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The Living Mission: Mission Statements Evidenced in the Student Experience

Darek D. Hollis

Eastern Illinois University

## **Abstract**

Mission statements are thought to be documents that hold the core purposes of an organization. While several studies have examined the various aspects of higher education mission statements, few have explored how the themes within mission statements are transferred to those the institutions it serves, its students. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews with graduating senior students at a mid-sized, Midwest institution to examine whether or not the missional themes were evident in and valuable to the students' experience. The result of the study found that the missional themes were in general present and valuable in the students' experience. The research also revealed that the value of themes and what the students discussed as valuable about their experiences were largely connected to their individual development in alignment with Chickering and Reisser's 1993 student development theory. This study concluded with a discussion regarding the core importance of student development in the university experience and how this must be considered in the mission and future of higher education.

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Jalen Faith, my coworker, classmate, and friend who was one of the biggest supports I had through this journey. I am where I am today because of his encouragement and friendship.

I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my parents Daryl and Ginger Hollis who have been nonstop supports in my life. I am where I am today because of their amazing love and support. I couldn't have asked for better parents and am so grateful to God for his undeserved blessing in giving me my parents. Thank you, Dad and Mom, for always pointing me to God, believing in me, and loving me. I love you.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Higher education is facing an identity crisis as “cultural, demographic, and economic forces are changing the world around and on campuses, challenging long-held beliefs and upending traditions” (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019, p. 2). Universities and colleges have historically represented themselves as a marketplace of ideas. In more recent history they are championed as a pathway for social mobility (Fischer, 2019; Kelderman, 2020). Today, the value of higher education is being called into question (Fischer, 2018, Mangan, 2019). “To remain effective, vital, and true to the academy’s mission, college leaders must strive to improve – even as debate rages about exactly what improvement looks like” (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2019, p. 3). Improvement is met with a full set of challenges.

The top three results listed in a Google search on “top issues in higher education” include articles covering a range of topics from financial and funding concerns to issues of student success, assessment and accountability (Craig, 2017; Twenge et al., 2018; Wiley Education Services, 2018). Wiley Education Services (2018) cited data reflecting continued declines in overall college enrollments between the fall 2015 and 2017 terms. They also noted that there was approximately a 2% decline in high school graduates between 2016 and 2017 (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education as cited in Wiley Education Services, 2018). In addition, State funding for higher education has continued to decrease and this decrease in funding, combined with lower enrollment numbers, has resulted in serious financial difficulties. Wiley Education Services (2018) further attributed the lack of funding as part of the reason that U.S. universities are slipping in education rankings around the world.

Craig (2017) addressed issues of college completion rates, job attainment, accountability, assessment and funding strategies, and value outcomes. He argued that despite the current political climate, these issues are bipartisan and that addressing them are important to establishing the value of higher education for the U.S. public. The idea that students who enter college make it to graduation, equipped with the skills necessary to meet employment requirements, seems to be an uncontested idea. Yet Craig points out that matriculation is not happening. He notes that amid discussions about the increasing cost of higher education, improving completion rates would generate more college graduates than improving access. He also raised the concern about the “unprecedented unemployment and underemployment rates for new college graduates” (Craig, 2017, para. 7) and stated colleges need to do more to ensure students are prepared for current entry-level positions. Furthermore, Craig recommended improving assessment and changing in federal funding that “align institutions’ interests with student outcomes” (Craig, 2017, para. 13) as a way to hold institutions accountable to meet the outcomes they claim to produce.

The New York Times article by Twenge et al. (2018) included excerpts from the Higher Ed Leaders Forum which brought together various education leaders across the country, including university administrators, professors, and business leaders. These authors’ statements reflect the value higher education can provide but speak to the various ways that current institutions are struggling and/or failing to meet that potential for value. They discuss challenges of “operating in a relentlessly difficult fiscal environment” (Twenge et al., 2018, para. 13), disagreements over the importance of four-year college vs. career preparation, “anti-intellectualism” (Twenge et al., 2018, para. 29) brought about by the current social media culture, issues of “food and/or housing insecurit[ies]” (Twenge et al., 2018, para. 36) among

students, “affordability” (Twenge et al., 2018, para. 42), “college completion crisis” (Twenge et al., 2018, para. 53), “accountability” (Twenge et al., 2018, para. 57), and building student “character” (Twenge et al., 2018, para. 64).

Under the weight of the various issues addressed above, many institutions are rushing to implement new initiatives, attract and retain students, and find new sources of income. Yet despite universities’ efforts, critics argue that that the university is losing touch with its central purpose to educate and develop the next generation of global citizens (Busteed & Auter, 2018, Eggenschwiler, 2019). In evaluating the enrollment decline, Rhyneer (2019) chastised current institutions for holding to these old ideals. She tells colleges that they need to change, developing new programs that provide what the consumers of higher education, students and their families, want. She bluntly stated that today, “most families view college as a transaction, not as a time of transformation” (para. 3). Furthermore, she points out that the current business model of higher education is a not helping. She provided no hope of a solution stating that “[t]here’s a Nobel Prize in economics for the person who figures it out” (Rhyneer, 2019, para. 5). In response to Rhyneer’s assessment, Eggenschwiler (2019) maintained that the desire and quest for knowledge is alive and reflected in the activities of her literature students. Rather, she proposes that the university is the only place that provides the space for this kind of thinking. She argues that the current consumer focused public “has a hard time seeing the value of things not to be bought and sold...[education] is about being exposed to things that feel foreign, uncomfortable – things that we never even knew to ask for” (Eggenschwiler, 2019, paras.6-7).

Despite Eggenschwiler’s traditional view of the university’s purpose, studies confirm the overwhelming reason today’s students pursue higher education is to get a job (Gallup, 2016; Eagan et al, 2016; Fishman, 2015; Gallup, 2015). Meanwhile, governmental policies and

legislation are placing increasing pressure on universities to fulfill a promise of social mobility through increased college attainment and completion and improved student and employment outcomes (Fischer, 2019; Kelderman, 2020). In a recent article in the Chronicle of Higher education, Kelderman (2020) references President Obama's 2009 challenge to the nation that "[i]n a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a prerequisite" (para. 3). But what is the knowledge that constructs a good education? That continues to be up for debate as "[s]ome higher education experts insist that the purpose of higher education is to train students for jobs, while others argue it is to prepare them more broadly for meaningful, engaged lives" (Busteed & Auter, 2018, pg. 1).

In 2002 Flower referenced a recent study that identified 72% of students attend college to get a better job. A survey released in 2015 by New America's Education Policy Program found that this percentage had grown to 91% (Fishman, 2015). In fact, it was the leading reason prospective students were choosing to attend college and was ranked to be very important by 7 out of 10 students. This growing statistic presents a compelling argument for proponents who argue to shift the colleges' focus to workforce training. Whether or not advocates for a workforce mission of the modern university are correct, a quick survey of current four-year institutions' mission statements finds little mention of increased career prospects. Instead, universities' mission statements continue to reflect the ideals echoed in Pavlenko's and Bojan's (2014) statement that "universities should... – educate graduates to be critically minded, innovative, analytical, internationally adept, with good communication and team skills" (p. 95).

## **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to assess students' perspectives on how the University's mission statement is revealed through their experience. Given that the mission statement of the university ought to magnify the values of the institution and guide its operation (Taylor and Morpew, 2006), it would be expected that elements of the mission statement will be reflected in the experience and personal development of the student. This study explored students' understanding and consideration to the ways in which the idealized concepts expressed in the University's mission statement have impacted their experience at the University. Further, this study helped to add to the literature on the importance of mission statement in higher education as well as value that students attribute to their college experience.

## **Research Questions**

This study explored the following research questions.

R1. Are the key concepts outlined in a mid-size midwestern University's mission statement evident in the individual student's experience?

R2. Do students recognize the concepts outlined in a mid-size midwestern University's mission statement as useful in creating their experience?

## **Significance of the Study**

While mission statements have been heavily studied via content analysis, there are few studies that explore students' understanding of the mission statement or the specific impact it has in their experience on campus. This study adds to the empirical research on mission statements and helps to provide understanding to administration of the relevance of the current mission statement for today's student. Given the rising debate regarding the purpose of higher education and the cry for change moving forward, this study provides better insight into what students are

currently experiencing through their education and how it ties the current ideals voiced in the mission statement. This study provided understanding into the purpose of the university from the perspective of those it seeks to serve and provided guidance and considerations for the institution moving forward.

### **Limitations of Study**

This study used a qualitative method to conduct interviews at a single midsize Midwestern university and thus is limited in scope and generalization. Only a small selection of six students were interviewed for this study out of an enrollment of over 7,000. While the study did incorporate students from all the major undergraduate colleges at the university, there were still many voices not reflected in this study. Further, this study was conducted at a single university and as multiple studies have shown (Taylor and Morpew, 2006; Sidhu 2003) mission statements do vary from institution to institution. To account for these limitations the themes pulled from the mission statement and incorporated into the interview questions were themes expected to be associated with higher education in general and not explicitly related to the university used in this study. Furthermore, previous research and student development theory was used in analyzing the results of this study.

### **Definitions of Terms**

**Mission Statements.** Mission statements have been used in studies to incorporate mission statements, vision statements, diversity statements and other similar statements. For this study, *mission statement* will simply apply to the written text following the heading mission statement published on the university's main website. This study will not assess text labeled as vision statement, diversity statement or similar headings. It will also not incorporate any other publication of the university mission statement found anywhere other than the main website.

**Summary**

The value of the university continues to come under fire given the current issues regarding cost, enrollment, and student debt. The reason students are going to college is to get a better job, but institutions maintain a mission to educate the student and develop citizens that can effectively participate in the world. This study explored the university mission statement and the way it is impacting students' experiences and the relevance it holds for today's students.

## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature

This section explores previous research done concerning university mission statements. It examines what the research says about the value of mission statements in higher education and some of the historic and current purposes attributed to higher education. It also provides a brief reflection on student development theory that is important framework used in understanding the student experience. This section provides a foundation of the current research related to this topic and reveals the some of the gaps this study fills.

#### Value of the Mission Statement

The value, effectiveness and actual usefulness of mission statements in higher education still stands debated (Chunoo & Osteen, 2016; Davis, Ruhe, Lee, & Rajadhyaksha, 2007; Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015; Lake & Mrozinki, 2011; Morpew & Hartley, 2006). They can be criticized as lofty ideals without providing any real direction for the institution or championed as purposeful and inspiring contributors to student learning outcomes and campus identity.

In their broad analysis of institutional mission statement, Morpew and Hartley (2006) determined that the literature holds three differing camps regarding the value and use of these statements. The first camp holds that mission statements are used to frame an institution's identity and purpose by informing decisions, inspiring staff, and communicating values (Morpew & Hartley, 2006). The second camp maintains that these statements are too generalized to provide actual direction and identity (Morpew & Hartley, 2006). The final camp maintains that mission statements are purposefully general, constructed that way to highlight elements that validate the institution as a legitimate university; essentially, they exist because



they are supposed to exist and represent the greater purpose of higher education rather than an individual school's goals (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Given these options, Morphew and Hartley conducted a content analysis of 300 university mission statements divided among varying Carnegie Classifications to explore how mission statements varied in content and to what extent that reflected the institutional type. The study found that there were indeed common elements held across various institutional types but while concepts may be repeated, they were expressed differently at different institutions. Morphew and Hartley (2006) proposed that these findings possibly indicated that mission statements are more a reflection of the institution, rather than a steering force. They concluded that mission statements stand more as a symbolic artifact used to communicate values of the institution to interested or involved parties and thus are used politically to gain and maintain support (Morphew & Hartley, 2006).

