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Abstract

This paper describes the renewal of mission at three liberal arts colleges. Based on interviews with 77 participants and the review of more than 2,000 pages of institutional documents, the study explores how groups of individuals responded to an institutional crisis by seeking a more satisfying institutional life. The paper draws parallels between these efforts at mission-centered change and socio-cultural movement theory.

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“There Is No Way without a Because”: Revitalization of Purpose at Three Liberal Arts Colleges

Matthew Hartley

Humans are “sense-making” creatures (Weick, 1995), suspended, as Clifford Geertz (1973) famously observed, in webs of significance that we spin ourselves. In our professional work, these webs are spun collectively, forming that “invisible tapestry” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988) of shared beliefs, values, and norms known as organizational culture (Ashkanasy, Wilderom, & Peterson, 2000; Schein, 1985; Trice & Beyer, 1993). A central element of any strong organizational culture—one that is resilient and efficient and that engenders commitment—is a compelling sense of purpose (Banner & Gagne, 1995; Collins & Porras, 1994; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Ouchi, 1981; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983).

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A variety of terms express the broader concept of institutional purpose. The two most common are “mission” and “vision.” References to “mission” tend to point to hard-nosed operational goals or core organizational competencies (Dill, 1997), while “vision” connotes the idealized values, assumptions, hopes, dreams, and aspirations of a group (Collins & Porras, 1996; Vaill, 1998). Vaill explains:

We will call the bare statement of why the organization exists and what it intends to do the mission. We will call its human meaning and the difference that the mission makes in the world the vision. If the mission is the words, the vision is the music. (p. 64)

Collins and Porras’s (1996) comprehensive research led them to conclude that “visionary” organizations have a “core ideology”—beliefs and values that would be adhered to even if they caused a competitive *disadvantage*—and have an “envisioned future.” Thus, a shared institutional purpose not only describes what we do (operational aims), but it also encompasses who we are (institutional identity) and the ideals we embrace and aspire to (vision).

The literature suggests that a clear purpose influences institutional life in two ways. First, it informs day-to-day decision-making. Two disparate missions (e.g., “cultivating liberally educated scholars” and “providing exceptional vocational training”) will likely lead to decidedly different notions about which behaviors or ideas are valued or proscribed (Ouchi, 1980; Schein, 1985). Thus, a clear purpose reinforces common priorities, which produce greater social and programmatic cohesion (Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983). Second, a shared purpose has the capacity to ennoble work—to promote a sense of importance and uniqueness about the work at hand (Clark, 1972; Martin, Feldman, et al., 1983; Peterson, Cameron, et al., 1986; Selznick, 1957)—and can thus generate tremendous energy and commitment (Martin, Feldman, et al., 1983; Ouchi, 1981; Pettigrew, 1979). One quantitative study of independent colleges found that a clear mission correlated with high faculty morale (Rice & Austin, 1988). Like the mason who described work as “building a cathedral” rather than “laying down stone,” missions have the capacity to inspire. Organizations apparently benefit from answering the workplace equivalent of the great existential question: “Why are we here?”

Mission is particularly important during times of change to organizations generally (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Collins & Porras, 1994; Kotter, 1996; Nanus, 1992; Peters & Waterman, 1982) and to colleges and universities specifically (Bryson, 1995; Chaffee, 1984; Dill, 1997; Gaudiani, 1996; Tierney, 1988). Although the benefits of having a clear purpose have been described (Chaffee, 1984; Clark, 1972; Keller, 1983; Tierney, 1992; Tierney, 1988) and

recommended (Austin, 1990; Dill, 1997; Rice & Austin, 1988; Smith & Reynolds, 1990), the *process* by which colleges and universities might go about clarifying their academic missions remains largely unexplored (Delucchi, 1997, p. 424).

What happens when institutions attempt to renew their institutional purpose? This qualitative study describes how that process unfolded at three liberal arts colleges. What became a widely shared institutional mission was the *by-product* of a collective search for meaning—not an organizing first principle. A decade ago these institutions were in crisis—operating in an increasingly hostile environment and racked by in-fighting. A small group within each institution responded with an unexpected rekindling of idealism, with each group triggering a larger collective effort to articulate and later implement a new and compelling educational vision. This new purpose animated and informed prodigious change efforts (e.g., changing the academic calendar, ending distribution requirements, instituting a new core curriculum, and developing service learning programs). Over time, a majority of institutional members came to embrace the new vision. Relationships between estranged individuals were restored; and ultimately, efforts to realize the new mission led to a stronger organizational culture and a more satisfying institutional life than had been in place before the crisis. These accounts confirm cultural theories that link institutional purpose with organizational culture, suggesting that clarification of purpose is the result of a socio-cultural phenomenon akin to social movements (Diani, 1992) and cultural revitalizations (Wallace, 1956).

HISTORIC CONTEXT: EROSION OF MISSION AT LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES IN THE 1980S

Liberal arts colleges comprise only a modest percentage of our institutions of higher learning (Breneman, 1994). Nevertheless, they are of particular interest to educational researchers because they have historically been bellwethers of change. They are the “indicator species” of American higher education, signaling the health or fragility of the overall system. Like the majority of these colleges, the institutions in this study have modest endowments and are heavily tuition dependent. They are not selective in their admissions and they serve a discrete geographic region. Institutions of this sort have historically been attentive to shifts in the interests of students or the needs of their localities, and they have modified their work accordingly. Warren Bryan Martin (1984) comments, “The record . . . shows modern liberal arts colleges to be a curious mixture of traditions and innovation, or as Pfinster puts it, ‘a study in persistence within change, continuation within adaptation’” (p. 286).

The 1980s were difficult times for many small independent colleges. There were growing fears about enrollment shortfalls (Leslie, Grant, & Brown, quoted in Zammuto, 1984). The economy was in a seemingly intractable recession, inflation was high, and experts predicted that between 10 and 30% of all colleges and universities would close or merge within a decade (Keller, 1983).

In an effort to compete, many colleges employed enrollment-driven strategies—adding programs and services based on their ability to attract and retain students. Preprofessional programs proved far more popular than the traditional liberal arts and ultimately displaced them at many campuses (Breneman, 1994; Delucchi, 1997). One observer warned that, while the expansion into professional programs promised to be a successful short-term strategy for bolstering enrollment, it also constituted a loss of institutional focus, which might ultimately “cause these institutions a number of problems during the 1980s and 1990s” (Zammuto, 1984, p. 209). What Zammuto foresaw was a crisis of purpose stemming from the abandonment of these institutions’ core missions as liberal arts colleges. In time, many small, independent colleges, unloosed from their traditional academic moorings, drifted away from their founding purposes (Breneman, 1994; Delucchi, 1997).

