*, 313-327. doi:10.1002/smj.4250070403
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. (2002). What do you call people with visions? The role of vision, mission, and goals in school leadership and improvement. In K. Leithwood & P. Hallinger (Eds.), *Second international handbook of educational leadership and administration* (pp. 9-40). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer.
- Harrison, H., Birks, M., Franklin, R., & Mills, J. (2017, January). Case study research: Foundations and methodological orientations. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 18*(1). Retrieved from <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2655/4079#g33>
- Hart, S. L., & Quinn, R. E. (1993). Roles executives play: CEOs, behavioral complexity, and firm performance. *Human Relations, 46*, 543-574. doi:10.1177/001872679304600501
- Hemmings, B., & Hill, D. (2014). Challenges to Christian higher education at a time of increasing emphasis on research. *Christian Higher Education, 13*(3), 183-198. doi:10.1080/15363759.2014.904653
- Henck, A. F. (2011). Walking the tightrope: Christian colleges and universities in a time of change. *Christian Higher Education, 10*, 196-214. doi:10.1080/15363759.2011.577711
- House, R. J. (1977). A 1976 theory of charismatic leadership. In J. T. McMahon (Ed.), *Leadership Classics* (pp. 237-255). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press.
- Husserl, E. (2013). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology* (2nd ed.). New

- York, NY: Routledge.
- James, K., & Lahti, K. (2011). Organizational vision and system influences on employee inspiration and organizational performance. *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 20(2), 108-120. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8691.2011.00595.x
- Jing, F. F., Avery, G. C., & Bergsteiner, H. (2014). Enhancing performance in small professional firms through vision communication and sharing. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 31, 599-620. doi:10.1007/s10490-013-9345-9
- Johansen, M., & Hawes, D. P. (2016). The effect of the tasks middle managers perform on organizational performance. *Public Administration Quarterly*, 40(3), 589-616. Retrieved from <https://spaef.org/article/1695/Single-article:The-Effect-Of-The-Tasks-Middle-Managers-Perform-On-Organizational-Performance>
- Jones, R. D. (2013). University challenges: Negotiating secularism and religiosity in higher education institutions. *Environment and Planning*, 46, 1983-1999. doi:10.1068/a46290
- Jones, S. R., Torres, V., & Arminio, J. (2006). *Negotiating the complexities of qualitative research in higher education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kantabutra, S. (2008). What do we know about vision? *The Journal of Applied Business Research*, 24(2), 127-138. doi:10.19030/jabr.v24i2.1359
- Kantabutra, S. (2010). Negative vision effect in Thai retail stores. *Singapore Management Review*, 32(1), 1-27. Retrieved from <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Negative+vision+effect+in+Thai+retail+stores.-a0215408841>
- Kirkpatrick, S. A. (2017a). Toward a grounded theory: A qualitative study of vision statement development. *Journal of Management Policy and Practice*, 18(1), 87-101. Retrieved from [http://www.na-businesspress.com/JMPP/KirkpatrickSA\\_Web18\\_1\\_.pdf](http://www.na-businesspress.com/JMPP/KirkpatrickSA_Web18_1_.pdf)

- Kirkpatrick, S. A. (2017b). Understanding the role of vision, mission, and values in the HPT model. *Performance Improvement*, 56(3), 6-14. doi:10.1002/pfi.21689
- Kirkpatrick, S. A., & Locke, E. A. (1996). Direct and indirect effects of three core charismatic leadership components on performance and attitudes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 81, 36-51. doi:0.1037/0021-9010.81.1.36
- Kohles, J. C., Bligh, M. C., & Carsten, M. K. (2012). A follower-centric approach to the vision integration process. *Leadership Quarterly*, 23, 476-487.  
doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2011.12.002
- Kopaneva, I. M. (2013). *Employee constructions of organizational mission and vision* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Digital Dissertations & Theses Global. (3587126)
- Kosmutzky, A., & Krucken, G. (2015). Sameness and difference: Analyzing institutional and organizational specificities of universities through mission statements. *International Studies of Management & Organization*, 45(2), 137-149.  
doi:10.1080/00208825.2015.1006013
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (1987). *The leadership challenge: How to get extraordinary things done in organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2002). *The leadership challenge* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kristof-Brown, A. L., Zimmerman, R. D., & Johnson, E. C. (2005). Consequences of individual's work fit: A meta-analysis of person-job, person-organization, person-group, and person-supervisor fit. *Personnel Psychology*, 58, 281-342.  
doi:10.1111/j.1744-6570.2005.00672.x
- Lacey, R. (1986). *Ford: The men and the machine*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.