Davis et al. (2007) also recognized the confusion and mixed results of previous studies to determine the usefulness of university mission statements. They referenced Sidhu's (2003) study that "identified two potential problems with previous mission statement studies: (1) the lack of agreement on the core components of mission statements and (2) the variance in business context is not taken into consideration (Drucker, 1994)" (as cited in Davis et al., 2007, p. 100). Davis et al. (2007) also noted that statements alone were not enough, but that according to Trevino and Nelson (2003) "the values must be 'baked into' the culture with various reinforcement methods" (as cited in Davis et al., 2007, p. 100).

To overcome these issues, Davis et al. (2007) focused their study on mission statements represented in higher education and examined the core element of character development and how students perceived these elements to be reinforced. Their study surveyed 762 senior business students from 16 different institutions (nine religious, seven secular). Maccoby's (1976

as cited in Davis et al., 2007) 19 trait scale was used to identify value traits and a factor analysis was used to reduce the scale to five factors: heart traits, importance of learning, independence, confidence, and openness. Their results were mixed and found that significant relationships between traits and mission varied based on trait factor and institutional type. Religious schools had higher perceived value of heart traits and confidence which are tied closely to their missions while secular schools held higher perceived value on importance of learning as is consistent with secular schools' missions. Independence and openness traits were not found to be perceived values in secular institutions though they were traits highlighted in the mission statements of those schools.

As a result, Davis et al. (2007) concluded that their results partially evidenced claims that mission statements provide defining purpose. They did raise the point that students may have already valued those specific traits and thus been drawn to the institution, but argued that regardless, the school mission created "a context that values the character traits proscribed by the statement" (Davis et al., 2007, p. 109). Finally, Davis et al. (2007) concluded that mission statements do impact organizational behavior as seen by the fact that staff in religious schools were perceived to reinforce character traits more than those in secular schools which matches the difference in emphasis placed on character traits found in these types of schools' mission statements.

Expanding upon Morphey and Hartley's (2006) study, Taylor and Morphey (2010) examined mission statements of 100 baccalaureate liberal arts institutions seeking to understand how mission statements reflect the emphasis of a liberal arts education and explain communicative patterns found in mission statements. Morphey and Hartley (2006) noticed that in many ways mission statements were used as a tool to reflect outwardly traits that represent it

broadly as a capable institution and to attract new students. Thus, Taylor and Morpew (2010) conducted a content analysis on both the college's official mission statement (OMS) and the mission statement portrayed in a collected archive kept by U.S. News and World Report (U.S. News). By this cross-reference they hoped to examine how colleges specifically communicate to prospective students and what the differences may illuminate regarding the utility of mission statements. In their findings 94% of mission statements varied between the OMS and U.S. News with the U.S. News statement having added explanations of themes such as highlighting benefits of a liberal arts education or content, and/or added content such as statements of excellence.

They determined that baccalaureate colleges' OMS were normative descriptions of liberal arts college elements as defined by Breneman (1994). On the other hand, U.S. News mission statements were used to recruit students by presenting concepts that could be interpreted through various lenses of an audience and thus be available with different meaning that could appeal to any individual. In the end they concluded that "mission statements told less about what a college is or wants to be than about how that college seeks to communicate what it is and wants to be with various audiences" (p. 501). Mission statements tend to highlight the common elements that make it a university and hide distinctive qualities so as to appeal to the greatest number of prospective students. The one exception to this seemed to be religious institutions which would emphasize their commitment to faith within in the mission statement.

Lake & Mrozinki, (2011) used a qualitative study to examine the mission statement's "role" and "efficacy" (p. 6) in strategic planning. Their study focused on community colleges and they used a diversified sample of nine community colleges that were known for excellence and innovation in strategic planning. Pre-interview questionnaires and an interview with an executive in charge of strategic planning were used to collect data along with a review of the

college's strategic plan. Lake and Mrozinki identified seven roles of university mission statements: goal clarification, smokescreen for opportunism, description of things as they are, aspirations, mission statement as marketing tool, accreditation requirement, and teambuilding. The roles most commonly referenced by participants were goal clarification, marketing tool, and accreditation requirement.

In exploring these differing roles, Lake and Mrozinki (2011) recognized the competing purposes that mission statements serve in attempting to provide direction within the institution, as well as to communicate outwardly its value as a product and legitimacy as an institution of higher education. They hold that these various roles present two conflicting groups of the mission statements, those that communicate to stakeholders (both internal and external) and those that define the work of the institution. Institutions applying mission statements fall on a continuum between these two divided roles which results in sacrificing of effectiveness of the roles depending on where on the continuum the institution lands. Lake and Mrozinki (2011) expressed that given these conflicting roles it is important for strategic planners to clarify these roles in mission statement development. They call for a clarification of the purpose of mission statements. They mention that maybe institutional goals are common knowledge and widely enough understood that mission statements as goal definers can be done away with and they can be directed to serve as instruments of institutional branding. Whether or not this is true, Lake and Mrozinki (2011) recognized the many resources put into mission statement development, and "clarity regarding its functions will provide planners with the first steps in establishing a framework for mission statement development that can infuse the planning cycle with cohesion and evidence of efficacy" (p. 14).

In their project to Document Effective Educational Practice (*DEEP*), Kuh et al. (2010) recognized “A ‘living’ mission and ‘lived’ educational philosophy” (p. 24) as one of the six identifying marks of *DEEP* institutions. They studied 20 schools that had higher-than-predicted student engagement and graduation rates and found two identifying characteristics of *DEEP* schools’ mission statements: “(1) clearly articulated educational purposes and aspirations, and (2) a coherent, relatively well understood philosophy that guides ‘how we do things here’” (p. 25). They assumed the fact that institutions generally have two missions. Their espoused mission, the written mission, and their enacted mission, what the institution actually does. While there is always some difference between what is written and what is done, the group found that this difference was much smaller between the 20 *DEEP* institutions in comparison to most other schools (Kuh et al., 2010).

*DEEP* schools have one characteristic in common: their mission is alive. Faculty members, administrators, staff, students, and others use it to explain their behavior and to talk about what the institution is, the direction it is heading, and how their work contributes to its goals (Kuh et al., 2010, p. 27).

Further a “widespread use of shared language and commonly understood terms” results in people “describing their school’s mission in a similar way” (Kuh et al., 2010, p. 27).

Tied to the mission is the idea of the college philosophy which is the underlying culture of values and beliefs regarding students’ education that guides the decisions and practice in pursuit of its mission (Kuh et al., 2010). *DEEP* schools’ philosophies all center on student success within the context of their own student population and provide understandable explanation for policies and practice (Kuh et al., 2010). The study recognized that though most staff will agree with the mission, often there are differing opinions on how this is achieved (Kuh

et al., 2010). To prevent such disagreements from causing dissension and inhibiting student success, these schools maintain open dialogue about “(1) balancing the priorities and demands of teaching and research, (2) maintaining a clear, shared sense of mission, and (3) developing pluralistic learning environments for students” (Kuh et al., 2010, p. 59). Further, these schools work to ensure that the institution is acting out what it says and redefining terms or even rewriting the mission statement to match the changing understandings and priorities of the times. In these schools the mission is not empty assertions but a living expression of who the college is and what it does.

### **Civil Responsibility in Mission Statements**

“[T]he university is the Messiah of ... democracy” (Harper, 1899 as cited in Myers, 2014, p. 64) and the “core mission of the university is civic engagement” (Dewey, 1916 as cited in Levesque-Bristol and Cornelius-White, 2012, p. 695). This idea of universities’ missions continues to echo through the conversations of the purpose of higher education. Myers (2014), reflecting on Harper’s (1899) words, stated that “education for citizenship must be seen as a priority” (p. 70) and ought to be reflected in the university’s mission statement and executed throughout university curriculum. Myers is not alone in this view. Braunsberger and Flamm (2013) noted that service-learning programs have been developed as response to criticisms that higher education systems are not doing enough to give back to their communities. In a review of Lownstein’s 2011 article on improvements to academic advising, Sopper (2015) highlighted that general education has always valued the development of well-rounded students which includes the ability to engage in the world at greater levels of reasoning and understanding. He mentioned that the ability to understand one’s place within the larger global context gives students better context and aids in the development of academic skills (Braunsberger and Flamm, 2013).

Flanagan, Faust and Pykett (2013) argued that the welfare of communities depends on engaged citizens who tackle the complex challenges of society through critical thinking and teamwork. They stated institutions of higher education have the responsibility to develop these robust citizens but have instead turned to “an increasing embrace of technical and professional expertise as the best solution ... resulting in graduates who are more narrowly focused in their specialty area but who lack democratic dispositions and skills” (Flanagan et al., 2013, p. 247). They argued that democracy demands for the provision of public education to develop citizens that are able to participate in political decision making of the nation and that the Morrill Act championed that “the ideals of a democracy could only be realized with higher education as a right of the people” (Flanagan et al., 2013, p. 248).

In addressing the need for maintaining universities as a place for the cultivation of democracy and human rights, the authors shared that the importance of higher education institutions as spaces that are supportive, but not comfortable. Where the “dangerous certainty of knowledge and experience is questioned” (Flanagan et al., 2013, p. 256) and students are able to wrestle with uncertainty as a group, facilitating the development of social support networks and finding of civic purpose through pursuit of collective action for the common good. They concluded by stating “developing the character and public spirit of students and equipping them to take up the complex problems of our time not only as experts or professionals but as critically conscious citizens constitutes higher education’s most important mission” (Flanagan et al., 2013, p. 257).

Jones (2016) explored a community college’s efforts toward balancing this call for citizenship and professional expertise. Recognizing that integrated within the college’s mission and vision statements were both civic and workforce goals, Jones conducted a qualitative study

to determine the possibilities and challenges of fulfilling these missions in practice. Student focus groups both in career and technical education programs, as well as liberal arts programs, were created and asked to explain ways the college was fulfilling both its civic and workplace mission (Jones, 2016). According to the student focus groups, the college was fulfilling both its civic and workplace mission through various experiences that students participated in (Jones, 2016). These experiences centered around experiential and service-learning opportunities outside the classroom and teaching practices that challenged student learning and thinking, specifically through classroom discussion and group work that exposed students to diverse ideas. In relation to the workplace mission, students also highlighted teachers' efforts in providing specific knowledge and real-world application as significant for this outcome. When asked about ways for institutions to improve efforts to support these missions, students suggested more spaces to allow for interaction as well as more off-campus learning experiences, specifically for students in liberal arts programs.

Jones (2016) also held discussions with faculty groups to understand how faculty perceived the civic and workplace goals of the institution. She met with multiple faculty groups, one group of social science faculty, and then several mixed groups of liberal arts faculty and staff. The discussion with social science faculty largely focused on the concerns for lack of support necessary to develop effective experiential and service-learning opportunities (Jones, 2016). The other group focused largely on their perceived contradiction of the civic and workforce missions (Jones, 2016). The mixed group of liberal arts faculty and staff felt that there has been an increased focus on workforce development in higher education institutions and politics that has forgotten the duty of the civic mission (Jones, 2016). The general thought was that the workforce mission prepared students to adapt to existing systems while the civic mission



encouraged “students to think critically and challenge unjust systems” (Jones, 2016, p. 126). Furthermore, participants raised the fact that pursuit of civic mission did not necessarily need to occur off-campus and that there were numerous ways the mission could be addressed at the institution from a shift in institutional governance from a more democratic structure to focusing on addressing the civic needs of student right on campus.