Zammuto’s prescience was confirmed in a study conducted by Ellen Earle Chaffee in the 1980s. Chaffee examined 14 liberal arts institutions that had experienced serious financial difficulties and found that “one set made a dramatic recovery; the other set did not” (Chaffee, 1984, p. 213). In comparing the two groups, Chaffee found that the colleges whose strategies were primarily opportunistic, or “adaptive” to market demands, were less successful at overcoming their financial difficulties than those whose adaptive strategies were “tempered by interpretive approaches” (p. 217). To Chaffee, institutions engage in interpretive work when they make decisions by “interpreting” the institutional mission and pursuing strategies consonant with that mission. Chaffee found that such institutions were “selective in responding to opportunities and invested heavily in conceptual and communication systems that guided and interpreted any organizational change” (p. 213). The shared sense of mission helped members determine which policies or programs conformed, or failed to conform, to that articulated mission.

METHODS

I selected the three colleges in this study through a purposive sampling strategy (Chein, 1981) to develop “information rich cases” (Patton, 1990) of colleges that had engaged in the “interpretive” work Chaffee (1984) de-

scribed. I first interviewed representatives of seven higher education associations.¹ They identified 28 institutions that had undertaken significant change efforts during the past decade. To further narrow the field, I applied four criteria:

1. The institutions were of similar type. I reasoned that comparing institutions of vastly different size or purpose might complicate the cross-case analysis.

2. Curricular reform accompanied the change effort. Curricular reform often entails revisiting the institution's educational purpose. The presence of broad-based curricular reform indicated that the change process went beyond the rhetorical repackaging of existing programs.

3. Multiple constituents were involved in the change. I was not interested in looking at innovations at the margins and therefore selected sites where the president, senior staff members, faculty from multiple departments or divisions, and staff members all participated in the change effort.

4. The change had occurred in a similar time-frame. I identified institutions that had engaged in interpretive change within the past decade or so, to ensure that many of the people who participated in those efforts were still on campus. I disqualified several institutions where changes had been initiated only recently.

My conversations with the association representatives and a subsequent review of institutional literature (e.g., student handbooks, catalogs, admissions materials) suggested that eight institutions met the above criteria. Telephone interviews with representatives from these institutions led to the final selection of LeMoyne-Owen College, a historically Black college in Memphis, Tennessee; Olivet College in Olivet, Michigan; and Tusculum College in Greeneville, Tennessee—all independent colleges.

I did not select these institutions because they employed particular strategies (e.g., were models of shared governance). A well-known cartoon depicts a scientist filling a chalkboard with complex calculations, in the midst of which is written "and then a miracle occurs." In the same way, I began this research understanding that each of these three colleges had once been in trouble and that each had achieved remarkable results. The process that led to those changes was the "miracle" I hoped to explore.

I secured permission to conduct my study by speaking with the presidents of Tusculum and Olivet. At LeMoyne-Owen, the college's institutional review board read my research proposal and unanimously approved the

¹American Association for Higher Education (AAHE), American Council on Education (ACE), Association of College Personnel Administrators (ACPA), Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Association of Governing Boards (AGB), Campus Compact, Council of Independent Colleges (CIC), and New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE).

research. To ensure that the interviews were “as representative as possible of the individuals, groups and situations under study” (Harrison, 1994, p. 68), I asked at least two individuals from each institution to identify people with a range of perspectives on the change process—both proponents and opponents. To avoid member bias, I added the names of several senior faculty members and any long-standing administrators who had not been recommended to me. I contacted each individual on my list by e-mail prior to my visit, described the study, and asked if he or she would be willing to participate in the research. Prior to each interview, I described the purpose of the research again and answered any questions about the study. I then asked permission to audiotape each conversation and demonstrated how to shut off the tape recorder should the person wish to make a comment off the record. (None did.) I explained that the audiotape would be transcribed and all names removed from the transcript. I also specified that only the participant’s institutional role would be used as an identifier (e.g., faculty member, administrator) and that no quotations would be used for attribution without permission. (See Table 1.)

As new names emerged during the interviews, I attempted to schedule additional appointments, a variation of the snowballing or chain technique (Patton, 1990; Bogdan & Bilken, 1992). I visited each campus for a week between October and December 1999. Although I learned a great deal from witnessing institutional life firsthand and took field notes during these visits, the retrospective nature of this study and limited resources weighed against multiple site visits and the collection of more robust ethnographic evidence.

In total, 77 people participated in this study. Our conversations lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, the average length of time being approximately one hour. The interviews were semi-structured (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and the protocol solicited reflections on institutional life before, during, and after the institutional changes. A separate protocol that focused largely on current institutional life was devised for members who had joined the institution more recently (e.g., junior faculty members and students). The protocol was a useful means of ensuring that I touched on all intended topics during each interview. I used interviews later in the week to cross-check facts. This “overlap method” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314) was an invaluable means of gaining multiple perspectives on key events. On the last day of my visit, I met again with a key institutional contact (a senior faculty member or long-standing administrator) and reviewed the details of the case, which I had compiled from my field notes in the evenings. These discussions provided an additional means of ensuring that the substance of the account was complete and accurate.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

<i>Type</i>	<i>LeMoyné-Owen</i>	<i>Olivet</i>	<i>Tusculum</i>
Senior administrators	6	7	6
Other staff	3	3	3
Senior faculty members	8	9	10
Junior faculty members	3	1	2
Students	4	10	2
Total	24	30	23

Erikson (1986) notes that a primary type of “evidentiary inadequacy” is “inadequate variety in kinds of evidence” (p. 140). Institutional documents were an important additional source of data.² The documents corroborated many of the details provided by the participants in the interviews. They also allowed for comparison of institutional language before and after the change effort.

The interview transcripts, institutional literature, and field notes constituted the data set. I performed “multiple readings of the entire set of field notes” (Erikson, 1986, p. 149), identified and coded emergent themes, and adjusted the coding rubric as the analysis moved forward and patterns emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). It was during the analysis that the complex process of developing a shared sense of purpose emerged as a central feature in the accounts.

²At the end of each interview, I asked members to help identify documents that might be helpful. Participants offered a wealth of written materials from their files—more than 2,000 pages—including drafts of mission statements, development materials, course catalogs, admissions materials, minutes from faculty senate meetings, accreditation reports, memoranda and reports regarding the change process, and syllabi for prospective courses. These documents were helpful for three reasons. First, by comparing documents before and after the change, I could better understand the extent to which the articulated mission of the institution had changed. Second, institutional documents such as syllabi of new classes, descriptions of new programs, revised promotion and tenure guidelines, and the institutional budget suggested the extent to which the change has been incorporated into the life of the institution. Third, the written materials corroborated many of the details provided by members. This last issue is of critical importance. One concern I had about engaging in a retrospective analysis of change was that an official “account” would taint members’ recollections of events. Although there were certainly times when members simply could not recall certain details, their stories of what occurred were often corroborated in the written materials.