- Letizia, A. J. (2017). Using strategic planning to create the public good for higher education in volatile times. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, 13(2), 144-164. Retrieved from [http://ijpe.penpublishing.net/makale\\_indir/243](http://ijpe.penpublishing.net/makale_indir/243)
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Locke, E. A., Kirkpatrick, S., Wheeler, J. K., Schneider, J., Niles, K., Goldstein, H. . . . Chah, D. O. (1991). *The essence of leadership*. New York, NY: Lexington Books.
- Lucey, J., Bateman, N., & Hines, P. (2005). Why major lean transitions have not been sustained. *Management Services*, 49(2), 9-13. Retrieved from <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/18011838/why-major-lean-transitions-have-not-been-sustained>
- Mahurin, R. (2016, May 4). *Communicating your vision to campus and beyond*. Retrieved from <http://www.stamats.com/stamats-insights/write-a-plan/2016/communicating-vision-campus-beyond>
- Marsden, G. M. (2001). *The Soul of the American university: From Protestant establishment to established non-belief*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Mayfield, J., Mayfield, M., & Sharbrough, W. C. (2015). Strategic vision and values in top leaders' communications: Motivating language at a higher level. *International Journal of Business Communication*, 52(1), 97-121. doi:10.1177/2329488414560282
- Melrose, S. (2009). Naturalistic generalization. In A. J. Mills, G. Durepos, & E. Wiebe (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of case study research* (pp. 599-601). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miles, J. A. (2012). *Management and organization theory: A Jossey-Bass reader* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Mintzberg, H. (1979). *The structuring of organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Mio, J. S., Riggio, R. E., Levin, S. S., & Reese, R. (2005). Presidential leadership and charisma: The effects of metaphor. *Leadership Quarterly*, *16*, 287-294. Retrieved from [https://cognitivepolitics.ucr.edu/events/mio/mio\\_etal\\_2005.pdf](https://cognitivepolitics.ucr.edu/events/mio/mio_etal_2005.pdf)
- Moehler, A. (2011, November 8). A tale of two colleges. Retrieved from <http://www.albertmoehler.com/2011/11/08/a-tale-of-two-colleges/>
- Morphew, C. C., & Hartley, M. (2006). Mission statements: Thematic analysis of rhetoric across institutional type. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *77*(3), 456-471.  
doi:10.1353/jhe.2006.0025
- Nanus, B. (1992). *Visionary leadership: Creating a compelling sense of direction for your organization*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Nanus, B., & Dobbs, S. M. (1999). *Leaders who make a difference: Essential strategies for meeting the nonprofit challenge*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2018, November). *Number of degree-granting postsecondary institutions and enrollment in these institutions, by enrollment size, control, and classification of institution: Fall 2017*. Retrieved from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18\\_317.40.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_317.40.asp)
- Nite, C., Singer, J. N., & Cunningham, G. B. (2013). Addressing competing logics between the mission of a religious university and the demands of intercollegiate athletics. *Sports Management Review*, *16*, 465-476. doi:10.1016/j.smr.2013.03.002
- O'Connell, D., Hickerson, K., & Pillutla, A. (2011). Organizational visioning: An integrative review. *Group & Organization Management*, *36*(1), 103-125.  
doi:10.1177/1059601110390999

- Oertel, S., & Söll, M. (2017). Universities between traditional forces and modern demands: The role of imprinting on the missions of German universities. *Higher Education, 73*, 1-18. doi:10.1007/s10734-016-0013-0
- Orr, K., & Bennett, M. (2016). Relational leadership, storytelling, and narratives: Practices of local government chief executives. *Public Administration Review, 77*(4), 515-527. doi:10.1111/puar.12680
- Ostroff, C., Shin, Y., & Kinicki, A. J. (2005). Multiple perspectives of value congruence: Relationships between value congruence and employee attitudes. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 26*, 591-623. doi:10.1002/job.333
- Özdem, G. (2011). An analysis of the mission and vision statements on the strategic plans of higher education institutions. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice, 11*(4), 1887-1894. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ962679.pdf>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pearson, A. E. (1989). Six basics for general managers. *Harvard Business Review, 67*(4), 94-101. Retrieved from <https://hbr.org/1989/07/six-basics-for-general-managers>
- Pekarsky, D. (1998). Vision and education. In H. Marantz (Ed.), *Judaism and education* (pp. 277-291). Beersheva, Israel: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press.
- Raes, A., Heijltjes, M., Glunk, U., & Roe, R. (2011). The interface of the top management team and middle managers: A process model. *Academy of Management Review, 36*(1), 102-126. doi:10.5465/AMR.2011.55662566