Jones (2016) highlighted several key observations and provided several suggestions going forward. First, Jones (2016) noted that students tend not to separate the civic and workforce missions of the college but see teaching practices and off-campus experience as fulfilling both mission and overall desire more of these experiences. Jones (2016) recommended including students in the discussion of how the college can best integrate the mission within the student experience. Accordingly, Jones (2016) determined that in many ways the integration of civic and workplace mission was already taking place both inside and outside the classroom. She challenged institutions to be “investing resources in these areas to more effectively pursue their civic and workforce goals and to scale up the types of activities that are already taking place” (Jones, 2016, p. 124).

Secondly, Jones (2016) recognized that there are communication and funding challenges between liberal arts and Career and Technical education (CTE) faculty that have caused lines to be drawn between the workforce and civic mission of community colleges. Liberal arts faculty tend to view the “workforce mission with institutional and societal trends that are leading to the devaluing of liberal education” (Jones, 2016, p. 129). CTE faculty on the other hand “place high importance on training students to understand and engage the communities where they work” (Jones, 2016, p. 129). Jones (2016) suggested that space be created, and solutions be sought, that open up communication between these sets of faculty to facilitate the necessary “discussion

about the role of higher education in making democracy work in the 21st century” (Jones, 2016, p. 129).

### **The Changing Institution and Mission Statements**

In higher education, growing globalization, increased access, new technology, and other factors have driven continued changes in higher education. (Ayers, 2015; Banda & Mafofo, 2016; Dougherty, Lahr, & Morset, 2017; Oertel & Söll, 2017; Purcell, 2014). In 2015, Ayers conducted a textual analysis to identify change of trajectory in community college mission statements by comparing 1,009 collected community colleges mission statements from 2013-2014 with 427 collected mission statements from 2004. The results identified four areas of change: credentialing structures, pedagogies, practices, and curriculum goals (Ayers, 2015). Changes in credentialing structures were identified by a heightened focus on degree completion programs and a shift in focus from two-year degree programs to a convenience structure of part-time students working towards degree completion at their own pace (Ayers, 2015).

Ayers (2015) noted that text involving pedagogies witnessed an increase of words centered on building self-worth and forming close relationships between the professor and student. In areas of practice, there was a growing focus toward multiple styles of learning, increased accessibility, student concerns, and sustainability (Ayers, 2015). Lastly, curriculum goals saw a raised emphasis on communication as a learning outcome, civic and community engagement, respect for diverse humanity, and globalization (Ayers, 2015).

From the research, Ayers (2015) concluded that there is a push for mission statements to legitimize the community college as a player in the field of higher education. Ayers (2015) also identified that over time there has developed a dualistic focus between marketization and student

development as citizens. These competing foci may be driving community colleges away from being comprehensive intuitions to a more specialized focus on sustainability.

Other factors such as political, cultural, and social influences also play a role in the continued changes in higher education. Banda and Mafofo (2016) examined how various political and social discourses have impacted the development of mission statements at South African Universities in light of the fall of the apartheid regime. Through interpretive text-based analysis, Banda and Mafofo (2016) explored how “the repurposing of struggle and transformation discourses, in the universities’ mission statements” (pp. 174-175) is used to promote the current values of these institutions and to blur the line between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. Banda and Mafofo (2016) comment that “there is a growing interest in university mission for branding and marketing purposes” (p. 178).

Pressure to join the global market has led to a telling and selling mentality in regard to university mission statements (Banda & Mafofo, 2016). On one hand, the mission statements communicate the purpose of the university to current stakeholders while also promoting the university to prospective consumers. Examining three historically diverse institutions, Banda and Mafofo (2016) walk through the mission statements of each university to reveal how specific statements draw from historical texts to create a mission statement that promotes their unique contributions to potential clients. Pulling from the same material, the universities reconstruct these political and social discourses to provide expanded meaning that creates differentiated identities. “Discourses have been repurposed for marketing the universities as objects of desire to which all racial, ethnic, national, etc. groups are welcome to consume the best in academia” (Banda & Mafofo, 2016, p. 190). The institutions’ histories have been minimized to paint a forward focus of academic excellence, transformation, redress and equal opportunity.

In another study Watanabe and Abe (2017) focused on the “dynamics of University functional diversification” (p. 2) through the transformation of mission statements in areas of researcher funding and productivity and public services activity. Using California and New York schools, the study examined the fluctuation in allocated financial resources to the areas of instruction, research, and public service between FY2002 and FY2014 at a single university in comparison to the total allocation for that area in the whole system. The specially developed Concentration Equality Index was used to measure focused functional activity (Watanabe & Abe, 2017). Based on the research, California schools seemed to maintain a stronger focus on equally distributed function, while New York schools greatly changed from highly diversified functions to more equalized functions (Watanabe & Abe, 2017).

### **The New Entrepreneurial University**

The modern research university is generally considered to have sprouted from the ideas of Wilhelm von Humboldt which highlight the concepts of “research-like learning and academic freedom” (Sam & Sijde, 2014, p. 893). In the Humboldtian university model, professors and students work together for the central purpose of exploring and transferring new knowledge through an integration of research and teaching (Sam & Sijde, 2014). In the pure Humboldtian model the institution is to be funded by the government; however, the learning and research that occurs within the university ought to be uninhibited by governmental influence (Sam & Sijde, 2014). Furthermore, this model separates out vocational training since “pure science is considered much more important than specialized professional training” (Sam & Sijde, 2014, p. 893).

Other university models have also been developed over time, focusing on different elements of educational practice and governance. The Napoleonic model maintains a strong

focus on vocational education specifically focusing on the fields of mathematics and science over the humanities (Sam & Sijde, 2014). Universities in this model are considered public and operate under control of the government and professional councils. The educational focus is on training rather than exploratory learning (Sam & Sijde, 2014). Individuals are taught vocational skills for specific professional roles.

The Anglo-Saxon model stemming from the structures of Oxford and Cambridge University focuses more on student personal development (Sam & Sijde, 2014). The base of the Liberal Arts University, this model provides “a broad base with less emphasis on subject-specific and skill-related content” (Sam & Sijde, 2014, p. 894). While these types of institutions operate under general government guidelines, the everyday operations and curriculum are determined by each individual institution (Sam & Sijde, 2014). This educational model focuses on the character development of the student and aims to provide students with the ability to think critically in addressing future challenges and to operate flexibly in continually changing environments (Sam & Sijde, 2014).

According to Etzkowitz (2016), the modern university is experiencing a change in the institutional mission. Etzkowitz (2016) holds that alongside the historical missions of teaching and research the modern university now has a “[t]hird Mission to advance innovation” (p. 83) that includes formal ties with industry and an expectation of shared development for the growth of society. This new form of university, titled the “entrepreneurial university” both replaces and builds upon the historical higher educational paradigms of Newman and Humboldt that championed the roles of character building and research respectively (Etzkowitz, 2016). Now the university “expands academic roles from teacher, to researcher, to entrepreneur” (Etzkowitz, 2016, p. 84). In his article, Etzkowitz (2016) “synthesize[s] a wide variety of data

drawn from in-depth interviews, participant observation, archival research and secondary analysis” (p. 84).

Etzkowitz (2016) explained the entrepreneurial university is a product of a shift from an industrial-based to knowledge-based economy. The shift at the university level is developed as they recognize the potential economic value of knowledge generated within the university.

Furthermore, a shift from block-funding to competitive research grants leads “academic researchers to manage risk by fund-raising from multiple sources, introducing an entrepreneurial element into the faculty role as a matter of academic survival” (Etzkowitz, 2016, p. 85). This is further exonerated by collaboration efforts made by pools of research groups seeking to work together to obtain larger funding. Universities are found directly involved in economic activity through patented research and licensing to venture capital spin offs (Etzkowitz, 2016).

A submodel of the entrepreneurial university is the civic university which seeks to engage society beyond just economic growth and incorporates “cultural activities and the transfer of social innovations that may not have an immediately observable economic impact” (Goddard, 2009, p. 11).

Etzkowitz (2016) recognized that there is a continuing debate regarding the rise of the entrepreneurial model and the call to return to the “ivory tower” ideals of teaching and research. Etzkowitz (2016) attributed the fight against the entrepreneurial university to be a result of poor and traditional metrics that fail to show, or undervalue, the economic and social contribution of these institutions, as well as a failure to recognize the persisting problems in universities’ structures. Etzkowitz (2016) proposed the Global Entrepreneurial University Metrics (GEUM) initiative which aims to provide a metric that “improve[s] universities’ abilities to raise their performance level in all three mission areas (education, research, and innovation),

simultaneously and interactively” by “improving their entrepreneurship performance, enhancing diversity and further the public interest” (p. 91) The three missions of the higher education institutions create multiple, rather than single, logic structure that requires the development of “responsible metrics...for societal critique and economic and social advance” (Etzkowitz, 2016, p. 92).

### **Religious Institutions and Mission Statements**

In Morphew and Hartley’s (2006) original analysis of college mission statements they noted that religious universities’ mission statements specifically differed from other institutions in that religious universities included statements of exclusivity. Davis et al. (2007) also noticed that religious institutions have a greater focus on character trait development than do secular institutions and that these traits were also reinforced more in religious institutions.

A study by Estanek, James, and Norton (2006) used content analysis of 55 catholic institutional mission statements to examine commonly shared values among catholic institutions that could be used to inform assessment practices. They determined shared themes included intellectual, religious or spiritual, moral, and personal development as well as social responsibility, service leadership, professional competence, responsible citizenship, holistic education, and lifelong learning. (Estanek et al., 2006). Estanek et al. (2006) argued that catholic institutional mission statements provide a base of desired student outcomes that reflect general goals of higher education grounded in catholic identity and that “there is a consensus of student learning outcomes that characterize a Catholic higher education experience” (p. 214)

### **Theoretical Constructs**

There are multiple student development theories that establish the progression of student cognitive development and relationship to society through the college experience (Patton, Renn,

Guido-DiBrito, & Quaye, 2016). While these theories highlight different aspects of cognitive and social development, they all establish a progression of growing complexity with which one interacts with and understands the world around them. These theories tend to follow a pattern that begins with a simple and concrete understanding established by influential authorities (Patton et al., 2016). As students develop, they then move toward a process of independence, separating from previous authoritative influences and defining their own personal values (Patton et al., 2016). In the final stages of development, students recognize the interdependence of society and come to solidify their personal standards within the context of care, openness, and adaptability towards the complexity of the world around them (Patton et al., 2016).

Chickering and Reisser (1993) pull from various theories to establish their own identity development theory. They highlight the importance of developmental theories for universities by stating,

without a developmental philosophy at the core of the college, it can become a dispensary of services, a training ground for jobs that may not exist, or a holding tank for those not sure what to do next. Institutions that impart transferable skills and relevant knowledge, bolster confidence and creativity, and engender social responsibility and self-directed learning are needed more than ever (p. 44).