THREE ILLUSTRATIVE CASES

The events that unfolded at LeMoyne-Owen, Olivet, and Tusculum are in some respects particularistic. What follows is intended to point out the striking similarities in the six-stage pathway leading to a new institutional purpose.

1. A crisis of purpose: the “institutional malaise” that provoked the search for purpose.
2. Rejection of the status quo and building the consensus for change: the process that led to a clarified institutional “vision.”
3. Arriving at a renewed vision: the surfacing of shared ideals and values by means of the presidential search, the reinterpretation of the founding purpose, and other factors.
4. The birth of a movement: the emergence of a core group of “true believers” dedicated to realizing the new vision.
5. Implementing the vision: the garnering of support for implementation of the vision.
6. Realizing the vision and the social construction of success: the emergence of a coherent set of beliefs and values about institutional life.

1. A Crisis of Purpose

By the 1980s, LeMoyne-Owen, Olivet, and Tusculum were headed toward crisis. Senior administrators at Tusculum and Olivet recalled that their institutions had debts of more than a million dollars. More troubling still, enrollments had declined—a disastrous condition for such tuition-dependent institutions. Declining resources meant stagnant salaries, which lowered morale. The campuses had grown shabby as the institutions were increasingly forced to defer maintenance. Several buildings at Tusculum were boarded up and condemned. A senior faculty member explained: “The campus was physically dying.” He continued:

You’d walk into Rankin Hall, which was housing admissions at the time, and the carpet had gaping holes in it and was ragged. The impression on a new prospective student was really pretty poor. And so, the facilities were in dreadful shape. Worse yet was faculty morale. Virtually every faculty member was looking for work elsewhere—some because they wanted to leave, others because they feared they would have to. They were committed and wanted to stay here, but they were saying, “Well, you know I have to feed my family and this school may close.”

Despite these bleak circumstances, prospects for change remained distant. Organizations are rife with mechanisms of conservation (Jonsson & Lundin, 1977; Schein, 1985; Trice & Beyer, 1993) and these colleges had developed dysfunctional organizational cultures—beliefs and norms that preserved a malignant status quo. There was a stoic acceptance of fate. A

senior Olivet professor explained: “We got used to being poor—we’d *always* been poor.”

Further, the long-standing presidents had proved adept at preserving their power. Faculty rarely had contact with the board and assumed that the president enjoyed its unequivocal support. Faculty and staff members described the president as “distant” and “aloof,” and at Olivet and Tusculum descriptors like “autocratic” and “hostile” were common. Tusculum’s president fired senior administrators with alarming regularity, and several faculty members described him as manipulative and adept at “playing favorites.” “It was a divide and conquer kind of thing,” noted one senior professor. The American Association of University Professors censured Olivet after the president fired an outspoken faculty member. A professor there recalled, “There was a lot of fear among the faculty. I mean I personally never felt threatened. I never felt my job was on the line if I crossed swords with the president or the dean, but a lot of faculty did.” Consultation, even communication, between the administration and the faculty grew increasingly rare. A member of Olivet’s faculty senate noted:

Occasionally, [the president] would ask the Senate to do something for form’s sake. They would do it and it would inevitably end up on a shelf somewhere so the frustration and the cynicism was high. We were asked to do things, but then it never went anywhere.

However, there were benefits to this arrangement. First, it lent a measure of predictability and stability to institutional life and second, because the presidents maintained a “hands-off” approach to curriculum, academic departments—even individual faculty members—were free to develop whatever courses they wanted, even new majors. There was also a cost: a complete absence of cross-functional cooperation. Several Olivet faculty members described this trade-off as “a devil’s bargain.”

There was a devil’s bargain between the administration and the faculty. The president, who had been here at that time thirteen years, found that as long as there wasn’t trouble, he could be very happy. And so he essentially told the faculty, “Listen, you do your thing. As long as we can support it financially, I don’t care what you do.”

It was a social contract with all the warmth and stability of a cease-fire. Over time this stalemate exacted a heavy price. Faculty dissatisfaction with the curriculum intensified. All three institutions during the 1980s placed a heavy emphasis on “practical” or professional education: LeMoyne-Owen gave credits for “experience” through a co-op program; Olivet developed a host of new majors—many of them preprofessional, and Tusculum’s liberal arts-focused residential college took a back seat to the lucrative “professional studies” program held in satellite classrooms in nearby cities. None

of their general education curricula had been updated in years. "It was the menu approach," explained a LeMoyné-Owen faculty member. "Students took a little of this and a little of that and called it an education." "It was really patronizing," said another. Despite its legacy as a normal school, a rigorous and thriving teacher education program was closed down. At Olivet (then with fewer than 800 students), the number of majors grew to more than 60—some with few or no students enrolled in them. A Tusculum faculty member described a similar scatter-shot approach, "We were running in every which direction."

Faculty concerns over the absence of academic rigor seemed to be corroborated by their growing perception that student preparedness had fallen to an alarming level. At LeMoyné-Owen, heated faculty discussions broke out when a number of graduates failed to secure employment—a devastating development for an institution that prided itself on training the next generation of leaders for Memphis. A Tusculum administrator observed despondently: "At that time we had students here who were simply unprepared for college . . . and we were graduating illiterates."

These troubling times provoked a range of reactions. Accounts of faculty and staff, particularly at Olivet and Tusculum, suggest that people had grown bitter and were becoming hostile. Acts of aggression, such as interdepartmental squabbles over scarce resources, intensified. Faculty meetings grew contentious, and arguments over policy changes became personal. The results were often painful. A Tusculum professor describing those meetings quipped, "I had a lot of flaming arrows shot in my butt during those years!" Other faculty members became despondent, withdrawing from the fray. They avoided committee meetings and left campus once their teaching was done.

The relationship between the administration and the faculty soured, particularly at Olivet and Tusculum. An Olivet faculty member explained: "The faculty's agenda was to teach students the best way we can when we have to beware of the administration because they're interested in attacking us." Indeed, efforts to spur change were rebuffed. An administrator at Olivet recalled trying to warn the president of rising racial tensions on campus:

A couple of us as faculty senators went directly to [the president] and said you got to listen to the students and listen to the faculty and staff that are saying we're growing as an institution and there are certain things we're going to have to do as a college.

The president demurred and the campus became increasingly balkanized.

Eventually institutional life became so unpleasant—the level of distress so acute—that some individuals concluded that, without change, the institution might well be headed for ruin. Some "evidence" was tangible and apparent (e.g., peeling paint, declining enrollments, an incoherent curricu-

lum). But also conclusive was a gnawing, gut-level sense that the institution had lost its way. It was as if, like Dante's hero in the opening lines of the *Inferno*, they "awoke in the midst of a dark wood in which the one true way was wholly lost." A Tusculum faculty member described that feeling of foreboding: "There was just this sense that the institution was being frittered away." Another likened the situation to "an institutional malaise." Describing the degradation of Olivet's purpose, an administrator remarked: "It had basically come down to: we're cheap and we're old; and if that doesn't work for you, we're a year-round sports camp with financial aid." A faculty member summarized the situation poignantly, "We just didn't know who we were anymore." The narratives suggest that it was this sense of purposelessness, more than any other factor that eventually called forth the subsequent rejection of the status quo and the search for meaningful change.

2. Rejection of the Status Quo and Building the Consensus for Change

The response began with a seemingly innocuous step. Individual faculty members began seeking one another out—trying to make sense of events and weighing possible responses. A Tusculum faculty member recalled:

The college's situation seemed increasingly dire, and actually the faculty came together more. So, some of the animosities were put aside and we realized—what is it—the old saying, "United we stand, divided we fall"? So we became united, maybe in some parts . . . because we wanted to be, and in other parts because it became a necessity. It was interesting because some of these folks had been at each other's throats.

These discussions led to a growing conviction that the institution was in trouble, and fuller realizations of the institution's problems emerged. Perceptions of the president also began to change. (The term "devil's bargain" is particularly illuminating when one considers who the "devil" was in that formulation.) What once had been viewed as a "hands-off" management style became evidence of incompetence, apathy, or obliviousness—all interpretations suggested in the narratives. At Tusculum, rumors of financial improprieties circulated (which were never proved). Although the presidents were only partially responsible for their institutions' circumstances, they bore the full weight of the blame—perhaps unfairly. A former administrator from Olivet remarked: "I don't think it was all the president's fault. You'll hear people saying that. There was really a dysfunctional relationship between the faculty and the administration. The faculty simply didn't take ownership of the academic mission." Nevertheless, the president came to symbolize to the faculty, and later to the board, the dissention, division, and absence of direction. A Tusculum faculty member quipped, "There wasn't anything to believe in other than 'preserve my administration.'" Finally, the faculty approached the trustees to express their lack of confidence in their

institution's future and its president. As a result, all three presidents left or were removed—casualties of, perhaps even scapegoats for, their college's troubles.

When an institution is in such a "crisis of decay," to use Clark's (1972) term, the result is often a "suspending [of] past practice" (p. 200). The subsequent presidential search processes resulted in shifts in institutional norms. Although contacts between the board and the faculty had been limited in the past, they now worked together to identify a new institutional leader. This cooperation helped bridge the long-standing rift between them. One member of the search committee at Olivet commented:

The board was very, very open with us, and at that point the board chair was here almost on a daily basis even though she lived in Grand Rapids, and I think she played a really good role in terms of steering us out of this mess.

The process, which also invited people to share their concerns and criticisms, established a new pattern of openness. One faculty member noted:

By a stroke of good luck we chose this academic search group, and in the process they interviewed everyone in the faculty and the administration and students to find out what is good about the school, what is bad about the school, where do you want to go. It was an excellent process. It was very gratifying to see that it basically confirmed and echoed much of what the faculty had said—but this was an independent finding.

The selection process led to the shared conviction among the trustees and some faculty members that because significant change was warranted, bold and unconventional thinking was called for. One Olivet trustee wrote an influential memo imploring the board to find an unconventional candidate, a "mad scientist" who would help the college reinvent itself. Ultimately, all three institutions selected extremely ambitious leaders. At LeMoyne-Owen, Irving McPhail challenged the college to recapture its past glory as the premier liberal arts institution for the Black community in Memphis. A faculty member quipped: "You want a bumper sticker for McPhail? He wanted us to be Harvard." Michael Bassis, too, put the Olivet community on notice, stating during his on-campus interview: "If you want incremental change, *don't hire me.*" A member of the search committee recalled:

The one thing I remember clearly about the candidates—all except Michael [Bassis]—they all said we were too timid in our fund raising and we didn't ask for enough money. We didn't have our tuition high enough. It seemed like an odd response to something that was so deeply embedded here and so systemic. . . . I mean we *did* need more money! No question about that, but that seemed like a tiny part of the total problem.

At Tusculum, Robert Knott's first public act was to convene the faculty on July 1, 1989. A faculty member described that moment:

He said: "The South is full of small liberal arts colleges. If that's all we aspire to, then that's not much justification for our continued existence. We may as well return to a year ago and close the place and you can get jobs at institutions that are stronger and better positioned to serve your professional needs. . . . Instead, I'm challenging you. I can point to an overall direction, but the faculty must lead us in the direction."

3. Arriving at a Renewed Vision

The visions emerged from several distinct sources. One influence was the new president or, more specifically, what the new president symbolized. Each one's professional background suggested the direction the institution needed to go next. For example, Irving McPhail was "Ivy League educated" and had proved his administrative acumen by engineering curricular reform at his previous post. A LeMoyne-Owen faculty member recalled, "He had his hand on the pulse of the trends that were taking place in higher education." His selection by the board seemed to presage a new emphasis on academic excellence and innovation for the college. Michael Bassis came to Olivet from Antioch. The board knew that with Bassis as provost, Antioch had transformed itself. In the interviews, people pointed to Antioch's and Olivet's common roots as progressive colleges founded by abolitionists—clearly implying that Olivet might become another Antioch. At Tusculum, Robert Knott impressed the board with his sterling academic and administrative credentials. Once a philosophy professor, he had joined the ranks of the administration and had served as provost of a successful Christian college in nearby North Carolina. A faculty member said: "I found him impressive because of his grasp of the nuts and bolts of small colleges. Plus I saw the glimmerings of a lot of intellectual depth in connection with the liberal arts in him. I thought that was real valuable."

Cohen and March (1974) observe: "The college president faces [many] ambiguities. The first is the ambiguity of purpose. What are the goals of the organization?" (p. 195). The vehicle the presidents used to address this question was large committee meetings (a viable approach given the relatively small size of these institutions). All three immediately engaged the faculty in conversations—there were strategic planning sessions at LeMoyne-Owen, all-faculty retreats at Olivet, and "side-porch meetings" at Tusculum (regular meetings between the president and the faculty held on the side porch of the president's house). Common concerns, shared values, and the testing of new ideas occurred during these conversations, which ultimately supplied the conceptual and ideological raw materials for what emerged as the new vision.

Reclaiming the institution's history proved a particularly effective way of reclaiming a distinctive identity. In fulfilling its twin purposes—to train leaders and to serve as a vehicle for racial uplift—LeMoyné-Owen took students whom the faculty refer to as “diamonds in the rough” and turned them into well-educated citizens. The school had been founded to teach freed slaves to read and write and later, as a normal school, had trained “nine tenths of all the Black schoolteachers in Memphis.” For more than a century, this college was the elite educational institution and primary cultural resource for the Black community in Memphis. It counted many prominent local and even national leaders as alumni. McPhail challenged the board and the faculty and staff to reclaim that birthright.

The founding purposes of Tusculum and Olivet proved equally powerful. Before arriving on campus, Knott pored over Tusculum's founding documents. Established in 1794, less than two decades after the Revolutionary War, it was “the first college chartered west of the mountains and the oldest college in Tennessee.” Named for Cicero's ancient Roman academy, it too was dedicated to promoting civic education. Knott challenged the faculty to reclaim this lost heritage. A professor recalled that “galvanizing” speech:

He went back to the founder's comments from the 1700s . . . and he said, “We have a chance to resurrect it.” He talked to us about what would it mean to have a college which specifically claimed its civic republican and Christian heritage and linked them in civic education for the next generation of the state's and the nation's leaders, and citizens—precisely what the original mission was.

Bassis pointed to Olivet's founding by abolitionists—“the first college by charter to admit women and people of color”—and emphasized the radical nature of that foundational purpose of providing an education predicated on uncompromising principles of social justice. Bassis then formed a faculty committee (the “vision commission”), which he charged with distilling the ideas from the broad-based discussions into a statement that everyone could endorse. A member of the committee recalled:

He laid out some parameters. They were things like the college has to develop a new vision that's in line with the heritage of the school. . . . He wasn't going to, you know, let us become a truck-driving institute or a military academy that only allowed women.

These efforts were useful because the founding purposes were almost universally considered to be legitimate. Evoking history tied the change effort to something deeper and reinforced the sense that the institution was “special.” A senior faculty member at Tusculum expressed this: “It was worth saving. It was an institution that had been around since 1794. You just don't discard it. And that sounds corny, but that I think was part of my motiva-

tion.” Incredibly, not a single person interviewed questioned the notion of dusting off a purpose that had been articulated a century or two ago under vastly different circumstances. Ultimately, the founding purpose provided a common set of ideals from which to work.

Of course, it needed to be refitted to suit contemporary circumstances. In a real sense, the founding purpose served as a kind of institutional Rorschach test: people looked at it and then interpreted what it meant—with all of the above factors (e.g., presidential symbolism, broad-based conversations) informing the translation. At LeMoyne-Owen, McPhail used the term “a Beacon of Hope” from a speech of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to convey the college’s role as an academically elite institution and a resource for the Black community of Memphis. Olivet’s “vision commission” drew on themes of inclusiveness and social justice and articulated them as “Education for Individual and Social Responsibility.” Finally, Tusculum drew heavily from its founding purpose and expressed a desire to prepare students to become practitioners of the “Civic Arts.”

4. Birth of a Movement: True Believers, Supporters, Fence-Sitters, and Naysayers

All three institutions now had “mission” or “vision statements” pregnant with meaning. On a rather abstract level, a “shared sense of purpose” had been achieved. However, there was no consensus about how these visions ought to be made manifest. In what followed, the seemingly endless debates, the resistance of skeptics, and the sheer volume of work necessary to enact such comprehensive reform might well have suffocated the vision in its infancy but for a small group of individuals who became absolutely committed to the vision. Over time, these “true believers” were able to draw others to the cause and were increasingly influential in the decision-making process. A kind of hierarchy developed. First, there were the “true believers”—zealous and campaigning tirelessly for the cause. An Olivet administrator referred to them as “the vanguard.”

Then, there was a slightly larger group of people who joined the “true believers” in the effort because they supported change, albeit for largely pragmatic reasons. The “supporters” agreed to serve on committees and worked with the “true believers” to advance change. Some joined the effort because of an interest in one specific element of the change agenda (e.g., the redesign of a particular course or the creation of a new program). The largest group by far was the “fence-sitters”—people who were ambivalent about the effort. Some had become cynical about the possibility for change, while others harbored a deep distrust of the board and the new administration. Most were simply willing to wait and see before committing themselves.

Finally, there were the “naysayers”—people who actively opposed the effort. A few long-standing faculty members (the “old guard”) interpreted

the call to change as an implicit condemnation of their life's work. An Olivet faculty member explained: "All of a sudden, a lot of the people who had been here for years began saying: 'Wasn't what we had good enough?'" Also in this group were those who took issue with particular policies, a group a Tusculum administrator referred to as "the loyal opposition." Indeed, the proposed curricular changes raised a host of turf issues. A faculty member at LeMoyne-Owen pointed to these concerns:

[With the proposed core curriculum] there weren't intro courses for your majors anymore! You lost your intro courses for your majors so then "What do we do about that?" They weren't recruiting tools. I don't know what your experience has been; but a lot of times in a lot of schools, people teach the Gen Ed course and they're recruiting for the major.

5. Implementing the Vision

Over time, support for the vision grew. An administrator at Olivet described that process:

I saw three groups of people—those who were the naysayers, those who were the fence-sitters (which was the biggest group), and the vanguard. I think we had a good-sized group of naysayers to begin with and a medium-size group of fence-sitters and just a little tiny handful of vanguard. And, pretty soon the number of fence-sitters started to grow because I think they were starting to see some good things happening and they were thinking, "Well, I've got to be positioned to move in the other direction if I need to." And, pretty soon instead of having 20 of the 50 or 55 faculty as naysayers, there were only six.

A similar dynamic occurred at the other two colleges as well. Over time, the pragmatic "supporters," by participating in the change effort, came to embrace the new vision and profess its efficacy, thereby entering the ranks of the "true believers." The "fence-sitters," seeing that changes were taking place and wanting a say in the new order, joined the effort and thus became "supporters." So, eventually the proponents of the new vision increased in number and gained influence. Ultimately, at each institution, the vast majority of individuals came to endorse the programmatic expression of the vision.

What accounted for the eventually widespread "buy-in"? The commitment to the new vision was clearly first and foremost with the true believers, who believed it could be realized long before there was any evidence of success. Through its efforts, this group, in a real sense, provided the "venture capital" of the movement. They and their faith were a key resource, and they drew others to the cause by means of several strategies. Quite pragmatically, they argued for the necessity of broad-based change: "Some kind of change had to happen, so why not this particular conception?" They in-

vited people to become active participants and allowed anyone who joined the effort to influence the process. This tactic had a powerful effect on people. A faculty member at Olivet described her initial skepticism giving way:

At first I thought, "Okay, here we go again." And then, after I started to be a part of—actually, I assisted in the development of the curriculum . . . so I had a very critical, very central involvement in that project. So at that point it went beyond rhetoric for me, and I began to realize, "Oh, they are very serious about this Olivet Plan."

The mechanism of involvement was the establishment of parallel governance structures—the strategic planning process at LeMoyne-Owen and committees dedicated to the change effort at Olivet and Tusculum. A "fence-sitter" could choose to participate on any number of levels (work groups were charged with designing particular courses, for example), and within these structures were multiple opportunities for leadership. Anyone participating in the change effort could argue for a particular idea: if a convincing case could be made that the idea advanced the institution toward the ideal, it was attempted. In a few instances, influential fence-sitters were actively sought out and tapped for leadership positions. An administrator at Olivet described Bassis's drawing in of one such person:

[That person] had been one of the naysayers and was kind of a curmudgeon. But [Bassis] knew if he co-opted somebody who had been here for a long time and knew the institutional history and who had potential for leadership, he'd have an insider. . . . It worked! I mean, [the person] just blossomed.

As this broader (and ideologically less homogeneous group) was drawn into the movement, the visions were to some degree amended. For example, although Tusculum's original vision was the recapturing of the civic republican and Christian values expressed in its founding purpose, the former quickly overshadowed the latter—the vision that finally emerged was the "civic arts." Instead, the Christian mission came to be described as a part of the civic purpose, the inculcation of "Judeo-Christian values." Elements of all the visions were amended as trial and error indicated which ideas, in fact, worked.

As curricular and policy changes were implemented, the opportunities to join the movement declined. Efforts at inclusiveness eventually gave way to obstinacy as proponents of change acted to protect their investment of time and effort. At Olivet, Bassis stated openly at a faculty meeting that the changes were moving forward, that everyone had had an opportunity for input, and that "if anyone wasn't happy, there are 3,500 other institutions in the United States and one of them must be a better fit." At both Olivet and Tusculum, some faculty members left as a result of the changes. In a few

cases, there were doubts about whether all of the departures were voluntary. "With some, it had to become a more 'forced situation,'" according to a Tusculum administrator. This development sent a powerful signal to those who had been openly critical. An Olivet faculty member recalled, "My office mate kind of got on the—you know—the 'bad list,' and as other people left she started saying to me 'Oh man, I'm exposed now.'"

6. Realizing the Vision and the Social Construction of Success

Ultimately, these visions found concrete expression, in part, through new programs and policies tailored to promote the new educational ideal. People pointed as well to improvements in institutional life—restored relationships and greater cooperation. Finally, individuals pointed to the validation of the vision by external groups.

In an effort to prepare students for lives of leadership and service to their community, LeMoyné-Owen incorporated Afrocentric ideas into the curriculum. A new, two-tiered core was devised for freshmen and sophomores, with one track ensuring that the academically talented were challenged and the other providing remediation for those "diamonds in the rough" who needed extra assistance. The teacher education program was resurrected and McPhail spent considerable time building strong relationships in the community.

Olivet created 11 new core courses (e.g., Self and Community I and II, Living in a Diverse World; Nature, Technology and a Diverse World) aimed at promoting "individual and social responsibility." A portfolio program was instituted: students submit "artifacts" demonstrating competency in a number of areas directly related to the vision and must pass "validation" at the end of sophomore year and before graduation. A service-learning program was also instituted, as was a new multi-cultural center promoting tolerance and celebrating diversity.

Tusculum's programmatic and policy changes were arguably the most sweeping. The college adopted a "focused calendar" (students take one intensive course at a time). This schedule gives faculty large chunks of time in which to structure community-based learning projects, a strategy consistent with the "civic arts" ideal. Service-learning has been incorporated throughout the curriculum and student participation is impressive. Tusculum also experimented with a new governance structure, under which, for several years, the college had no academic dean or provost. Instead, the faculty handled those tasks in committee, an arrangement that required a close partnership with the administration.

Although this research cannot establish a causal connection regarding the change effort and the overall fiscal health of these institutions, it is clear that all three colleges were in a far better position fiscally at the end of the change process than they were at the beginning. For example, Olivet and

Tusculum were able to erase million-dollar debts. The endowments at all three institutions began to grow, the donor base expanded, and new development efforts blossomed. Tusculum successfully completed the largest capital campaign in its history, and Knott nearly doubled the size of the board, increasing the percentage of alumni serving on it and setting clear expectations regarding their financial support. Olivet undertook a two-stage campaign that attempted to overreach the target suggested by consultants; the college completed the first stage earlier than expected and began preparing to launch the second phase. At LeMoyne-Owen, McPhail began conversations with his board about a campaign that was launched after his departure. At all three institutions, new building projects were undertaken and deferred maintenance was addressed. Once-condemned buildings at Tusculum were beautifully restored, and a new multi-million dollar student center was built. For the first time, all three institutions were successful in competing for large grants from foundations. At Olivet and Tusculum, enrollments grew; and at LeMoyne-Owen, although overall numbers of students did not increase, the previously high attrition rate was curtailed, thus creating a more stable environment.

As impressive as these tangible gains may be (e.g., programmatic and fiscal improvements), even more conspicuous is the transformation in attitudes about institutional life. There is intense satisfaction and pride in what has been accomplished. A Tusculum faculty member remarked, "Surely to goodness, you've heard the great campus story about the three professors who hadn't spoken to each other in something like 20 years . . . and that the process helped to heal that silence?" This account of three estranged senior professors whom Knott sent to attend a conference at Colorado College on curriculum reform and ended up bringing back the idea of the focused calendar was emblematic of the capacity of meaningful work to restore broken relationships. There is, overall, a greater sense of community, built on a shared sense of purpose. Consider the following statements from a Tusculum and an Olivet faculty member, respectively.

For me and, I think, for a number of other people, this process has been exhilarating and nurturing, and I think it was a way to get at that sense of collegiality and shared vision that I think we have.

There certainly are disagreements, but I think there's also a lot of respect. It's balanced by a sense that we're all trying to get to someplace that's similar with the development of our students.

External validation is another source of pride. A LeMoyne-Owen administrator boasted: "We've joined national networks and involved ourselves in some national movements that have helped to enhance what we were doing. . . . [These] helped place us, I think, in a national setting, but it

also gave us a sense of validity.” An Olivet faculty member also spoke with satisfaction about the institution’s improved reputation:

We’re the envy of a lot of other colleges and universities, places with a hell of a lot more money than us, a lot more financial resources, a lot better infrastructure. Yet we’re out on the leading edge of what we think higher education should be and where it’s going.

Administrators, faculty, and staff also feel that the students are much better served, thanks to the changes. An Olivet professor explained:

I think we’ve been successful because our students are a lot more sophisticated than they were when we were under the old system ten or 15 years ago. They are just experiencing things that are a lot broader. So, in those terms I think we’re successful. You know, I actually feel *good* about being here.

Of course, such assertions, though deeply felt, are impressionistic perceptions. Some clearly recognize this. A LeMoyne-Owen faculty member wisely remarked:

I have one student—he can’t write a sophisticated paper, not yet. We’ve got to work on that. But once they catch fire—one of the most beautiful things I know about is when a student catches fire and they come to my office and say “Look what I found!” I know that’s anecdotal. People say, “Well, that’s just anecdotal,” but I think teachers live by that.

ANALYSIS: MISSION-CENTERED CHANGE AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL MOVEMENT

The events at LeMoyne-Owen, Olivet, and Tusculum colleges are instructive about how a shared sense of purpose forms, develops, and is fulfilled during times of institutional change. From one perspective, these colleges can be understood as exemplars of the campaign approach to change (Hirschhorn & May, 2000), in which a powerful coalition attracts the attention of a sufficient number of individuals to advance a particular agenda. The political model is incomplete, however, in that it assumes “enduring differences among coalition members in values, beliefs, information, interests, and perceptions of reality” (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 163). By contrast, the most persistent theme emerging from these accounts is the shared nature of the ideals and values of the change proponents.

John Kotter (1996) acknowledges the limitation of the political model by suggesting that the final challenge of any change effort is to integrate new approaches into the organizational culture (p. 145). However, at these three colleges, it is not possible to separate the programmatic expression of the vision (the tangible “change”) from the surfacing of common values, the articulation of the vision, and the establishment of new institutional

norms and behaviors. In a real sense, cultural change *was* the central project, not a final step or add-on.

Something happened at these colleges beyond an exercise of political will by a powerful coalition. At their core, these stories are about collective searches for a more meaningful and satisfying institutional life. What occurred at these colleges were socio-cultural movements. Each one engendered a powerful affective response and generated an outpouring of energy and an intensity of commitment that had been previously absent. In his seminal article, Anthony Wallace (1956) describes an entire class of phenomena that include social movements, reform movements, revolutions, religious revivals, nativistic movements, and the establishment of utopian communities. Wallace terms these “revitalizations.”

A revitalization movement is defined as a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture. . . . They must feel [that] their cultural system is unsatisfactory; and they must innovate not merely discrete items, but a new cultural system, specifying new relationships as well as, in some cases, new traits. (p. 265)

Wallace argues that change efforts centered around shared ideals are common and occur in wide variety of social settings: “Revitalization movements are evidently not unusual phenomena” (p. 267). The central feature of a revitalization is that it depends on the emergence of a vision of a new way of life. Revitalizations may be explicitly religious (e.g., revivals, messianic movements) or largely secular (protest movements). In all cases, a movement’s cohesiveness and power is contingent on the maintenance of shared values and a healthy dose of idealism. Social movement theorist Mario Diani (1992) explains: “To be considered a social movement, an interacting collectivity requires a shared set of beliefs and a sense of belongingness” (p. 8). The progression of events at the three colleges conforms to Wallace’s framework. (See Table 2.)

The revitalization framework is useful in that it underscores the multi-stage complexity of collective purpose making. The early desire to end the status quo led to discussions of shared ideals, values, and aspirations (e.g., discussing the kind of president the institution needed, revisiting the founding purpose), which in turn formed the substance of the vision (e.g., “A Beacon of Hope,” “Education for Individual and Social Responsibility,” the “Civic Arts”). These visions, however, did not remain fixed. Early on, they constituted what Harry Abravanel (1983) terms a meta-ideology, an “abstract social and analytical philosophic belief system [that is a] doctrine without a distinct action component” (p. 276). These were disembodied ideals—manifestoes or declarations with the revolution yet to come. It took time to give them expression through new programs and policies. Further, as the movement broadened, the visions were modified to accommodate

an increasingly ideologically heterogeneous membership. Thus, Tusculum's Christian mission became subsumed under the Civic Arts banner. Institutional purpose is not a static construct—it shifts and adapts over time.

The revitalization framework also points to the cumulative aspect of socio-cultural change: It starts small and builds momentum one person at a time. The initial idealistic vision fired the imagination of a small core of “true believers”—individuals whose commitment to the cause provided the energy that propelled the movement forward. Later, pragmatic supporters joined the effort in hopes of influencing the change process. This participation had a powerful socializing effect (Bales, 1970; Schein, 1969). In her study of idealistic and utopian communities, Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1972) identifies a number of factors that promote commitment among members, with one such “commitment mechanism” being shared sacrifice. Simply put, when an individual contributes labor to a task, he or she becomes invested in its outcome. “The more it ‘costs’ a person to do something, the more ‘valuable’ he will consider it, in order to justify the psychic expense” (Kanter, 1972, p. 76). Shared sacrifice also promotes social cohesion: The act of working together inspires camaraderie. Having individuals from different departments serve on various committees built collegial relations across departments; and in some cases, old grudges were set aside in the interest of advancing a shared cause. Relationships were restored and the balkanization of the campuses dissipated.

Kanter also notes that commitment is generated through communal sharing. The three colleges manifested many such examples—discussions during the presidential searches, committee work, group retreats, and the “vision commission.” Arguably the most important instance of “communal sharing” was the redesign of the curriculum itself. When distribution requirements were abolished in favor of a new core, the locus of control shifted from individual faculty members and departments to the faculty as a whole. The departments thereby relinquished much of their former independence, hoping that by working together they could achieve their collective educational dream. A LeMoyné-Owen faculty member explained the costs:

There weren't intro courses for your majors anymore! You lost your intro courses for your majors so then “What do we do about that?” They weren't recruiting tools—I don't know what your experience has been, but a lot of times in a lot of schools people teach the Gen Ed course and they're recruiting for the major.

This leads us to the most striking quality of these change efforts. Ultimately, they produced something far more than rhetorical flourishes or “a new paint job over what we already had,” in the words of one of Tusculum's few naysayers. A comparison of the perceptions of institutional life before and after the revitalization reveals a remarkable shift in norms and values. (See Table 3.) There are numerous examples illustrated in the above ac-

TABLE 2

A COMPARISON OF CASES AND THE REVITALIZATION FRAMEWORK

<i>Three Illustrative Cases</i>	<i>Wallace (1956): Revitalization Framework</i>
<p>1. <i>A crisis of purpose.</i> Various pressures (e.g., declining enrollment and fiscal problems) generate increasing levels of anxiety at the colleges. Faculty start to question the long-term viability of the institution. Some become apathetic or despondent (e.g., leaving campus after they teach their classes or looking for new jobs). The administration maintains control through coercion. There is increased in-fighting among academic divisions over scarce resources.</p>	<p><i>Period of cultural distortion:</i> "The prolonged experience of stress . . . [leads to] extreme passivity and indolence, the development of highly ambivalent dependency relationships, intragroup violence . . . states of depression and self-reproach" (p. 269).</p>
<p>2. <i>Rejecting the status quo:</i> A group of faculty members outside of formal channels concludes that the status quo must end. The president, a symbol of the institutional malaise, is deposed. During the presidential search, discussions begin about the institution's future."</p>	<p><i>World destruction fantasies:</i> provide fertile soil for a revitalization. Once "the 'dead' way of life is recognized as dead, interest shifts to . . . a new way" (p. 270)</p>
<p>3. <i>The genesis of a vision:</i> Once a mandate for change has been established, broad-based discussions ensue. The concerns, ideals, and aspirations of the group are voiced. A compelling educational vision is articulated (e.g., "Education for Individual and Social Responsibility").</p>	<p><i>The resulting vision</i> expresses a "longing for the establishment of an ideal state of stable and satisfying . . . relations (the restitution fantasy or Utopian content)" (p. 270).</p>
<p>4. <i>Birth of a movement:</i> A small group of "true believers" begins to work toward realizing the educational vision. It is aided by a larger group of "supporters" who participate for pragmatic reasons.</p>	<p><i>Organization:</i> "A small clique of special disciples . . . clusters around the prophet and an embryonic campaign organization develops with three orders of personnel: the prophet, the disciples, and the followers" (p. 273) [The vision promises that] society will benefit materially from . . . the new cultural system" (p. 273).</p>
<p>5. <i>Implementing the vision:</i> Over time, more people are drawn to the cause by being invited to participate in the change effort itself. Certain early ideals are altered to make them more acceptable.</p>	<p><i>Adaptation:</i> "The movement is a revolutionary organization . . . [and uses] various strategies of adaptation: doctrinal modification; political and diplomatic maneuver; and force" (p. 274).</p>
<p>6. <i>Realizing the vision:</i> A significant enough proportion of faculty and staff back the new vision and the resulting change efforts. New policies are enacted reflecting the vision. Highly symbolic and anecdotal "evidence" of success justifies the movement.</p>	<p><i>Cultural transformation:</i> "As the whole or a controlling portion of the population comes to accept the new [belief system] with its various injunctions, a noticeable social revitalization occurs" (p. 275).</p>

TABLE 3
A COMPARISON OF PRE- AND POST-REVITALIZATION BELIEFS

<i>Pre-Revitalization Beliefs</i>	<i>Post-Revitalization Beliefs</i>
<p><i>Relationships among various groups are strained.</i> “There was a lot of fear among the faculty.” “It was a divide and conquer kind of thing.” “There was a devil’s bargain between the administration and the faculty.”</p> <p><i>Our curriculum is weak.</i> “It was a menu approach.” “[The curriculum] was really patronizing.” “We were graduating illiterates.”</p> <p><i>The institution is adrift and in trouble.</i> “There was just this sense that the institution was being frittered away.” “Cynicism was high.” “Virtually every faculty member was looking for work elsewhere.” “We just didn’t know who we were anymore.”</p>	<p><i>Relationships are strong.</i> “There certainly are disagreements, but I think there’s also a lot of respect.”</p> <p><i>We provide a good education for our students.</i> “I think we’ve been successful because our students are a lot more sophisticated than they were when we were under the old system.”</p> <p><i>We have accomplished something important and are part of an institution we can be proud of.</i> “This process has been exhilarating and nurturing and I think it was a way to get at that sense of collegiality and shared vision that I think we have.” “We’re the envy of a lot of other colleges and universities, places with a hell of a lot more money than us.” “You know, I actually feel good about being here.”</p>

count: Before the change, individuals rarely reached outside the narrow confines of their own departments. Academic departments saw each other as rivals—even enemies in the struggle for resources. Many faculty members were convinced that the president was interested only in maintaining power. At Olivet and Tusculum, these difficult times led to increased levels of personal animosity and mistrust. There was a widespread perception that the institution was in trouble, if not foundering—failing its students, ailing fiscally, and stumbling toward potential catastrophe. Taken together, these conditions created a toxic institutional environment.

After the revitalization, a strikingly different institutional ethos emerged. Isolation gave way to new norms of collaboration. Departmental allegiances were set aside as members from across campus worked together on committees dedicated to the change effort. Contact between the administration, faculty, and the board increased. The faculty developed a greater sense of agency. The previous despondency gave way to a justifiable sense of pride in what has been accomplished.

Taken together, the data suggest that the byproduct of this process was a change in organizational culture and the development of a complex, inter-related belief system that reflected new norms and new attitudes and was upheld with a measure of faith. The alteration in the beliefs of institutional members both reflected and sustained the greater sense of fulfillment produced by the change effort. Highly symbolic stories reified this ideology, supplying the “evidence” that the vision was being fulfilled. Belief in the institutional purpose was, in a real sense, a profession of faith—less reliant on objective measures (e.g., enrollments, financial health) and more dependent on the conviction that the effort has been successful.

Participating in the realization of the vision produced, at least in many, what Kanter terms a form of “transcendence” (p. 111)—an intense satisfaction derived from the idealistic struggle to attain a worthy goal. Edward Shils (1965) argues that these sorts of powerful feelings in turn produce “institutional charisma” (p. 113)—the willingness of people to submerge their individual interests in a larger institutional cause. Such social systems lend meaning to members and generate feelings of self-respect. Such “institutionalized awe,” according to Kanter, “signals the presence of an ideological and structural system that orders and gives meaning to the individual’s life, and which attaches the order and meaning to the organization” (p. 113). It is by creating a coherent ideology and a structure for its expression that a true, shared sense of purpose emerges.

CONCLUSION

By the time these change efforts wound to their close, much had been accomplished. Enrollments had either stabilized or grown. (Tusculum soared from fewer than 500 to more than 1,500 students.) The colleges achieved greater success in fund raising than at any point in the past. The methodology of this study prevents my drawing a causal connection between these achievements and the efforts to realize their visions—after all, the environment changed dramatically during the 1990s: The economy grew and student demographics expanded. What can be said with absolute confidence is that people were able to construct a more meaningful institutional life around a common purpose. Christopher A. Bartlett and Sumantra Ghoshal (1994), who conducted extensive research at 20 successful large corporations, concluded that effective organizations are those with which members can identify, in which they share a sense of pride, and to which they are willing to commit. In short, senior managers must convert the contractual employees of an economic entity into committed members of a purposeful organization (p. 81).

This ends seems to have been achieved at these three colleges. The evidence of the force of idealism is unmistakable. George Keller (1998) recently observed that “real people figure less and less in the current planning literature in higher education” (p. 18). What he meant was that by focusing on organizational structures and processes, theorists have lost sight of the communities—the people. The events at these institutions suggest that people’s ideals and commitment to a shared purpose can matter a great deal to an institution. These colleges are not utopias. Each faces prodigious challenges. Further, it is unclear how enduring these revitalizations will prove to be. A new president, a change in board leadership, or harsh environmental conditions may threaten the fragile balance. What must be acknowledged is that these attempts at realizing a compelling educational vision produced an investment in time and energy that money could not buy. Even if it could, these institutions could never have afforded it. The situation these institutions faced a decade ago is perhaps best summed up in the motto emblazoned on a 1957 LeMoyne class photograph: “There is no way without a because.” These institutions found a “because,” and it made a tremendous difference.

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