- Rainey, H. G. (2003). *Understanding and managing public organizations* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Reed-Lewis, J. (1986). *Minding your middle: Linking middle management to organizational change* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Digital Dissertations & Theses Global. (MR14123)
- Reicher, S., Haslam, S. A., & Hopkins, N. (2005). Social identity and the dynamics of leadership: Leaders and followers as collaborative agents in the transformation of social reality. *Leadership Quarterly*, *16*, 547-568. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2005.06.007
- Rogers, E. M. (2003). *Diffusion of innovations* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Free Press.
- Ryu, G. (2015). The missing link of value congruence and its consequences: The mediating role of employees' acceptance of organizational vision. *Public Personnel Management*, *44*(4), 473-495. doi:10.1177/0091026015592233
- Saldaña, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of qualitative research: Understanding qualitative research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Schaubroeck, J., Lam, S. S. K., & Cha, S. E. (2007). Embracing transformational leadership: Team values and the impact of leader behavior on team performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *92*, 1020-1030. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.92.4.1020
- Schwandt, T. A. (2001). *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (2nd Rev. ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

- Seo, M., & Creed, E. D. (2002). Institutional contradictions, praxis and institutional change: A dialectical perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, 27(2), 222-247.  
doi:10.5465/AMR.2002.6588004
- Sheaffer, Z., Landau, D., & Drori, I. (2008). Mission statement and performance: An evidence of “coming of age.” *Organization Development Journal*, 26(2), 49-62. Retrieved from <https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/mission-statement-and-performance-an-evidence-of-coming-of-age>
- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22, 63-75. doi:10.3233/EFI-2004-22201
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Stam, D., Lord, R. G., van Knippenberg, D. & Wisse, B. (2014). An image of who we might become: Vision communication, possible selves, and vision pursuit. *Organization Science*, 25(4), 1172-1194. doi:10.1287/orsc.2013.0891
- Stam, D., van Knippenberg, D., & Wisse, B. (2010). Focusing on followers: The role of regulatory focus and possible selves in visionary leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 21, 457-468. doi:10.1016/j.leaqua.2010.03.009
- Steiner, L., Sundstrom, A. C., & Sammalisto, K. (2013). An analytical model for university identity and reputation strategy work. *Higher Education*, 65(4), 401-415.  
doi:10.1007/s10734-012-9552-1
- Stensaker, B. (2015). Organizational identity as a concept for understanding university dynamics. *Higher Education*, 69(1), 103-115. doi:10.1007/s10734-014-9763-8
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and*

- procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sullivan, J. (1988). Three roles of language in motivation theory. *Academy of Management Review*, *13*, 104-115. doi:10.5465/AMR.1988.4306798
- Taylor, J. S., & Machado-Taylor, M. L. (2010). Leading strategic change in higher education: The need for a paradigm shift toward visionary leadership. *At the Interface: Probing the Boundaries*, *72*, 167-194. Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/262684211>
- Vedder, R. (2017, August 29). Seven challenges facing higher education. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ccap/2017/08/29/seven-challenges-facing-higher-education/#602ffcc73180>
- Vision. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster's online dictionary*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/vision>
- Vision, Mission & Values. (n.d.). In *Mercedes-Benz*. Retrieved from <https://cac.mercedes-benz.com/about-us/vision-mission-and-values/>
- Wang, C. L., & Rafiq, M. (2009). Organizational diversity and shared vision: Resolving the paradox of exploratory and exploitative learning. *European Journal of Innovation Management*, *12*(1), 86-101. doi:10.1108/14601060910928184
- Way, S. A., Simons, T., Leroy, H., & Tuleja, E. A. (2016). What is in it for me? Middle manager behavioral integrity and performance. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *150*(3), 765-777. doi:10.1007/s10551-016-3204-9
- Weeks, M., Winningham, K. J., & Winningham, B. (2017). Looking for mature faith in the missions of religiously affiliated institutions of higher education. *Christian Higher Education*, *16*(3), 159-171. doi:10.1080/15363759.2016.1250682

- Westley, F., & Mintzberg, H. (1989). Visionary leadership and strategic management. *Strategic Management Journal*, 10, 17-32. doi:10.1002/smj.4250100704
- Wolcott, H. (2009). *Writing up qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Woodrow, J. (2004). Institutional image: Secular and marketing influences on Christian higher education. *Christian Higher Education*, 3, 115-125. doi:10.1080/15363750490438967
- Woodrow, J. (2006). Institutional mission: The soul of Christian higher education. *Christian Higher Education*, 5, 313-327. doi:10.1080/15363750600860778
- Wylie, P. (2017). Memorandum of misunderstanding? Public accountability and the University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus, 2004-2017. *BC Studies*, 195, 65-96.  
<https://doi.org/10.14288/bcs.v0i195.188974>
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Yin, R. K. (2011). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Zaccaro, S. J. (2001). *The nature of executive leadership: A conceptual and empirical analysis of success*. Washington, D.C.: APA Books.
- Zaccaro, S. J., & Banks, D. (2004). Leader visioning and adaptability: Bridging the gap between research and practice on developing the ability to manage change. *Human Resource Management*, 43(4), 367-380. doi:10.1002/hrm.20030