Their theory on student identity development is composed of a seven-vector model. This model was developed to provide a broad but crucial understanding of student development to aid higher education practitioners in fostering student growth through the continued challenges and changes of higher education (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The vectors represent directionally aimed stages of human development in which progression along a vector shows an increase in skills and strengths that lead to greater versatility and adaptability to the surrounding environment



(Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The vectors do not represent a particularly linear progression, but rather a “building block” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 37) approach in which the first four vectors provide a foundation upon which the final three vectors can be established. Movement along vectors may occur at different rates and times per the individual and can occur in conjunction with movement along other vectors as well. Chickering and Reisser (1993) expressed their model represents a “journeying towards individuation...and also toward communion with other individuals and groups, including the large national and global society” (p. 35).

The first vector, *developing competence*, involves a personal assessment of and confidence in one’s ability to overcome challenges and achieve one’s goals (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Competence is composed of three interrelated subcomponents of intellectual, physical, and interpersonal competence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The second vector, *managing emotions*, involves one’s ability to recognize, control, balance, and appropriately express feeling and emotion (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The third vector is *moving through autonomy toward interdependence* (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This vector focuses on the importance of separation as a key step in identity development (Erikson, 1968; Blos, 1967; Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Aspects of developing a clear sense of self involve: 1) self-confidence and separation from constant reassurance, defined as emotional independence; 2) ability to self-manage and problem-solve, defined as instrumental independence; and 3) a consciousness of where one fits in the great societal context, defined as interdependence (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

The fourth vector, *developing mature interpersonal relationships*, involves “rebalancing...needs for autonomy and attachment” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 145). In this

vector individuals grow in their understanding and acceptance of relational differences and ability to form and maintain close relationships with others. The fifth vector, *establishing identity*, involves a conglomeration of various elements included in the previous four vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). It involves a self-awareness, self-comfort, and personal worth composed of personal characteristics, attributes, and role within the context of history, culture, and interpersonal relationship. The sixth vector is *developing purpose*; it involves “an increasing ability to be intentional, to assess interests and options, to clarify goals, to make plans, and to persist despite obstacles” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 50). The final vector, *developing integrity*, centers on the concept of establishing values which is achieved through “three sequential but overlapping stages: (1) humanizing values...(2) personalizing values...and (3) developing congruence” (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, pp. 236-237).

Chickering and Reisser (1993) highlight the process and aspects through which students journey in creating their identity during their time in college and beyond. Given that mission statements are considered to establish purpose and identity of an institution (Davis et al. 2007; Meacham, 2008; Morpew & Hartley, 2006) it would be expected that university mission statements would impact the development of student’s values. University mission statements often tout developing graduates that are socially responsible leaders, engaged citizen, and who hold an appreciation and respect of diversity (Meacham, 2008). The attainment of such outcomes involves progress along multiple vectors outlined in Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) theory. Thus, Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) provide an important foundation in assessing development of values held by students and how these values correlate with the values championed in the University’s mission statement.

**Summary**

Chapter two covered the existing research on university mission statements. It provided general foundation of the topics that are further explored and addressed through this study. It also revealed some of the current consideration regarding the importance of university mission statements and areas that are still require further research. The following chapter discusses the methodologies used in conducting this study.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

The following chapter reviews the methodological approach used to explore the influence of a University's mission statement on students' experiences. Qualitative analysis was selected as an effective way to explore the variations of students' university experiences (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). This chapter also outlines the setting and participants of the study as well as the processes used in data collection, storage, and analysis.

#### **Design of the Study**

The qualitative research methodology of semi-structured interviews was used to explore the presence of the university mission statement's themes within students' experiences and the value students believe those themes had on their college experience. Qualitative research is a method of research that seeks to explore and pull meaning from the social context of an individual's lived experience (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Qualitative research focuses on the holistic context of human existence within the systems and structures in which they exist. By conducting semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to develop an understanding of the students' experiences within the social context of the university and the missional themes.

#### **Participants**

In an attempt to gain a broad perspective on the impact of the University's mission across the University, this study conducted interviews with students representing each of the four undergraduate colleges at the university. Several of the students selected had double majors and thus covered several of the colleges. Students selected for this study were seniors planning to or having just graduated from the university. This requirement was established so that the students were able communicate their views on the presence and value of the missional themes across the

entirety of their undergraduate experience. No further classification or restrictions were required in selecting participants for this study. While gender was not directly assessed there was a mix of male and female participants. Ethnicity was also not discussed, but it appeared that all participants were white. No further personal data regarding the participants was collected. There were 6 students selected to participate in this study and are identified as Participant 1 through 6 as follows:

**Participant 1** was majoring in psychology under the College of the Liberal Arts and Sciences.

**Participant 2** was double majoring in Human Services in Community Leadership under the College of Health and Human Services and Psychology under the College of the Liberal Arts and Sciences

**Participant 3** was double majoring in Mathematics under the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and Accounting under the College of Business and Technology. Participant 3 was also a member of the Honors College.

**Participant 4** was majoring in Early Childhood Special Education under the College of Education

**Participant 5** was majoring in Accounting under the College of Business and Technology.

**Participant 6** was majoring in Civil and Nonprofit Leadership under the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

### **Site**

The research was conducted at a mid-size public midwestern university. The university is comprised of four primary undergraduate colleges: Liberal Arts and Sciences; Business and

Technology; Education; and Health and Human Services. Its 2019 undergraduate enrollment was 4,738 with a 1:13 Faculty to student ratio. The institution is predominately white (N=63%).

There were five separate themes pulled from the University mission statement used to assist in structuring the interview questions and interview analysis. They were free and rigorous inquiry, diversity and inclusion, research and applied learning, reason and communication, and citizenship and leadership.

### **Instrument**

#### ***Semi-Structured interviews.***

This study utilized one-on-one semi-structured interviews using a standard interview protocol (Appendix A). Participants were asked to share about their experiences at the University and the ways they believed the themes identified in the University's mission statement were present or lacking from their overall experience. They were also asked about how their experience had impacted their personal goals and the value that they attributed to the presence of the missional themes in impacting their experience.

#### ***The researcher as an Instrument.***

Interviews were conducted by the researcher and thus the researcher was considered an instrument of the research. The researcher is a white male who became interested in this topic due to his perceived misalignment between why students attend university (to get jobs) and the stated mission of the university. It is important to understand that results of this research are driven by these interests of the researcher. Specific data analysis methods were used in coding, further described below, in attempt to reduce bias and other issues in the results.

## **Data Collection**

Data was collected via video/audio recording of virtual interviews held over Microsoft Teams. The interviews were marked private and only shared with the researcher's advisor via the Teams applications. The interviews were then downloaded to the researcher's computer. The interviews were transcribed from those downloaded recordings. The interview transcriptions were then coded according to the missional themes and other themes that were identified during analysis.

## **Treatment of the Data**

Interview data was stored on the personal computer of the researcher and the researcher's Google drive for backup. Both the researcher's computer and Google drive are protected with a password only known to the researcher. The research was only shared with the researcher and his thesis advisor. Participants are referred to only by participant number for confidentiality purposes. Once the thesis was complete all data was transferred to a separate flash drive and in compliance with the IRB will be deleted after three years.

## **Data Analysis**

Yin (2011) outlines a five-phased cycle for qualitative analysis which includes compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. Yin's process was followed to analyze the interview results. First each interview was transcribed and compiled into individual documents. Secondly, the interviews were reviewed, and similar conceptual elements found in the interviews were used to create initial codes. Once a set of initial codes was generated further review was conducted to group the initial codes into categories. Once these categories had been constructed, they were examined for patterns, themes, and concepts. The resulting data was

interpreted into a comprehensive basis from which to understand the overall study. Finally, conclusions were drawn from the interpreted themes and discussed in chapter five.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided review of the process and elements that were used in the research. Interviews were conducted with participants selected from each of the university's colleges. A qualitative approach was used to collect and analyze the data and provide insight into the impact of the university mission statement on university students. The following chapter will share the findings that were collected from the methodology used in this chapter.



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Results**

This chapter presents the reflections of the college experience gathered from semi-structured interviews aimed to answer the research questions: 1) are the key concepts outlined in a mid-size midwestern University's mission statement evident in the individual student experience and 2) do students recognize the concepts outlined in a mid-size midwestern University's mission statement as useful in creating their experience? Participants were asked both general questions regarding their college experience as well as direct questions about their experience in relation to the themes identified within the University's mission statement. Participants' responses are grouped and analyzed by the themes provided by the University's mission statement as well as significant new themes that were derived from participants' responses.

#### **Evidence of Mission Statement Themes Present in the Student Experience**

There were five key themes identified in the University's mission statement: free and rigorous inquiry, diversity and inclusion, research and applied learning experiences, reason and communication, and responsible citizenship and leadership. Initially, participants were asked to generally share about their college experience. The responses were evaluated for content alluding to the mission statement themes. Depending on whether or not participants' responses included the mission statement themes, more direct questions were asked regarding the presence of these specific themes in their college experience. This method of questioning did find that each of the mission statement themes were present to some extent across the participants' experiences.

### *Free and Rigorous Inquiry*

The rigor of college was first discussed as an expectation of college. Four of the six participants mentioned or alluded to the expectation that college would be academically rigorous. Participant 3 stated, “I had the feeling that college [classes were] going to be incredibly hard.” This theme was less frequently discussed within the participants’ experience and when it was discussed, was seemingly metered by professors’ teaching methods and student determination and interest. Participant 3 continued stating, “most classes you take [in college] are glorified high school classes” he further expressed that once “you get into your major and get what you’re interested in, [classes] actually do start getting hard and interesting.” Somewhat contrary to this, Participant 6 expressed, “when I got into my major it wasn’t too challenging, it was definitely hard, but it was a little bit easier cause I enjoyed learning it...” Later, participant 3 expanded on his ideas mentioning that classes can be challenging but the determination to keep pushing through and not give up keeps them achievable.

I don’t think a class is ever intuitively hard, a lot of people think so, but it’s like whenever you give up, that’s when it gets really hard. As long as you don’t give up it’s really not too hard, but it’s just, it can be challenging more to say.

Tying in participant 6’s thoughts of “interest in the course” provided motivation to not give up when things are challenging. Further, both participant 3 and 5 talked about how professors impacted the difficulty of courses “it’s really, really hard when teachers are not very sympathetic, because when you do have a caring professor and they know what’s going on, it makes the class more enjoyable.” Both participant 3 and 5 shared these concerns within in the context of their accounting professors.

The theme of free inquiry most clearly was present in an experience shared by participant 1. She talked about an extracurricular research project she has been working on with a professor that is in the works to be published. She stated, “I approached my professor about it and I said I just have like a thesis question that I want to ask or just a statement and [my professor] said, ‘you know what, we could really turn that into something’” Among responses from the other participants, the theme of free inquiry was more vague. In fact, participant 5 shared that within her major classes she did not feel she had this experience. When directly asked she responded, “I can’t say that I really felt like I had that freedom...[accounting] is very principle based, follow the rules, cookie cutter...” Other participants expressed that that they did believe this theme was a part of their experience but did not provide very in-depth examples backing this view.

While this initial analysis may indicate this theme is absent from the students’ college experience, that conclusion may be too short-sighted. Rather the theme may be better represented through the variety of opportunities and experiences that participants were able to be involved in throughout their college experience. This idea may be best summarized in the statement from participant 3, “I figure college is what you make of it.” Many of the participants shared about their vast involvement on campus from sports, to opportunities within their educational departments, to on-campus jobs, to various student organizations. Few of the participants were involved in the exact same activities. Possibly this freedom to diversify one’s experience within the college environment is in itself a display of the mission theme of free inquiry.

### ***Diversity and Inclusion***

All six participants shared some experience that alluded to the theme of diversity and inclusion. Participants generally shared about experiences in which they developed a new

understanding of diversity and inclusion specifically within the campus community. Participant 4 shared

this past year we had a student who was requiring wheelchair access to buildings...me and the other specialists went around to like every building on campus and found all the wheelchair accessible doors...it was eye opening to me that diversity and inclusion wasn't necessarily just a part of like the culture...but not in the fact that that meant for everybody because I feel...like we have a pretty diverse campus

Participant 5 also shared an experience in which she was surprised by how some diverse groups felt on campus. She shared about a time when she volunteered at an event on diversity and inclusion that opened her eyes to some of the diversity issues on campus. In sharing her experience, she expressed, "I felt a little blindsided cause I didn't really notice how they felt. I thought there was a lot of diversity and inclusion here on campus, but I did hear a lot of what they had to say too." Similarly, participant 4 mentioned being surprised that "diversity and inclusion wasn't necessarily just a part of the culture" when she was required to search every building on campus for wheelchair accessibility to "accommodate for a student in a wheelchair" while planning for the freshman welcome event. Yet she also emphasized "we have a pretty diverse campus."

Participant 3 shared that having come from a small town, the University helped to expand his understanding of what was possible. He stated, "seeing the diversity there [at the University] is really, just kept my mind open." Participants 1, 2, and 6's experience with diversity were related to friendships they built with people different than themselves. Participant 1 became best friends with a lesbian couple. She shared how this friendship broke down some of the stereotypes she held and helped her to broaden her understanding of those different than herself. Participant

2 shared, “one of my very best friends...showed me what college is like for someone that isn’t a second or third generation student.” Participant 6 talked about his experience on the soccer team with many international players and being able to work together as a team with “guys from all over the U.S. all over the globe...a lot of different people, a lot of different backgrounds.”

The experiences shared related to this theme more often focused on the idea of diversity rather than inclusion, however many participants did share that they felt welcomed and cared about at the University. Participant 4 expressed “I really did feel welcomed on my orientation day...I cannot believe how much people care at [the University] about our students.” Similarly, participant 1 shared,

I guess I cannot say enough good things about the psychology department because they are so accommodating with their students, because they want them to be successful. And I guess that really helped me to see, because I sat there and I said, ‘Wow, these people really care, like they really want me to do well’

While not all the participants directly stated that they felt included, it was clear from these and other expressions of being welcomed and cared for alongside their involvement in the community, that the participants did feel included in the University. In fact, participant 5 simply stated that the University was her “home away from home.”

### ***Research and Applied Learning***

For this theme the interview questions centered specifically around participants’ experiences with research and applied learning. Nearly all participants expressed having experiences doing research within their courses. Only participant 5 did not feel that research was a part of her experience. Participant 1’s experience clearly revealed evidence of this theme in her co-published research which she did with one of her professors. Participant 3 shared that one of

the highlights from his college experience was winning a scholarship as a part of some honors research he was doing for the department. He expressed, “I applied and won [a] \$10,000 scholarship in the STEM fields. Hearing that announcement, I was over the moon. I worked my hardest through this honors research I’d been doing.” Participant 4 mentioned that she has specific courses dedicated to doing research. She also shared that she had the experience of sharing one of her research projects “at the research fair at [the University] and then also as the state conference for special education.”

When asked about experiences involving applied learning, most participants referenced internships or practicums that they participated in as a part of their educational requirements. Participant 4 expressed that her department was well known for the applied experience their graduates receive. She shared,

One thing that...[the] special education department talks about that sets us apart from other educational institutions is that our undergrad students get over 400 hours of clinical experience in the classroom prior to student teaching...the department has really gone above and beyond to give us every experience we can get.

Other than this example from participant 4, participants did not share much detail regarding any of their applied learning experiences. Similar to the discussion about free inquiry, evidence of applied learning may be more generally found through students’ involvement outside of the classroom. Participant 5 shared about being the finance chair for her sorority and how doing so “was pretty cool just because it kind of gave me insight of my major.” It remains difficult to confirm this idea though as other participants did not make these connections between what they were learning in the classroom and how it applied to the experience outside the classroom.

### *Reason and Communication*

Overall this theme seemed to be the hardest theme to identify within the participants' experiences. When directly asked about it some participants had difficulty matching the meaning of these themes with the same meaning intended in the mission statement. For example, when asked about reason, one participant began sharing about their reason for attending the University and when asked how communication had been a part of her college experience, participant 2 spoke about how her professors did a good job communicating with her and her classmates. This may have been due the fact that the themes were not presented within the specific context of the mission statement and so participants responded just as they understood these themes in general. That said, there were still indications that these themes were present in the student experience. Participant 4 provided the clearest example in her response.

We have specific classes that are just based on communication. That could be communication with parents, communication with other professionals that we'll have in the field, communication with students themselves...communication when you are in charge of other adults in your classroom, when you're responsible for paraprofessionals in your classroom that aid your students in class.

While participant 4 clearly expressed how her class supported the development of her communication skills, participant 4 also mentioned "my communication skills have increased tremendously from my freshman year...I think my communication skills have kept growing...and that's kind of like the whole point of why I've been so involved." Highlighting this idea of involvement, I think, points to the ways that the other participants also had these themes reflected in their college experience.

Communication and reason are skills that may be best developed through practical experience. When discussing what she gained from her college experience, participant 1 shared how working with the orientation office helped her become less shy because she had “to interact with a lot of students and family members [and] also a lot of offices.” When directly asked about the presence of reason in her experience, participant 5 also expressed that it was a part of her experience. She was able to use both her experience within and outside the classroom “to find solutions to what [she] was learning and going on in life.” These themes can also be abstracted as important aspects of leadership. As will be discussed in the following section, all the participants shared about experiences working in leadership roles. Leadership requires the ability to communicate and reason. Participant 4 again highlights this point by sharing that the areas where she had leadership roles were most beneficial to developing her ability to reason.

I would say with reason, I think that my experiences have helped me, but I think that my experiences in housing, in new student family, in like those areas of college student affairs, more so than any other experiences.

### ***Responsible Citizenship and Leadership***

Leadership was the theme most evident in the participants’ responses. All participants shared about one or more leadership roles they held at one point or another during their college experience; “[I got] to be an orientation leader”, “I am currently the vice president of [the University Board]”, “I joined an organization called student government. I currently am the speaker of the student senate”, “I was a senior staff assistant in Greek court”, “I actually had one of the hardest position in my sorority, I was finance chair”, and “I was voted captain [of the soccer team].” Participant 1 specifically discussed how while she had previous leadership experience, her University experience helped to expand her leadership ability. “I never thought I



could be a leader outside of soccer. [The University] has definitely helped me realize that I can be any leader I want.”

Interestingly two of the participants actually had leadership included in the title of their major; however, all participants related their leadership experiences with extra-curricular activities. Many served on leadership teams of a variety of student organizations. Participant 6 was elected captain of the soccer team, and several had leadership experiences within Greek life. Participant 2 did mention that watching her professors’ leadership styles helped her “formulate [her] own leadership approach” but specifically expressed how being involved outside the classroom helped to express herself as a leader. She recounted one of her best college experiences as

When I got involved with a campus ministry, called The Wesley Foundation. I met some of my best friends through there; we're still best friends to this day. I still keep in touch with all of them and it gave me a chance to show that I was a leader in a different fashion. Usually in the classroom I try to participate as much as I could, but there I really got to let my colors show, I got to show these people who I was and the best parts of me.

Participant 3 discussed how one of the most memorable experiences he had in college was being able to attend an optional summer conference. When discussing what he gained from the experience he mentioned

...you get some leadership skills for that. We had to make a dinner by scratch for the people, for the professors and stuff like that and the camp staff one night cause that was like one of the challenges we had and it was, it was amazing, so we had to take leadership roles.

Participant 5 attributed her experience with holding leadership roles within in her sorority as the catalyst that helped her get out of her comfort zone and build confidence.

[Leadership] got me to go out of my comfort zone and join an accounting group on campus. That's definitely helped just because in high school I wasn't very leader based type, so I've definitely gained a lot of leadership roles and like the confidence to do that

The earlier examples help to indicate that leadership, whether or not directly discussed by each participant, was evident in and an important part of their experiences.

The citizenship theme in contrast seemed more elusive at first. To begin with, five of the six participants needed some clarification on what was meant by citizenship when directly asked about its role in their experience. Furthermore, the fact that all participants were directly asked about citizenship meant that this theme was not clearly evident in the experiences they shared without direct prompting. Despite its initial elusiveness, it was clear that citizenship was very much a part of the student experience. As students were asked to share about their experiences involving citizenship all had examples. Participant 5 shared "every year here on campus they have [a] service day." Participant 6 discussed that there is an annual competition between the University Sports teams to see who can participate in the most community service hours. Participant 4 spoke about how part of the graduation requirements for her major involved completing a number of community service hours. Participant 3 shared about the example and encouragement he received from one of his professors in this area.

I have a professor who is quite active in the political scene...He encourages his students to vote, he encourages all that....And I have a few other professors in the math department who are also along with him, who do their own political activism and they encourage me to go out and do stuff and especially with student government...

Beyond the above examples it is worth recognizing that the University itself serves as a localized community of which students can be considered citizens. It was clear that all the participants were deeply involved in the various campus organizations which models the work of citizenship. Participant 2 expressed this view perfectly stating, “yeah, so the citizenship piece of it, I don’t just see myself as a student or somebody that lives on campus, I see myself as a citizen within the [University] community.”

### **Value of Mission Statement Themes in the Student Experience**

The second research question presented in this study is, “Do students recognize the concepts outlined in a mid-size midwestern University’s mission statement as useful in creating their experience?” To answer this question the participants were asked directly about how their goals had changed and how their experience had impacted them. They were also asked to comment on how the specific missional themes were valuable in their life. As demonstrated in the previous section, the themes were evident in the student experience. When asked directly about the themes, all participants shared that they felt they were individually important. In some instances, the participants’ responses helped to clearly link the value they had for these themes with their college experience while other themes were not as clear.

### ***Free and Rigorous Inquiry***

The value of free inquiry within the classroom was not seen within any of the participants’ responses; however, given a broader context it can be identified in participants’ expressions of how their college experience assisted them in developing future direction.

Participant 2 specifically mentioned

When I came to college, I didn't know what it was that I wanted...having the chance to be involved in as many things as I have been able to be involved in, it helped me really grasp and make the most out of my experience

Participant 2 recognized her freedom to participate as an important aspect of developing her college experience. When this theme is broadened to encompass all freedom of choice within the college context, its value is thus recognized by the participants as assisting them in discovering themselves. Participant 2 ended her interview sharing how the University impacted her stating, “[the University] has given me the chance to be as involved as I can and to really tailor my experience to what it is that I wanted and what I wanted to get out of it.” Participant 5 similarly shared that college helped her develop goals for the future. When asked directly about the value of this theme she stated

I think [free and rigorous inquiry] is super important just because it prepares you for like a big girl/big boy job because if you don't know or have the confidence to learn and explore other things than just that, you're not going to be willing to have different opportunities.

Earlier in the interview she shared, “my college experience...gave me the push to be like ‘you know what, you only live once, you're young, might as well try it out’”. When asked about the impact their college experience had on their goals all six participants referred to the fact that their experience helped them develop, change, or build upon their goals. This seemed to be possible as a result of the freedom they had to be involved and develop themselves through the overall experience.

When it comes to rigorous inquiry, participant 3 was the one who mostly clearly demonstrated an understanding of the value this theme held in his college experience. He shared,

[in honor classes] the teachers challenge you more, so that might sound lame to like some other students like in other classes, but they challenge you to push you ahead...I've seen a lot of people who take that, those like challenges from the professors as like they're upset with them and when you have that mindset then you really are losing yourself in that class or whatever. So, like if you accept these challenges which I have, like I take the challenges and I try to run with them and see how far I can get, I'm better, I can use those in other classes

Several other participants also made brief statements expressing that they valued the challenge their classes provided such as participant 5 who stated "...I like having a challenge cause it keeps you on your toes." These statements support the value of rigorous inquiry in participants' experience, but participants were also clear that this value was only fully achieved when also met with caring professors and topical interest. Participant 5 continued by expressing

[Classes have] definitely been challenging just when you do have those professors that don't care or don't really know the knowledge, it's really hard when teachers, I don't want to say fight back, but they don't, they're not very sympathetic because when you do have a caring professor and they know what's going on it makes the class more enjoyable I would say. And I've definitely had a professor who is not the nicest and didn't care. So that was really hard just because I didn't understand the material necessarily cause there was no structure. And that's also what's really hard when the teacher does not have structure. It makes it hard to be motivated for the class and you just kind of don't show interest anymore or you know have motivation like I said before.

Participant 3 also shared that

the majority [of accounting professors] are professors that are from business and they don't really know how to teach that as well. And I would say in that form it is harder to actually learn from them... it's kind of just meh

Participant 6 mentioned that when he started his major classes "it went from very hard because I didn't like it to a level of difficulty that was challenging but I enjoyed being challenged." Thus, it seems that while participants recognize the importance of being challenged in their college experience, rigor alone is not enough. Along with the challenge there needs to be support and interest. Participant 1 expresses this idea as she discusses how her experience has prepared her for what comes next. She states

the professors, they genuinely care...I think just the faculty members and the professors I've met have prepared me in a way that I never thought I could be ready. Like a lot of the professors and faculty members, they'll give me an assignment and they'll give me a task and they'll say, "I want you to do this." and I will sit there and say, "I can't do that." And they're like, "Yeah, you can. You think you're not ready, but you are ready to do this."

### ***Diversity and Inclusion***

Students seemed to generally be able to express the value of diversity and inclusion in the experience. Participant 2 specifically expressed excitement about it this theme. She stated

Yes, I love this question. So, during my time on University board I've had a chance to work with a lot of different people from different backgrounds, different majors, different ethnic backgrounds, even some that are different socio-economic wise... One of my very best friends, she is currently the student vice president for student affairs... she's been able to show me some of those things whether it be helping her with her diversity action

council events, or participating in those, or attending a black student union event or a Latin American student organization event. She has helped show me that there is so much more to campus than what I had been seeing, because I had a very narrow circle of what our campus had to offer.

As stated previously participant 1 expressed gaining a broader perspective of diversity and inclusion by becoming friends with a lesbian couple. She shared “you can’t judge a book by its cover...that’s what they taught me.” Participant 5 expressed that she recognized the value of this theme as it reflects the fact that the world is diverse. She shared, “I think [diversity and inclusion] is really important just because the world is diverse. You need to learn how to be inclusive just because you’re working with so many different people. If not you’re kind of screwed.” Similarly, participant 6 expressed that this theme is valuable because “it makes you think outside of your circle; it makes you challenge your beliefs and think differently about yourself and your values.” Several participants shared that the University was their first exposure to a more diverse world. It is clear from the examples above that the participants found this experience was valuable in supporting their education and development.

### ***Research and Applied Learning***

All participants again expressed that this theme was important, but some did seem to have difficulty connecting the importance of it with their own experience. In the theme of research, Participant 1 had the most obvious example. What she highlighted as the value of this experience was the confidence in it built in her. She shared, “my research study going to be published, [I] never thought I could do that, ever...basically [I’m] realizing I am capable of so many opportunities if I just say ‘hey, I want to do this,’ and put my mind to it.” Participant 2

shared how through her research projects she gained more confidence in the skills necessary to do research properly. She explained,

...whether it be gaining skills as a public speaker or how to technically write a paper or how to give a presentation with all the add ins and extra stuff. So, I think that is super important because I will be giving big presentations and writing papers and proposals for the rest of my academic and professional career...

Participants 5 and 6 were not as clear about how the value of research was important in their own experiences. Participant 5 stated that she did not feel that it was something present in her experience. She expressed that it was something important but when asked what value she placed on it she simply stated, "I think I probably should have done more research." Participant 6 shared that his major was all about research but when asked to share about the value of it his answer was vague stating, "you need to research everything before you can come to like a decision about how you feel about something or how you're going to act...everybody researches everything..." Participants 3 and 4 did not directly share about their personal value of research but it seems that it will be an element central to their future pursuits.

The value participants placed in their applied learning experiences was even less clear, though several participants did express those experiences were helpful. When asked about the value of applied learning participant 5 stated,

I think that's really important just because, like I said it's hit or miss with my major and I think it needs to be more based on what's happening out in the jobs, just because you don't want to be learning all this stuff and you know spending all these years learning it and then not using it.



She had mentioned that at her internships she felt that some of what she learned in the classroom did not apply to actual scenarios. “You learn a lot of the principle and theories, but the problems and stuff you do, doesn’t really go with it.”

Other participants did not share this sentiment when discussing their experiences.

Participant 2 rather stated that what she learned in the classroom was “really helpful” in her practicum work. She, however, did not discuss what value being able to apply that learning had.

Participant 6 made an interesting assertion on this topic. When asked about the value of applied learning, he stated

For me personally, I think that’s important to apply those things to life, but when I hear applied learning it makes me think of people who necessarily don’t go to college, and like just learning from experience like just learning from applied learning rather than learning in a classroom environment. So basically, I think of that in a way. I think learning in a class, at least for me personally, learning in a class was more beneficial for me...

Potentially participants did not emphasize the value of applied learning because that was not a separate intent of their experience. Rather their goal, in general, was to learn and how that was specifically accomplished was irrelevant.

### ***Reason and Communication.***

As mentioned in the discussion of Research Question #1, this theme was hard to clearly identify within the student experience and thus it was also difficult to derive how participants valued it as a part of their own experience. However, when directly asked about it, all participants agreed that these themes were important and valuable. When looking at the stories told by the participants it is possible to extract the impact personal reasoning had on directing

their college experience. For instance, participant 4 shared this story about her journey of getting involved on campus.

I was on the ultimate frisbee team too, and I was super into that, but that was all I did. ...

I was thought, these people are nice, but they only hangout with each other and they

literally only care about playing frisbee. It got to a point where if I missed a frisbee

practice they got mad at me. I thought, okay this is like a weird cult and I need to find

some other stuff. So, I got involved in my apartment and that's when I got the hang of

trying new things, so I thought I am going to try something else to keep going... I would

say once I joined my sorority and had those go to friends that I didn't have to worry about them caring if I missed something cause I wanted to join something in the special ed.

department and I was comfortable with them, that I realized it's okay to join other things

and that's when I started branching out.

This example shows the way that participant 4 used reason to change her trajectory, but this form of reasoning was not one that stemmed from the classroom, but was a part of personal internal development. It would seem that, in this case, the participant recognized the value of the experience though not necessarily honing in on the missional theme identified within the experience.

Similarly, the theme of communication can be drawn from a variety of the stories shared, but participants tended to focus more generally on the overall value of the experience rather than the theme of communication itself. As with all the other themes, participants did express that they believed communication is something important. Participant 6 shared, “[communication has] been very present for me. [The University] has a lot of resources to make me be better like to join different groups and talk and speak and write and just kind of think.” After expressing the

value of communication, he then related it not to a specific experience of communicating, but the general way that it has been a part of his overall experience through being involved and interacting on campus. He later summarized this idea stating, “Communication is a big thing in everything you do.” Given that participants did recognize the value of these themes and separately recognized the value of their experiences, it would seem acceptable to argue that they do indeed recognize the value of these themes in their college experience despite not overtly stating it.

***Responsible Citizenship and Leadership.***

Participants seemed to recognize the value of this missional theme given that it was one of the most evident themes found within their experiences. As mentioned previously, all participants held some leadership position on campus at one point or another and all were involved in the campus community outside of the classroom experience. Through the interviews, participants attributed the value of this theme in assisting with personal development and confidence building. Participant 5 shared, “until I had leadership, I didn’t have confidence to do things out of my comfort zone” Participant 6 expressed “[Citizenship is] super important too. Going out there and being involved in the community, like learning from people, helping others, you learn a lot about them and about yourself from doing those things.” Participant 4, who held many leadership positions throughout campus and was greatly involved in the local community as well, shared “I realized I would get a lot out of being involved and so like that’s why I did it, really to kind of help round out myself a little bit.” Participant 3 also expressed that initial desire to improve himself. When talking about the goals he had set in college he stated, “I wanted to become a leader and actually work on my speaking skills and reach out to people.” The

demonstration of this theme carried through the participants' experiences, and ultimately speaks to the recognized value they had for it.

While participants were not always able to clearly express the specific value that the missional themes held in their experiences, it did seem they recognized them as valuable in general. Diversity and inclusion was the theme most expressed to be valuable by participants, while responsible citizenship and leadership was shown to be valued through the activity in which participants choose to engage. The other themes proved to be more vague, but through the above analysis it would seem that, in general, participants did recognize these concepts as important in their experiences. The value of some of these themes may be better understood from the perspective of the entire student experience, as natural occurrences within other aspects of their experiences, and as their personal development encompassed in these themes.

### **Other Themes Outside the Mission Statement**

Two other themes, separate from the missional themes, were identified through the analysis. Not only were these themes represented across participants' experiences, but they were also more pervasive throughout the participants' responses. While some of the missional themes required direct questioning to be identified within the participants' experiences, these themes surfaced naturally in the participants' stories. The first was confidence building and the second was social support.

#### ***Confidence Building***

Incorporated within this theme are experiences of personal achievement, pursuing and attaining goals, and navigating new experiences. While only three of the participants specifically mentioned that their confidence was increased as a result of their experiences, all six of the participants shared experiences that incorporated this theme. When sharing her top college

experiences, participant 1 continually made mention of achieving things she did not think possible, "...last Spring I actually won 5 [scholarships]...I never thought I could win that much money... I never thought I could...become published in my undergraduate degree... I never thought I could be a leader outside of soccer..." When asked to share what her takeaway was from her experience at the University she shared, "I'm capable of doing so much more than I could imagine."

Participant 2 shared that getting involved in campus "helped pull me out of my shell." Participant 3 specifically stated that several of his experiences gave him more confidence. He shared, "...the Kanzi conference...what it did was give me some confidence to work with professionals..." and "...the scholarship I won...told me that my work does mean something. It kind of gave me that confidence...to hopefully make a difference and kind of gave me some of that push to work on it..." and "being in student government kind of got me that group of friends, a group of people I can talk to and also get my confidence..."

Participant 4 shared how just the fact that she volunteered to do this study was a sign of her increased ability. "My freshman year, I couldn't even talk to people and if you would've asked me to do an interview like this...I couldn't do it." Participant 5 mentioned multiple times that her experiences built up her confidence. When asked about the impact of her college experience she summarized these thoughts saying, "I definitely think [the University] has brought me a lot more confidence than I've ever had before." Participant 6 also expressed that the way he had grown through his experience was in "self-confidence." When asked what led to his increase in self-confidence he expressed,

I never thought I would...be a captain or be a part of a group, like the SAC group...I'm going to be the vice president next semester. I never thought I could do that, but just

putting myself out there and at least trying, nominating myself for a position like that or just voicing who I am and trying to get in those spots just kind of helped me with my confidence for sure.

In the end when asked to reflect on how their college experience had impacted them and prepared them for what was next, none of the participants' responses included any direct references to the missional themes. Rather they expressed the feeling of growth and ability to move forward. This element of confidence the participants shared is well expressed in participant 5's response who stated that her experience "gave me the push to be like, 'you know what, you only live once, you're young, might as well try it out.'"

### *Social Support*

Scattered throughout all of the participants' responses were elements of the theme of social support. It first appeared in the expectations that participants had for their university experience. Aside from the academic expectations, most other expectations of what college would be like were centered around the social scene. Some participants expressed the expectation of building strong friendships with faculty and peers while others expressed concerns of not knowing anyone. Interweaved within the participants' stories of their actual experiences were multiple mentions of their social interactions and the support they received from their professors, staff members, and friends. In many instances this theme was interlinked with the previous theme of confidence building. Participant 2's example about confidence was within the context of her social relationships. She stated,

I had the chance to get involved. Whether it be through some campus ministries, through our programming board that really helped pull me out of my shell and find people that I could be friends with and that they would help me become acclimated to campus

As seen in the previous section, Participant 3 also spoke about how being involved helped in building a social group that contributed to the building of his confidence while participant 6 shared that his soccer coaches were very instrumental in helping him achieve his goals. "...I would say the coaches in the men's soccer culture helped me overcome challenges with school by challenging me and setting goals and encouraging me..." As previously mentioned, participant 1 switched majors based on the relationships she had with her professors. She also shared one of her most memorable experiences at the University was meeting her best friends. Similarly, participant 4 also shared,

The number one thing is just that I have made the absolute best friends...and that goes beyond friends too, like my professors, I still have phenomenal relationships with them...I would say that the people have been the everything from my experience at [the University].

Participant 6 also stated that "becoming best friends with my teammates that's probably, that's obviously the highlight." It is clear from just this smattering of examples that the relationships the participants formed through their experience were a key element to what they found valuable about their experience.

### **Summary**

All mission statement themes were found within the participants' experiences. While these themes were found to be recognized as valuable to the participants, it was clear that some themes carried more value than others. Specifically, the themes of diversity and inclusion and responsible citizenship and leadership were most recognized as important elements in the participants' experiences. While these missional themes were visible and important to the student experiences, two other themes not directly mentioned in the mission statement were made

evident through analysis of the participants' responses. These themes, confidence building and social support, were overall more pervasive than any of the other missional themes and were recognized as having greater value in the participants' experiences. The next chapter will explore the implications of these results as they relate to the purpose of the university, the structing of university mission statements, and students' experiences on campus.



## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

This chapter will explore the findings of the study and the implications these findings have on the university and student affairs practice. This study sought to understand how the values espoused in a university mission statement are present in individual students' experiences and the impact they have on shaping the student experience and their development. In a time when there are questions about the value and future of the university experience, this study provides a student perspective on the purpose of the university.

#### **The Presence of Missional Themes within the Students' Experiences.**

The five themes identified and focused on within the University's mission statement were free and rigorous inquiry, diversity and inclusion, research and applied learning, reason and communication, and responsible citizenship and leadership. As participants shared about their college experiences, there were clear references to specific mission statement themes. Students talked about experiences including doing research, pursuing personal interests, taking part in internships, meeting people different than themselves, being challenged by their classes, participating in campus organizations and community service projects, and serving as leaders on campus. While all of these themes were identified at some level throughout the entirety of the participants' experiences, some of these themes were more clearly evident than others.

#### ***Clearly Represented Missional Themes.***

The most evident theme was that of Leadership. It was clearly visible across all the participants' experience as each participant at one point mentioned holding a leadership role. For most participants, their leadership and involvement on campus was a valuable part of their experience as these examples surfaced without any specific prompting around the missional

themes. The value of this theme was also seen in that it was closely tied to the non-missional themes discovered in this study, confidence building and social support. It was within the participants' communities of social support that they rose to positions of leadership which assisted them in establishing confidence in themselves and their abilities.

The missional theme of leadership is tied together with responsible citizenship. According to Myers (2014), citizenship ought to be a priority of universities' missions and evident in the curriculum. The University's mission statement does recognize responsible citizenship and leadership as the developmental goal of the students' education; however only one participant talked about community outreach as a part of her academic requirements. It may be assumed that participant 2's and participant 6's majors included curriculum dedicated to citizenship and leadership, but neither participant shared that in their interviews. Furthermore, when asked specifically about citizenship, multiple participants needed further clarification of what was meant by the term. This need for clarification represents a disconnect between the written and lived mission of the University. As Kuh et al. (2010) discussed, schools provided a better overall experience when the written and lived mission statement are more closely aligned.

Despite the lack of understanding and shortage of the theme's presence in the participants' classroom experiences all participants had concrete examples of community involvement through extracurricular activities. In examining the presence of the citizenship and leadership theme, it was evident that the participants' leadership experiences were closely linked with their involvement in the campus community. Initially evidence of citizenship was restricted to involvement in the community outside the campus. While there was clear evidence for this form of citizenship, it became clear to me that the University itself was its own community and that the participants highly valued their involvement in the localized campus. The theme of

citizenship is exemplified through this strong student participation in the campus community. What is special about the University experience is that the campus environment creates a space that encourages student involvement and leadership. As members of the campus community, students develop skills that can then be carried into the communities in which they will ultimately reside.

The second most evident missional theme was that of diversity and inclusion. Ayers (2015) noted in his study that there was a missional shift for curriculum goals to emphasize respect for diverse humanity which is expected to be tied with the growing globalization of higher education so its presence as a clearly represented theme aligns with the current research. While the theme of diversity and inclusion did not present itself in many of the top experiences shared, when specifically asked about it, all participants had clear and personal examples to share.

Interestingly, once again this theme did not surface within the academic setting of the participants' experience, but rather in relationships and extra-curricular activities. It was clear that there was some question regarding the presence of this ideal on campus. While most participants shared that they felt the university provided a diverse community, there were also experiences shared where this ideal seemed to be lacking. In these experiences, students were confronted with new and broader knowledge of diversity and inclusion and were forced to wrestle with what it means to be a diverse and inclusive community. These encounters were broken into two types: specific events and personal relationship. While participants 3, 4, 5 talked about specific events that expanded their awareness of diversity on campus, participants 1, 2, and 6 shared about the impact of building friendship with people different from themselves. This

focus on relationship highlights the importance of the theme as it links it with the pervasive non-missional theme of social support.

***Vaguely Represented Missional Themes.***

The remaining missional themes, while still present in some of the participants' experiences, were not as widely represented and when represented, were sometimes minimally emphasized and not supported by clear experiential examples. Only one participant blatantly expressed the lack of a theme in their experience while some themes were obviously present in what one participant shared but were not apparent in another's. In some cases, participants had to ask for clarification about what was meant by the theme. Kuh et al. (2010) pointed out that marks of effective educational practice involved mission statements that were "(1) clearly articulated educational purposes and aspirations, and (2) a coherent, relatively well understood philosophy that guides 'how we do things here'" (p. 25). A lack of understanding of the terms used in the mission statement would seem to identify a missing salience between what is stated in the mission statement and what is lived out in the campus community. Still these themes were not altogether missing.

Regarding the theme of research, it was clearly evident in experiences that participant 1 and participant 3 highlighted as top moments in their college experience. The other participants, however, did not similarly share an overarching impact of research on their experiences. When directly asked about the presence of this theme, it was most commonly only briefly discussed as being a part of a specific class or two. It also seemed that the experiences participants had with research were different depending on their area of study. The theme of applied learning similarly seemed to have some variance depending on area of study. This variance can be explained in by the fact that the University's mission statement does not promise research or applied learning

experience for all students, but rather mentions that it will create opportunities for these experiences. For some of the participants, they took initiative and incorporated these opportunities as important elements of their experience. The other participants while presented with similar opportunities decided to focus their efforts elsewhere and thus did not highlight these opportunities as major parts of their experiences. Thus, despite the varied level at which these themes are present, the mission statement theme is still adequately upheld.

The next theme not as strongly represented is that of free and rigorous inquiry. Interestingly, though its overall appearance was lacking, it was the only theme that appeared in participants' expectations of what college would be like. This aligns with Morphey and Hartley's (2006) findings that mission statements are symbolic representations of institutional values. It also aligns with the circulating idea discussed in their study that mission statements are generalized representations of what it means to be an institution of higher education. Specifically, the expectation communicated by participants was that college would be academically challenging. It stands to reason that the next level of education would present a higher level of academic rigor and thus, if mission statements hold generalized ideals of what the institution is, it is not surprising to find this missional theme present in the participants' expectations.

What is surprising is that despite the expectation that college would be more challenging several participants expressed a somewhat contrary view. What attributed to this dissonance was that participants tied the idea of rigor with how they felt about the class. Classes are hard not only because of content, but also because of personal motivation and the teaching methods and relationship with the faculty member. Participants expressed that when they were interested in the classes or they felt supported and cared about by their professors the classes were more

enjoyable and thus seemed easier than classes where this was not the case. Thus, the theme of rigorous inquiry is more involved than just the level of difficulty but includes ideas of challenge matched by support.

The connected theme of free inquiry was even more vague in the participants interviews. When discussed by other participants, the statements were brief and lacking in detail. When tied to the academic experience this theme can seem stifled by the fact that there are academic requirements that students must follow to achieve their desired outcome. However, when this theme is expanded to the whole college experience it is revealed rather clearly. Each student that participated in this study shared different experience from the next that indicates they were free to explore and make their experience what they wanted to be. While there are the linked themes within each experience, each participant had the freedom to create their own experience from the choice of what they would study to the ways in which they would involve themselves in the community. Thus, in the context of the entire college experience students do have the freedom to define their own path.

The final and seemingly most elusive theme was that of reason and communication. While the participants clearly expressed that this theme was a part of their experience, most struggled in providing articulate examples and experiences. Participants' responses were often vague and incoherent. The reason for this struggle is the fact that these elements are skills developed over many experiences and are hard to pinpoint in a single experience. The University's mission statement specifically highlights reason and communication as abilities that when used effectively develop responsible citizens and leaders. Therefore, while vaguely portrayed as an individual theme, the high presence of citizenship and leadership experiences would indicate that reason and communication were also present. While these themes were not

as clearly represented in the other participants' experiences, the growth and development attributed to the participants' leadership experiences is an indication of the presence of these abilities.

### **The Mission Statement, Student Development, and the Value of the Student Experience.**

Throughout the interviews there is evidence that themes within the mission statement have been useful in creating the students' experience; however, it is not as clear that the participants fully recognize this. When specifically asked about the value of these themes, participants acknowledged that the themes are important, yet for some of the themes, participants were unable to identify the specific value it had in adding to their experience. Furthermore, when asked about the impact of their overall college experience, few of the responses included any mention of the missional themes. It is also interesting to recognize that the experiences in which participants attributed the most value were commonly extracurricular experiences. This stands out given the mission statement presents its themes focused largely on the academic operation of the institution. In examining participants' responses, the value found within each theme is not related to the theme itself, but how the experience involving that theme is connected to the participants' personal development.

### ***Student Development as a Valuable Experience.***

Chickering and Reisser (1993) stressed the importance of having a student "development philosophy at the core of the college" (p. 44); they argued that without this development philosophy, colleges are unable to prepare responsible individuals that are able to flexibly apply themselves to the changing needs of the world (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). The literature states that mission statements describe the institutions' core values and philosophies (Davis et. al., 2007; Meacham, 2008; Morpew & Hartley, 2006). It seems fitting then that the value that

participants gained from the missional themes of the University can be linked with Chickering and Reisser's (1993) student development theory. Most commonly students linked their experiences with the first vector of developing competence. This vector involves building confidence in one's abilities to face and overcome challenges and was evidenced across multiple missional themes. Furthermore, this vector is directly linked to the first non-missional theme, increased confidence. Participants talked about doing things they didn't think they could, pursuing and attaining goals, and navigating new experiences, all of which built confidence within them. Vector 1 is also linked to the second non-missional theme, social support, in that this theme included the value participants attributed to mentoring relationships in helping them to build confidence as they were guided and supported through their experiences.

As the first vector it makes sense that this would be seen widely across the student's experience since it is seen as a starting point from which all persons would begin in their identity development. It also closely aligns with the educational focus of the University mission. Concepts stated within the mission statements such as learning methods, fostering opportunities, and refining abilities lend themselves to the purpose of developing competence. Furthermore, increased confidence is a natural product of better understanding your identity, who you are, what is your purpose, and what you value.

Another vector that appeared in the participants' responses to what they valued from their experience was vector four, developing mature interpersonal relationships. This vector was also tied to the second non-missional theme identified, social support. This vector also appeared in responses to missional themes that were more person and community focused, such as the theme of diversity and inclusion and responsible citizenship. In valuing their experiences of diversity and inclusion participants discussed gaining new perspectives of others and how to better relate



to them which are developmental areas represented in developing mature interpersonal relationships. These similar concepts were also present in some of the participants' responses about citizenship. It was clear that relationships were a key and valuable element of the participants' experiences. Even in sharing about their expectations for college all participants focused at some level on the social aspect of college. This is due to the importance that relationships play in personal development. While vector 4 specifically includes relationship in the title of the vector, all the vectors include elements of building one's identity in the context of the surrounding social context.

The value of participants' experiences on personal development were further seen when asked how their college experience had impacted their goals. In response to this question, none of the participants mentioned any of the missional themes. Rather, all participants' answers in some way referenced the idea of providing direction. Some participants came into college with goals and their experience changed or further developed while other participants did not have any goals and their experience in college helped them find develop them. This directional shaping provided by the university experience ties into Chickering and Reisser's (1993) fifth and sixth vectors of establishing identity and developing purpose respectively. It may be that this personal development is ultimately linked with the missional theme of free inquiry. While none of the students expressed this connection, the university provides a unique context that not only encourages but is largely focused on independent (or free) learning and discovery where students are able explore their goals in a manner that allows them to better define and refine them. It would seem that ultimately the purpose of the missional themes is to aid in student development and whether or not students are able to draw that connection, this value of missional themes is represented in their experiences.

### *Missional Themes in Academic Versus Non-academic Experiences.*

While the missional themes do provide value to the student experience there is an interesting disconnect between the narrow academic focus of the mission statement and the students' experience. The University mission statement wording is strongly centered around the academic portion of the University. While the mission statement does mention the University community and campus culture, it inserts these ideas within the context of student-faculty scholarship and applied learning experiences. The entire mission statement seems to keep its focus on the academic realm of the university. This is highlighted again by the fact that the only university staff mentioned in the mission statement are faculty. Given the importance some students placed on the mentoring roles that coaches or administrative staff had on their experiences, the mission statement seems too narrowly focused in this area. Furthermore, while participants did speak some about the importance of experiences in the academic sphere, the experiences seen most widely represented and most valuable to participants nearly always occurred through extracurricular involvement.

### **Implications**

In the discussion of the changing mission of the modern university and the universities' purposes (Etzkowitz, 2016), there has been an important element missing. Research shows that most students go to college to for career purposes (Fisher, 2019). When the students in this study were asked about why they went to college, only two mentioned their career goals. The rest did not have clearly defined reasons and expressed more generally that it is what society, or their parents, wanted for them. Although in starting college students may have generally lacked a vision of what they would gain, it is clear that they all expressed that their collegiate experience was a valuable one. This value was not isolated to academic success or career potential, but was

more significantly attributed to their personal development. The university provides a unique localized community full of a variety of opportunities where students are empowered to be involved in creating their experiences as they seek to better identify who they are. It is a place of free inquiry not only about academic pursuit but of personal discovery.

While there is an important academic core to the work of higher education, it is important that universities take into account of the impact the whole university experience. As trustees, administrators, and faculty work to shape the mission statement of the university, it is advised that they clearly incorporate the extracurricular element into their mission. This study has shown that often those experiences help to more fully reflect the values communicated within the mission statement. As Kuh et. al. (2010) discussed, institutions that align their written mission with their lived mission are more effective. Thus, excluding the valuable extracurricular aspect of the university from the mission statement may muddle the institution's purpose and impact. It is important that university decision makers work to ensure the mission statement reflects the interconnected value of the academic and extracurricular aspects of the university experience.

In recent days, the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the university setting and has led some to raise the question of whether or not this is the end of the brick and mortar institution. This study provides a clear answer that it will not be. The experiences gained in the on-campus context is the most valuable aspect of the university according to students. The brick and mortar is not going away because the University is more than a place to learn a skill or subject, it is a place to explore, discover, and develop as a human being. As administrators and faculty continue to navigate the future of higher education, they must not lose sight of this valuable element. The words of Chickering and Reisser (1993) still echo true today, "institutions

that impart transferable skills and relevant knowledge, bolster confidence and creativity, and engender social responsibility and self-directed learning are needed more than ever” (p. 44).

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Much of the previous research done on university mission statements has been quantitatively and content analysis focused. This study, as well as studies like Davis et. al. (2007), are valuable in increasing understanding of the impact that university mission statements have on the actual students they seek to serve. This study was limited to only a single university and a small number of participants. Replication of this study at other institutions would provide insight on the continuity of the ideas developed through this study with different institutional types and more participants. Also, replication of this study would help to confirm or alter the findings presented in this study.

Further research may also explore student reflections on their experience several years following graduation. As students in this study did not clearly link the value of the some of the missional themes with their own experience, it would be interesting to know if this understanding shifts as students gain experience outside the university context. Once having some experience outside the university context, they may be able to better recognize the value of their college experience.

### **Summary**

This study explored the representation of a University’s mission statement within the individual students’ experiences. The missional themes were clearly evident in the students’ experience and adds to the literature that mission statements are more than just words, but are, to some extent, symbolic of the value and purpose of the university. Furthermore, this study found that what students find most valuable in their student experience is connected to their personal

development as can be represented in student development theory. The student experience, especially their experience outside the classroom, is valuable to students and ought to be considered in the continued conversation regarding the mission, purpose, and future of higher education.

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**Appendix A**  
**Interview Protocol**

**Identifier Questions**

1. What College are you a part of at the University?

**Research Questions 1:** *Are the key concepts outlined in a mid-size midwestern University's mission statement evident in the individual student's experience?*

1. What was your reason for attending college?
2. As you came to college what were your expectations of your experience?
3. Tell me about your undergraduate experience?
  - a. What were your top 5 experiences and why?
4. In what ways have the following elements been present and/or lacking from your college experience?
  - a. free and rigorous inquiry of various subject matters,
  - b. diversity and inclusion,
  - c. research and applied learning
  - d. reason and communication
  - e. citizenship and leadership

**Research Questions 2:** *Do students recognize the concepts outlined in a mid-size midwestern University's mission statement as useful in their personal development?*

1. How has your college experience impacted you and your goals?
  
2. In what ways do you feel your college experience has prepared you for life after college?
  
3. How are the following elements important to you and your experience?
  - a. free and rigorous inquiry of various subject matters,
  - b. diversity and inclusion,
  - c. research and applied learning
  - d. reason and communication
  - e. citizenship and leadership

## **Appendix B**

### **Sample Recruitment Email to Participants**



### Recruitment Email

Hello,

You are invited to participate in a study of the University's mission statement as it relates to your experience as a student. This study is being conducted by Darek Hollis, a graduate student in the College Student Affairs program, and is being advised by Dr. Richard Roberts of the Counseling and Student Development department.

The study will consist of an hour-long interview with the Research Darek Hollis. Participants must be traditional students who have attended Eastern University since their freshman year. Participation in this study is voluntary.

Selected participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card upon completing the interview and be entered to a drawing for a second \$25 Amazon gift card. Participants will be selected on a first-come basis.

If you are interested in participating, please contact Darek Hollis at [ddhollis@eiu.edu](mailto:ddhollis@eiu.edu) and be sure to include your College affiliation and major in the email. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Darek Hollis

**Appendix C**  
**Informed Consent Form**

## **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Darek Hollis and Dr. Richard Roberts (faculty sponsor) from the Counseling and Student Development department at Eastern Illinois University.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you are identified as an upperclassmen at the university.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study seeks to assess how the University's mission is evidenced in and through students' university experiences. The study will also explore the ways in which the missional goals of the University are important to and support the development of students' personal goals.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

Participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher that will last approximately one hour. During the interview you will be asked questions about your experience at the university and your perceptions of its alignment with the university mission. Your interview will be audio and video recorded and stored on the researcher's computer.

### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are not foreseeable risks or discomforts that will arise from participating in this study.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS**

This study may benefit university administrators in gaining insight regarding the impact and application of the university's mission as it pertains to students' experience.

### **INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION**

Participants in this study will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card for participating which will be provided upon completion of the interview. Participants will also be entered to win a second \$25 Amazon gift card. The winner will be notified via email once all interviews are completed. The gift card will be sent via that student's preferred email.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by removing identifying information, particularly names, from the interview transcripts. Participants names will not be present on any transcript materials, nor will they be in the final research report. Only the researcher and faculty advisor will have access to transcripts and recorded interviews. The recording files of the interview will be kept for 3 years and then destroyed as required by the IRB.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without penalty or consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may also refuse to answer any questions presented.

**IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact”

Darek Hollis, Principal Investigator

503-764-7251

ddhollis@eiu.edu

Dr. Richard Roberts, Faculty Advisor

217-581-2400

rroberts@eiu.edu

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board  
Eastern Illinois University  
600 Lincoln Ave.

Charleston, IL 61920  
Telephone: (217) 581-8576  
E-mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant Date

I, the undersigned, have defined and fully explained the investigation to the above subject.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator Date