## Appendix A: Participants

Table 1

*Veritas University Participants*

Participant	Role	Employee Level	Department
Victor Vines	President	Senior-level Executive	n/a
Harrison	Vice-President	Senior-level Executive	Enrollment/ Student Affairs
Samuel	Chief Strategy Officer	Senior-level Executive	n/a
Geoff	Dean	Mid-level Manager	Academics
Bill	Dean	Mid-level Manager	Academics
Joan	Associate Provost	Mid-level Manager	Academics
Marcus	Assistant Vice-President	Mid-level Manager	Enrollment
Brady	Assistant Dean	Mid-level Manager	Enrollment
Vera	Assistant Vice-President	Mid-level Manager	Student Affairs
Marianne	Assistant Vice President	Mid-level Manager	Student Affairs
Ross	Assistant Director	Mid-level Manager	Student Affairs
Brandon	Professor	Entry-level Employee	Academics
Emma	Professor	Entry-level Employee	Academics
Teresa	Assistant Director	Entry-level Employee	Student Affairs
Serena	Coordinator	Entry-level Employee	Student Affairs
Skyler	Assistant Director	Entry-level Employee	Enrollment
Derek	Admissions Counselor	Entry-level Employee	Enrollment
Courtney	Admissions Counselor	Entry-level Employee	Enrollment



Table 2

*Lux University Participants*

Participant	Role	Employee Level	Department
Lyle Lucas	President	Senior-level Executive	President
Barry	Provost	Senior-level Executive	Academics
Doug	Vice-President	Senior-level Executive	Enrollment
Trent	Vice-President	Senior-level Executive	Student Affairs
Charlie	Special Assistant to the President; former Provost	Senior-level Executive	n/a
Oscar	Dean	Mid-level Manager	Academics
Timothy	Department Chair	Mid-level Manager	Academics
Joseph	Professor	Mid-level Manager	Academics
Charlotte	Regional Campus Director	Mid-level Manager	Academics
Eva	Regional Campus Director	Mid-level Manager	Academics
Mitch	Assistant Vice-President	Mid-level Manager	Enrollment
Dave	Dean of Students	Mid-level Manager	Student Affairs
Otis	Director	Mid-level Manager	Student Affairs
Meredith	Admissions Counselor	Entry-level Employee	Enrollment
Harper	Admissions Counselor	Entry-level Employee	Enrollment
Heather	Coordinator of Visits & Special Events	Entry-level Employee	Enrollment
Jake	Director	Entry-level Employee	Student Affairs
Cora	Resident Director	Entry-level Employee	Student Affairs

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

I performed semistructured interviews using the following baseline of questioning to explore the nature and impact of vision communication on a Christian university campus.

### **Pre-Interview Questions**

- A. What is your title?
- B. What is your job description?
- C. How long have you worked at the university?

### **Initial Impressions of Vision**

- 1. What would you say is the purpose of organizational vision?
- 2. What can you tell me about your university's vision?
- 3. Can you recite the vision statement?
- 4. How would you access the vision statement if you needed it?

### **The Nature of Vision Communication**

- 5. Describe how vision is communicated to you in your role?
- 6. Through what *channels/individuals* do you receive this communication, specifically?
- 7. How *often* is vision communicated to you?
- 8. How effective is your supervisor's communication of institutional vision to you in your role?
- 9. How could university leaders improve the way they communicate the vision of the institution?
- 10. What sense of responsibility, if any, do you feel in sharing this vision with others?
- 11. What other instances of vision are communicated to employees on campus (e.g., university website, campus signage, events, HR documents, and recruitment materials)?

12. In what ways, if any, is the university's vision celebrated?

### **The Impact of Vision Communication**

13. In what ways, if any, does this vision *influence* your work?

14. How important to you is the faith-component of your university's vision statement?

15. To what level does institutional vision *align* with your own values and beliefs?

16. How much input do you feel you have in the future direction of the university?

17. Describe how *clear* the university's vision is to you in your role.

18. How well/easily are you able to envision the future it speaks of?

19. Describe how the university's vision *inspires* you in your work.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

20. Is there anything else you would like to add about the impact the university's vision has had on you?

21. Who else on campus might you recommend I follow up with in regards to your university's vision?

## Appendix C: IRB Approval

**ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY**  
*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885

April 9, 2019



Kyle Brantley

Department of Organizational Leadership

Abilene Christian University

Dear Kyle,

**On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "A Look at Vision: Perspectives throughout the Organizational Hierarchy of the Christian University Context",**

(IRB# 19-033 ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs