Res High Educ (2010) 51:483–503
DOI 10.1007/s11162-010-9162-7

An Analysis of Baccalaureate College Mission Statements

Barrett J. Taylor · Christopher C. Morphew

Received: 2 February 2009 / Published online: 3 February 2010

Abstract We examined baccalaureate colleges mission statements to better understand how these organizations represent themselves to potential students and other external constituent groups. We drew these documents from two sources, the colleges' official web sites and an archive constructed and maintained by *U.S. News and World Report*. Most sampled colleges submitted revised or different mission statements to *U.S. News* than published officially on institutional websites. Our findings suggested that the communication patterns of baccalaureate colleges are both vague and idiosyncratic. Official mission statements often proved descriptive or appealed to normative concepts. The statements submitted to *U.S. News*, by contrast, often utilized "strategically deployed shifters." These terms suggested legitimate content but eluded precise definition. Mission statements submitted to *U.S. News* thereby proved amenable to student recruitment efforts.

Keywords Baccalaureate college · Mission statements · Signaling · Liberal arts · Linguistic · Analysis

Baccalaureate colleges (BCs)—4-year degree-granting postsecondary institutions that offer few or zero graduate degrees—exhibit considerable variance in mission, student population, and curriculum. BCs range from colleges offering exclusively liberal arts majors to colleges where virtually all students are enrolled in professional or pre-professional coursework, and include religious as well as secular institutions. BCs may enroll commuter students, non-traditional students, residential students, or some hybrid student population. Yet this segment of the U.S. higher education system is often painted with a single broad brush. In an effort to understand more fully the differences among BCs, we examined how

B. J. Taylor (✉)
Institute of Higher Education, Meigs Hall, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, USA
e-mail: bjtaylor@uga.edu

C. C. Morphew
College of Education, University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA, USA

BCs of all types describe themselves to potential students and other external constituent groups.

Small, 4-year private colleges are commonly referred to as "liberal arts colleges" in the United States. Many times, however, this label is applied inappropriately. In his book *Liberal Arts Colleges: Thriving, Surviving, or Endangered*, Breneman (1994) determined that only about 400 of the more than 1,000 small private colleges then in existence met the liberal arts college standard. Breneman's definition of liberal arts colleges included those that exhibited a residential student population, enrolled fewer than 2,500 students, targeted a traditional age student population, and offered a liberal arts curriculum (which Breneman defined as an institution that awarded 40% or more of its degrees in liberal arts fields). Gilbert (1995) critiqued Breneman's argument, citing a range of historical data to argue that there have always been few genuine liberal arts colleges. In Gilbert's account, large numbers of liberal arts colleges did not disappear; they simply never existed. While Gilbert posed important criticisms of Breneman's account, she did not dispute his claim that few small private institutions manifested the characteristics of genuine liberal arts colleges. Within a few years, the ranks of these "true" liberal arts colleges appeared to have shrunk even further. Using the number of degrees conferred in particular fields as reported to *The Peterson Guide*, Delucchi (1997) categorized only 327 colleges as "primarily liberal arts" institutions.

Baccalaureate colleges that embrace a liberal arts mission face significant economic threats to their continued existence. McPherson and Schapiro (1999) noted that the savings associated with economies of scale typically elude colleges that are committed to using full-time faculty in the classroom and valuable campus space for the provision of residential life. These fiscal threats are paired with equally daunting assaults on the integrity of the liberal arts curriculum. Neely (1999), a trustee of Williams College, argued that the curricular space traditionally reserved for liberal arts programs now faced encroachments from vocational offerings even at highly selective and handsomely resourced institutions such as Williams. Neely's concern paralleled Labaree's (1997) contention that many American students pursued higher education with private goals in view. Data from UCLA's annual survey of first-year students substantiated this account. Reflecting on the first 30 years of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) study, Astin (1998) noted that changing gender roles and educational values had led increasing numbers of students to pursue professional and pre-professional programs of study.

Of course, the challenges outlined in the previous paragraph do not menace all small private colleges in equal measure. BCs evidence stark patterns of stratification in their admission selectivity and in their fiscal health (McPherson and Schapiro 1999). Both Kushner (1999) and Delucchi (1997) found that selective institutions were less likely to offer professional programs alongside degrees in the traditional liberal arts fields than were less selective institutions. A college's fiscal resources also insulate the organization from pressures to forego its liberal arts tradition. Ehrenberg (2003) has argued that endowment proves even more crucial than tuition receipts in determining the level of salary that a private institution can offer to its faculty members. The crucial role that student–faculty interactions play in the traditional liberal arts setting makes faculty salaries—and the ratio of student per faculty member—a particularly important marker for institutions that seek to sustain their liberal arts traditions. Perhaps even more significantly, differences in endowment resources ensure that private colleges have vastly different abilities to subsidize tuition receipts with revenue from other sources (Winston 1999, 2004). Endowment earnings paid directly to students in the form of institutional financial aid can prove a

crucial strategy for recruiting highly qualified applicants (McPherson and Schapiro 1999, 1998).

Colleges with less selective admission policies and fewer fiscal resources are less resistant than their elite peers to the threats to their financial health and liberal arts curricula. Neely (1999) argued that many less selective colleges respond with aggressive marketing strategies. Strategies attempted at less-selective, resource-poor BCs range from changing the name of the college to "university" to adopting a business major (Morphew 2002; Kushner 1999). Such strategies were not limited to less wealthy colleges, however. Morphew and Hartley (2006) analyzed college and university mission statements and contended that appeals to the liberal arts tradition proved a common strategy by which colleges across institutional types sought both to attract students and to legitimize themselves. Beyond their normative value, such claims allowed institution to draw upon the legacy of impressive student learning outcomes that Astin (1999) and Turner (1996) associated with liberal arts colleges.

This paper builds on the mission statement analysis of Morphew and Hartley (2006). To better understand how BCs identify and represent themselves, we employed Breneman's (1994) definition of a liberal arts college to analyze mission statements from 100 baccalaureate institutions. For the vast majority of the 100 BCs, we obtained two mission statements from distinct sources. Because we are interested in the ways in which colleges[1] communicate with prospective students, we analyzed the "mission statements" that colleges submitted to *U.S. News and World Report*.[2] These statements often differed from the official mission statements (OMS) that a college might maintain locally. We therefore hypothesized that the statements had been revised in an attempt to communicate with the prospective students who presumably constitute the primary readership of the annual *U.S. News* college rankings. To test this hypothesis, we conducted an identical analysis of mission statements that we obtained from the same group of BCs via the colleges' own websites.

We then applied a linguistic framework adapted from Urciuoli (2003) to both sets of mission statements. This framework enabled us to examine the rhetorical strategies used in each set of documents. We used Breneman's definition and this linguistic framework to pose four questions of the sampled mission statements:

1. Which of Breneman's (1994) liberal arts criteria recur within the mission statements of BCs?
2. What does the use of these criteria indicate about the manner in which different types of BCs communicate to prospective students through their mission statements?
3. How does Urciuoli's (2003) linguistic framework explain the communicative patterns found within the mission statements of BCs?
4. What do differences between the *U.S. News* mission statements (USMS) and OMS suggest about the relative utility of these statements and Urciuoli's framework?

[1] In keeping with Breneman's use of the phrase "liberal arts college," we refer to all institutions in our sample as "colleges" even though some may have changed their name to incorporate "university." We use the terms "institution" and "school" interchangeably with "college."

[2] While these were not official mission statements, they were labeled as "mission statements" on the *U.S. News* site (www.usnews.com).

Framework

In distinguishing among more than 1,000 small private institutions, Breneman (1994) identified several characteristics of a "genuine" liberal arts college. Such colleges award 40% or more of their degrees in traditional liberal arts fields.[3] While such a curricular standard seems intuitive, Breneman also included extracurricular elements in his model. A college's commitment to residential life, its maintenance of a small size (fewer than 2,500 students), and its sense of mission to a traditional-aged student population embody the ethos of liberal learning, in which proximity and intimacy promote regular interaction among students and faculty members. We used Breneman's definition of a liberal arts college in our analysis.

Additionally, we sought a linguistic framework as a means of interpreting how BCs employ important signaling terms in mission statements. Silverstein (2003) used the example of "wine talk," the linguistic terms and structures that oenophiles use to describe fine vintages, as an example of speech that attains legitimacy because of its linkages to existing rhetorical structures. Oenophiles accomplish several things via wine talk. First, they leverage words to make wine talk intelligible to those outside their community. When an oenophile uses the term "bouquet," for example, she communicates to a wine layperson that a specific vintage has a robust, varied aroma, similar to a bouquet of flowers. She also signals to the layperson and to his fellow oenophile, via her use of a normative, specialized term, that she is an oenophile. The term "bouquet," then, has value to multiple audiences because of its descriptive and normative value.

Uriciuoli (2003) applied Silverstein's idea to an analysis of marketing publications issued by Hamilton College, a liberal arts college in New York. She adopted the phrase "strategically deployed shifter" (SDS) to indicate how terms such as "excellence" and "leadership" link meaning from one context to another. These terms possess intuitive meaning, yet are sufficiently vague as to assume different meanings for different audiences and different contexts. In Urciuoli's phrase, a college "tak[es] that shifter to the bank" when a publication creates a context in which the shifter term assumes a meaning that makes the college alluring to prospective students and legitimizes the college's activities (p. 402). The term "critical thinking skills," for example, evokes the integrative model of learning characteristic of a liberal education in the humanities, sciences, and fine arts. The term thus conveys legitimacy as a liberal arts college. When juxtaposed with photographs of alumni who have attained successful business careers, however, "critical thinking skills" assumes specific connotations in the minds of some student consumers (e.g., skills for a career) in addition to its normative value as a legitimate product of a liberal arts education. Much like Silverstein's (2003) "wine talk" then, Urciuoli's (2003) SDS illustrate how specific terms may transmit both positive, descriptive images and legitimacy when placed within a rhetorical index of other terms and images. Urciuoli lists excellence, leadership, skills, and diversity as four key SDSs employed in the recruitment literature used by the college she studies. Each of these terms is simultaneously nebulous and distinctively normative.

We treated Breneman's (1994) and Urciuoli's (2003) frameworks as complementary lenses. First, we used Breneman's work to examine the extent to which a particular institution's mission statements made claims upon the traditional model of a liberal arts college. We then looked for ways in which these contextual elements provided a frame of

[3] A more conservative definition of a liberal arts college might include only those colleges awarding all of their degrees in the humanities, arts, and sciences.

reference for the SDSs cited by Urciuoli. For example, claims about an institution's excellence might refer to a college's curriculum, thereby conferring legitimacy upon the college's curriculum. In turn, the statements made about a college's curriculum—its emphasis on liberal education, its range of professional offerings, or its sheer breadth—give content to the concept of excellence. The two terms support and define one another, allowing the college to communicate with prospective students in a manner that is both carefully prescribed and open to interpretation.

Methods

For the purposes of this study, we randomly selected mission statements from 100 private BCs. Because Breneman's (1994) model of a liberal arts college emphasizes undergraduate teaching, we chose a proportionately equal distribution of colleges from across the five "No graduate coexistence" (NGC) Carnegie Foundation classifications. Our sample design paid explicit attention to the differences among BCs, particularly the fact that resource-rich and/or selective BCs generally have proven less likely than their peer institutions to adopt professional or vocational programs (Delucchi 1997; Morphew 2002). Sampling institutions across Carnegie classes therefore ensured that we simultaneously sampled colleges across the spectra of resources and selectivity. BCs also function differently in different geographic regions. That is, while a large number of BCs are established members of the higher education landscape in New England, the mid-South, and the upper Midwest, areas such as the western United States generally have fewer and less well-established BCs. In order to maximize the expected variation among our mission statements, we sought to include colleges from all regions of the country, not simply areas where BCs were prominent. Further, because our study used mission statements as its data source, we paid particular attention to colleges that espoused distinctive missions, such as HBCUs, Hispanic-serving institutions, and intentionally Christian colleges[4] (Table 1).

For each of the 100 BCs, we identified two mission statements from discrete sources. The first mission statement for each institution was identified via the "Best Colleges" section of the USNews.com web site. *U.S. News* had labeled each of these documents "mission statement."[5] We will refer to this mission statement as the "USNews mission statement" or "USMS." The second mission statement was identified via a visit to the institution's website. We will refer to this second mission statement as the "official mission statement" or "OMS." We compared these two documents to determine whether they differed. We will discuss these findings in the next section.

Consistent with Breneman's (1994) analysis of the criteria that identify liberal arts colleges, we identified terms or phrases linked to the residential nature of the college, the small size of the college, the liberal arts curriculum, or the traditional-aged student population. We also identified several sub-criteria in the residential and curriculum categories. Because the residential nature of liberal arts colleges is foundational to their ability to shape the development of their students, we differentially coded terms or phrases referencing student development or attention paid to the "whole" student. We also noted colleges' attempts to operationalize their liberal arts claim and references that colleges made to other curricular elements including professional programs. Codes related to

[4] Previous work by Morphew and Hartley (2006) suggested that these colleges were more likely than others to embrace distinctiveness in their mission statements.

[5] Access to this part of the USNews.com site requires an annual fee of approximately $15.

Table 1 Baccalaureate colleges sampled, by type

Category	Abbreviation	Description	# Institutions sampled	Total # institutions
Arts and sciences focus, NGC	A&S	>80% of degrees were offered in arts and sciences fields	19	95
Arts and sciences, plus professions, NGC	A&S+	60–79% of degrees were offered in arts and sciences fields	14	74
Balanced arts and sciences/ professions, NGC	Balanced	41–59% of degrees were offered both in arts and sciences fields and in professional fields	25	121
Professions plus arts and sciences, NGC	Prof+	60–79% of degrees were offered in professional fields	28	130
Professions focus, NGC	Prof	>80% of degrees were offered in professional fields	14	71

Source: The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2008)

Table 2 Examples of SDSs

Strategically deployed shifter	College	Carnegie classification	Example
Excellence	Rocky Mountain College	Balanced	We advocate for a life committed to excellence and service to others
Leadership	Whittier College	A&S+	[G]raduates emerge well-prepared for leadership in a global economy across a variety of sectors
Skills	Gettysburg College	A&S+	Critical thinking skills, broad vision, effective communications
Diversity	Mt. Ida College	Prof	A diverse community of learners

Urciuoli's (2003) framework simply reflected the presence or absence of one of her four themes. We include a list of Urciuoli's SDSs, along with examples of SDS drawn from our sample of USMS, in Table 2.

To ensure inter-rater reliability, each author independently coded ten mission statements. A comparison of coding patterns showed that the authors had incorporated a shared interpretation of the mission statements. We repeated this process several times to document that each author retained an identical notion of how mission statement terms and phrases were to be coded (Lombard et al. 2002). Where relevant, each author identified and included on the coding sheet a particularly cogent term or phrase from the mission statements. When coding was complete, the authors met again to discuss and make sense of the coding patterns that emerged from the analysis.

Findings

This section is organized as follows. First, we compare the *U.S. News* and OMS for each of the BCs and assess the similarity of these statements. Next, we apply the dual frameworks

of Breneman (1994) and Urciuoli (2003) to the mission statements from our sample of 100 institutions. In the process, we document how the elements from the two conceptual frameworks interact with and reinforce one another. We suggest that colleges utilize this interplay to communicate subtle and complex messages to prospective students. The resulting images reveal colleges that provide sufficient information to anchor abstract concepts without providing information that might decrease the legitimacy or increase the specificity denoted by these statements. Our analysis indicates that USMS and OMS differ both substantively and in their use of terms key to our conceptual frameworks.

U.S. News Mission Statements (USMS) Compared with Official Mission Statements (OMS)

Our comparison of the USMS and OMS for each of our 100 BCs showed considerable differences in the two documents. Specifically, Table 3[6] describes the number of instances (six) where a single baccalaureate college exhibited two mission statements similar in form or wording. Forty percent of the mission statement pairs were similar, either in substance or syntax. We defined USMS and OMS as syntactically similar when the USMS included passages that were identical to those found in the OMS, but added additional text treating additional themes. Bluefield College, for example, identified itself as a "Christ-centered liberal arts college in covenant with the Baptist General Association of Virginia" in the first sentences both of its USMS and OMS. In the *U.S. News* document, however, Bluefield went on to claim "to foster in its students excellence in character and sound ethics, sensitivity to religious, cultural and ethnic diversity, and an understanding of responsible service to God and our society." This passage treated themes of character and moral development that were not found in the OMS. Thus, we classified Bluefield and 25 other BCs as exhibiting only syntactical similarities (i.e., some identical passages) between their two mission statements.

We also identified a second category of similarity between the two groups of mission statements. We defined USMS and OMS as substantively and syntactically similar when the two documents treated the same themes using similar phrasing. In these cases, the *U.S. News* mission might elaborate upon established themes rather than covering new substantive ground. Both the USMS and OMS of Gettysburg College, for example, stated, "Gettysburg College, a national, residential, undergraduate college committed to a liberal education, prepares students to be active leaders and participants in a changing world." The USMS elaborated on these themes with a lengthy discussion of the College's Sunderman Conservatory of Music, Lincoln Prize for scholarship on the Civil War, and *Gettysburg Journal* publication. This list of college offerings did not exist in the College's OMS, yet it was consistent with that document's emphasis upon the College's core values. Gettysburg was one of only 14 BCs exhibiting both substantive and syntactical similarity between their USMS and OMS.

We defined USMS and OMS as dissimilar when they included different or additional themes using different phrasing. This lack of similarity between the USMS and OMS of BCs suggested that the statements had been constructed for different purposes, different audiences, or both. For example, Calvin College's OMS consisted of three sentences:

[6] Table 3 includes an *N* of 98 rather than 100 because we were unable to identify OMS for two BCs within our sample of 100.

Table 3 A comparison of USNews.com mission statements with mission statements obtained from institutional websites ($N = 98$)

Category (*N*)	Dissimilar	Syntactically similar	Substantively & syntactically similar	Identical
A&S (18)	12	5	0	1
A&S+ (15)	10	0	3	2
Balanced (25)	11	9	4	1
Prof+ (27)	13	6	7	1
Prof (13)	6	6	0	1
Total	52	26	14	6

> Calvin College is a comprehensive liberal arts college in the Reformed tradition of historic Christianity. Through our learning, we seek to be agents of renewal in the academy, church, and society. We pledge fidelity to Jesus Christ, offering our hearts and lives to do God's work in God's world.

By contrast, Calvin's USMS extended for six sentences. This document emphasized the College's achievements as a "top ranked comprehensive college" and "a premier Christian college." Further distinguishing itself from the OMS, the USMS enumerated many of the College's features. Calvin, in this account, boasted "4,200 students," "nearly 400 professors," and "more than 100 academic options." The *U.S. News* mission statement also quantified the College's student to faculty ratio, average class size, percentage of faculty members with terminal degrees, and placement of graduates in careers or graduate or professional schools.

Calvin was one of 52 BCs whose USMS and OMS we found to be dissimilar to one another. Because the majority of the BCs in our sample published different OMS and USMS, while very few published identical OMS and USMS, we now turn to a thematic analysis of the differences between official and USMS. We pursued this analysis to discover what the colleges hoped to communicate by revising, amending, or adding new text to their OMS as a means of producing their USMS. Mission statements submitted to *U.S. News* appear to have been adapted to appeal to external groups such as prospective students.

Size, Skills, and Curriculum

The classifications developed by the Carnegie Foundation (2008) in 2000 utilize the percentage of undergraduate degrees awarded in a particular area as the primary criterion for classifying BCs. Breneman (1994) classified institutions by similar means, denoting institutions that offered 40% of their baccalaureate degrees in liberal arts fields as genuine liberal arts colleges. Given this significant overlap in definitions, it is not surprising that A&S and A&S+ institutions—that is, the colleges the Carnegie Foundation identified as awarding the highest percentage of their degrees in the liberal arts fields—most clearly articulated liberal arts principles in line with Breneman's expectations. As a group, these schools made more robust liberal arts claims than did other institutions in our sample. Fully 27 of 33 A&S and A&S+ institutions used the worlds "liberal arts" in their OMS.

Interestingly, many of these A&S and A&S+ institutions did little more than make these statements. This pattern obtained in USMS as well as OMS. BCs such as Davidson

College, Hamilton College, Pine Manor College, and Tougaloo College used their USMS simply to state their status as "liberal arts colleges."[7] Relatively few colleges provided some sense of what liberal arts meant to their institution and its students. In these few cases, the liberal arts claim related to a common undergraduate educational experience. Ursinus College, for example, emphasized the role of a shared general education course by describing, "a core curriculum that includes the Common Intellectual Experience for first-year students" in its USMS. Brevard College echoed Ursinus' general education theme, noting in its USMS that "[e]very Brevard College student takes part in a one-semester course called the First Year Forum."

While A&S and A&S+ colleges made similarly vague claims in both types of mission statements, they did so in very different ways. For example, Bowdoin College's USMS expressed its conception of the liberal arts ideal in glib terms. Contrasting its curriculum with that of a college offering a high proportion of professional degrees, Bowdoin stated bluntly that it was "not a vocational school." The description of its liberal arts purpose in its OMS was no more specific, but constructed with language implying exclusivity.

> It is the mission of the College to engage students of uncommon promise in an intense full-time education of their minds, exploration of their creative faculties and development of their social and leadership abilities, in a four-year course of study and residence that concludes with a baccalaureate degree in the liberal arts (Bowdoin College website).

In mission statements published on their websites, A&S and A&S+ colleges rarely mentioned their size. In contrast, within mission statements from the USNews.com website, the same institutions often paired claims about their curricula with statements about their size. Such a pairing generally argued that a liberal education on a small campus provided students with an opportunity for dynamic interaction with faculty members. Colorado College, for example, boasted of "engaged, intensive, interdisciplinary teaching … [and] collaborative research with students." This statement implicitly evoked Breneman's (1994) contention that genuine liberal arts colleges enroll small numbers of students. However, few colleges in our sample mentioned their total enrollments in their USMS. Instead, Eckerd College, Juniata College, and Scripps College illustrated their size with promises of "small classes." By so doing, these colleges provided enough information about their sizes to attract students while withholding information that some students might find objectionable.

Balanced, Prof+, and Prof colleges made liberal arts claims in a decidedly different manner than did A&S-focused institutions. To be sure, colleges with a professional emphasis did not shy away from claiming the mantle of liberal education. On the USNews.com website, Greenville College cited a legacy of the "liberal arts tradition," while Hilbert College noted that its curriculum was "based in the liberal arts." As these excerpts indicate, however, such claims tended to consist of little more than a perfunctory mention of "liberal arts" and were couched in terms reflecting historical ties rather than making explicit present realities. St. Gregory's University, for example, described its curriculum as sourced in "western and Catholic intellectual traditions."

Like A&S and A&S+ schools, balanced and professional-focused colleges rarely elaborated upon the concept of liberal arts. Liberal education instead appeared alongside other curricular options available at the campuses. Waldorf College's OMS, for example,

[7] To be accurate, Pine Manor used the seemingly oxymoronic phrase: "applied liberal arts learning" in its mission statement.

touted programs "which build on the liberal arts foundation and concentrate on developing professional skills for careers." Mission statements from the USNews.com site provided further examples. Linfield College offered "a challenging and exciting academic program that features a liberal arts core, professional opportunities, and an atmosphere in which there is general concern for the individual." Mt. Ida College juxtaposed liberal education and promises of career success, offering a curriculum that "blends the liberal arts with professional preparation." Cumberland University explained that, "Learning opportunities are offered in the liberal arts, selected pre-professional, professional and graduate programs, and Continuing Education programs." These mission statements indicate—accurately—that the liberal arts are but one of many options available to students at these colleges.

Like their A&S and A&S+ peers, balanced and professional-focused BCs often appealed to their small size to underscore the appeal of their curricula. Virginia Intermont College and Sweet Briar College explicitly cited the colleges' student-to-faculty ratios in their USMS. This may have been a strategic choice for these small colleges. In 2007–2008, Virginia Intermont and University of the Ozarks enrolled 685 and 622 students, respectively. Citing small classes and low student-to-faculty ratios allowed these schools to communicate small school benefits without mentioning that prospective students might have come from high schools with enrollments larger than those found at the colleges. Here, "size" functioned as a SDS, conveying the positive connotations of an intimate learning environment without giving specifics that some individuals might find objectionable. This, in turn, allowed students to apply their own interpretations to this organizational variable.

On the USNews.com website, many institutions made overt attempts to link a liberal arts education with career-specific outcomes. Waldorf, Linfield, Mt. Ida, and Cumberland (see above) made these connections explicit by combining liberal education and career outcomes in a single description of their curricula. DePauw University, an A&S college, made a similar point, "linking liberal arts education with life's work." In Urciuoli's (2003) phrase, all five of these institutions juxtaposed liberal education and marketplace value to attract prospective students by making claims about "skills." Claims of skills proved a common technique by which the colleges in our sample communicated the utility of a liberal education. These claims were made in many different Carnegie classification groups. Gettysburg College, an A&S+ institution, stated its intention to instill "critical thinking skills, broad vision, [and] effective communications" in its students. Among Balanced institutions, Rocky Mountain College shared Gettysburg's interest in critical thinking skills, while Westminster College shifted Gettysburg's lexicon slightly, praising the "communication skills" of its graduates.

Mentions of skills proved less frequent in OMS. A&S and A&S+ colleges particularly evidenced this pattern. These institutions' statements included only those tightly defined as scholarly or academic skills. Juniata College, an A&S+ institution, touted "basic intellectual skills: the ability to read with insight, to use language clearly and effectively, and to think analytically" as part of its mission. Wabash, an A&S college, seconded Juniata's focus on "analytical skills." Prof and Prof+ colleges were more likely to cite their role in helping students develop practical skills. Yet their OMS were more likely than their USMS to couch this mission in normative, rather than simply utilitarian, terms. Waldorf College, a balanced institution, linked "professional skills for careers" with a "liberal arts foundation." Similarly, Concordia University, a Prof+ college, described its graduates as "skilled in critical and analytical thinking in scientific, humanistic, and theological topics."

Claims of small size and useful skills appeared regularly in the USNews.com mission statements. These claims appeared far less frequently in OMS. This distribution implied that skills claims might be made to appeal to external groups, as Urciuoli (2003) suggested would be the case. These claims appealed to the normative concept of a liberal arts education while maintaining enough ambiguity to allow prospective students to endow USMS with their own interpretations. In other words, these claims made BCs more appealing to prospective students who may view education as an avenue to a lucrative career.

Curricular Excellence

The colleges in our sample commonly made claims of excellence in their USNews.com mission statements. Drawing upon the work of the literary critic Readings (1996), Urciuoli (2003) argued that "excellence" lacks a clear referent or definition, making the term something that cannot be opposed. Excellence is therefore ideally situated to serve as a SDS. Indeed, the ambiguity of the term did not prevent the ubiquity of "excellence" in the mission statements that we sampled. Colleges across the five Carnegie classifications invoked markers of their own excellence. Occasionally, claims made in a USMS pointed to a unique subunit or institutional policy. Dakota Wesleyan University, for example, referred to "two new centers of excellence" on its campus. Waldorf College referenced having "received national attention for its honors college and academic achievement center." Doane College did more than cite its excellence. This institution created a quality guarantee that promised "additional classes paid for by the college" if students did not graduate in 4 years. This guarantee included a limited warranty on the skills of its teacher education graduates.

While a few BCs situated their claims to excellence in specific areas, attributions of excellence most often were attached to a college's curriculum. Such claims of excellence proliferated in USMS across Carnegie classifications. Westminster College (Balanced) proclaimed "[o]ur academic programs are excellent," Juniata College (A&S+) extolled its "strong reputation for excellent academics," and Urbana University (Prof) claimed "excellence in classroom instruction." Freed-Hardeman University (Balanced) moved beyond its curriculum without abandoning it, claiming "excellence in personal living as well as academic attainment." The deployment of excellence did not consist solely of unsubstantiated claims that a college made about itself. Some colleges sought to illustrate their excellence by citing external experts. Again, these tendencies proved especially pronounced in USMS. High Point University touted its standing among institutions that targeted students' moral and spiritual development, noting that it is "one of only 100 colleges and universities nationwide to be named to the Templeton Foundation's Honor Roll for Character-Building Colleges." Gustavus Adolphus College and Luther College invoked the Phi Beta Kappa chapters on their respective campuses. Russell Sage College cited its *U.S. News* ranking, boasting that the College was "[r]anked consistently in the top 10 schools in the North in its category by *U.S. News & World Report*."

We found few claims of excellence among OMS. Because they are localized to USMS, claims of excellence may perform a recruitment function. As Urciuoli (2003) noted, "excellence" lacks a clear meaning and so is non-controversial. The large number of organizations ranking colleges and universities on any number of criteria (e.g., wired campus, moral development, colleges that change lives, etc.) reinforces this reality. The manifest inability of "excellence" to offend audiences of prospective students allowed the concept to be deployed as a no-risk modifier of the college's curriculum. Simultaneously,

the connection forged between excellence and an institution's curriculum, regardless of its liberal arts focus, provided an index of interrelated concepts in which the otherwise nebulous term could acquire meaning. Claims of curricular excellence, in other words, provide content to the term "excellence" so that a prospective student might imagine the benefits of an education earned at a particular college. In this sense, claims of excellence functioned in parallel to the references that colleges made to their small class sizes. Content was conveyed without confounding the vagueness that allowed excellence to function as a source both of legitimacy and allure.

While excellence was not a primary theme in OMS, A&S and A&S+ colleges more often made claims of excellence than did balanced or professional-focused institutions. Unlike the function of excellence in USMS, however, these claims of excellence did not proclaim general institutional achievement and did not cite external evidence. Rather, they stood as testament to the fact that the given college was relatively selective in its admissions. Bowdoin College, for example, recognized the college's role in educating "students of uncommon promise." Centre College and Davidson College also emphasized admissions selectivity in their OMS. Only occasionally did BCs make more abstract claims in their OMS. Such patterns parallel scholarly findings about the stratification of BCs along the lines of admission selectivity (McPherson and Schapiro 1999). Whereas excellence in USMS seemed designed to attract student applicants, excellence in OMS functioned to warn students who stood little chance of admission that they need not apply.

Like A&S and A&S+ institutions, Prof and Prof+ colleges seemed less willing to make excellence claims in their OMS than they had in their USMS. The few cases in which excellence claims were made took a different shape both from the USMS of colleges in these categories and from the OMS of A&S and A&S+ colleges. Prof and Prof+ BCs generally could not appeal to selective admissions policies as proxies for institutional excellence. Instead, they were more likely to profess their hope of becoming excellent. Our analysis of the OMS, for example, revealed that College of the Southwest "strives for excellence" while Dakota Wesleyan College "aspires to excellence." Professional-focused BCs also emphasized their excellence in areas such as religious life. Rocky Mountain College, for example, boasted "an excellent Christ-centered education." Unlike the recruitment-themed uses of excellence in USMS, these uses described aspirations or non-academic areas in which the BC might plausibly claim excellence.

In these distinctions among Carnegie classes of institutions, OMS seem to perform a simply descriptive function. A&S and A&S+ colleges spoke openly of their liberal arts curricula and cite their admissions selectivity as evidence of their excellence. Prof and Prof+ BCs spoke of a liberal arts tradition only in passing, and cited an aspiration to excellence or achieved excellence in non-academic areas. OMS, in other words, described the colleges that issued them. In USMS, by contrast, BCs ornament their OMS by employing excellence as a concept that is specified by its attachment to curriculum but remains vague by offering little definition within that general area. These claims seem designed to appeal both to a broad audience of prospective students and to the general public.

The Extracurriculum: Residential Life, Service, and Leadership

Breneman (1994) argued that a significant percentage of students reside on the campus of a genuine liberal arts college. Statements about a college's residential population proved somewhat rare in our sample. In keeping with the patterns of stratification evidenced in our discussion of curricula, however, OMS of A&S and A&S+ institutions referenced a

college's residential environment more often than did the statements made by colleges in other classifications. Four of 57 Balanced, Prof, and Prof+ colleges mentioned residential life in their OMS. By contrast, such claims were relatively common among A&S and A&S+ colleges. The OMS of Bowdoin College and Gettysburg College even linked residence life with the academic nature of a liberal arts college. Bowdoin summarized its offerings as "a 4-year course of study and residence." Other colleges in these Carnegie classifications referenced residential life more succinctly. DePauw University described itself simply as "a residential liberal arts college." Brevard College preferred "a baccalaureate, residential, church-affiliated institution," while Doane College carefully noted its "residential campus programs," as well as its "off-campus programs." Again, the function of the OMS appeared to be largely descriptive. Colleges that enrolled a higher proportion of their students in traditional liberal arts fields proved more likely than their professional-focused peers to represent themselves by emphasizing residence life.

Similar patterns emerged in the documents that BCs submitted to *U.S. News*. In its USMS, Gettysburg College explicitly connected its residential setting to the college's academic mission, asserting the College's "belief that a residential college is the most effective means of promoting the personal interaction between student and professor, and student and student, which develops the community that is the heart of a liberal arts education." Such a claim emphasizes not merely the College's residential nature, but the educational motivations for that emphasis and the connection that Breneman (1994) drew between the residential and curricular components of the liberal arts college. While such claims appeared in OMS, as outlined above, few institutions made such detailed claims in their USMS. The nominal invocation of residential life, modified by the use of an adjective, proved far more common in USMS. Here, Bowdoin College simply claimed to offer a "unique residential life system." Several other A&S and A&S+ colleges followed this general pattern. Brevard College ("beautiful residential campus"), Southwestern University ("a dynamic residential community"), and Whittier College ("a vibrant residential 4-year liberal arts institution") evidenced similar tendencies. The descriptors "unique," "beautiful," "dynamic," and "vibrant" added rhetorical punch to the colleges' residential campuses, thereby attributing markers of quality without defining the educational purpose of on campus residence.

As with their OMS, colleges without an A&S focus rarely touted the residential nature of their campuses in their USMS. Unlike their OMS, however, BCs' USMS tended to offer a surrogate in place of residential life. These institutions often sounded themes related to non-residential elements of student life in USMS. At times, these references amounted to little more than extensive lists of the range of extracurricular activities offered by a particular institution. William Penn University, for example, used its USMS to boast "competitive NAIA athletics, extracurricular activities, and career-centered internships." Urbana University declined to list activities, but did hint at the breadth of its extracurriculum, which offered "the opportunity to participate in athletics or take leadership roles in any of the wide variety of campus groups and activities." Such litanies promised recreational opportunities without the encumbrance or expense of a residential expectation. The strategy of listing extracurricular activities proved more prevalent among Balanced, Prof+, and Prof institutions than among A&S or A&S+ colleges, suggesting that these colleges substitute the extracurricular for the residential.

As Morphew and Hartley (2006) noted, many colleges' mission statements emphasize service. Not surprisingly, then, themes of community or public service appeared regularly in the lists of activities that populate USMS. Eckerd College, for example, touted its "internships, study abroad, volunteer service and campus activities." Green Mountain

College ("a vigorous service oriented student affairs program") and Westminster College ("[m]ost students are active in community service and service learning") also illustrated this trend. References to service often grew into an explicit emphasis on moral and ethical development that was branded in an institution-specific fashion. Olivet College, for example, touted its "academic vision of Education for Individual and Social Responsibility [which] requires students to focus not only on their own personal development, but also assist others." In some cases, these moral and ethical themes assumed an explicitly religious connotation. Messiah College noted that it sought to instill "maturity of intellect, character, and Christian faith" in its students, while Freed-Hardeman University hoped that students would achieve "total growth in a Christian environment." In other cases, however, the theme of student development exhibited little tie to religion. Rocky Mountain College ("We strive to develop reflective, ethically responsible, and productive citizens") and Daniel Webster College (which seeks to "prepare its students for growth and change") referenced the role of student development on their campuses in a non-religious context.

Colleges across all five Carnegie classifications also articulated the value that they placed on leadership, which proved a popular theme in OMS. Alma College, for example, claimed to produce graduates who "lead purposefully and live responsibly." Leadership became regularly attached to service in OMS, with BCs such as Davidson College, Elizabethtown College, Lawrence University, Northwest University, Paul Quinn College, and Scripps College espousing some combination of these two qualities. By tying leadership closely to service, OMS documents gave some context and definition to the otherwise nebulous term leadership.

Leadership proved no less popular in USMS than it did in OMS. Whereas OMS tended to tie leadership to service, however, USMS often cited leadership without specifying its content, leveraging the subjective nature of the term. Urbana University, for example, claimed that its students "take leadership roles." Green Mountain College characterized its students as evidencing "a spirit of adventure and leadership in higher education." Cited in isolation in this manner, "leadership" lacked the references to other activities that service provided in OMS. Absent such context, leadership was able to convey a variety of images to the colleges' audiences.

Leadership sometimes did appear in concert with other opportunities for student enrichment. Texas Lutheran University, for example, proclaimed that "[t]he university's curriculum features numerous internships, study abroad, research, and leadership development opportunities." On other occasions, a connection was forged between leadership and student development. In these cases, leadership, like student development, might be couched in religious terms. Concordia University explicitly stated, "[o]ur mission is: To develop Christian leaders." Messiah College claimed to educate students "in preparation for lives of service, leadership, and reconciliation in church and society." As the excerpt from Messiah College's mission statement suggests, leadership also was expressed as a form of public service or community engagement. Miles College "dedicates its energies to providing community programs and leaders." Centre College claimed to prepare its students for "lives of learning, leadership, and service."

The connections forged between extracurricular activities, student development, and service may help students to envision themselves not merely as successes, but as successes in particular institutional contexts. At the same time, long lists of activities and the inherent vagueness of "leadership" allowed these constructions to appeal to a wide range of prospective students. Leadership in USMS thereby assumed the familiar pattern of other SDSs that aimed to communicate with prospective students. Residence life served a similar function in USMS. USMS relied upon images of extracurricular activities and narratives of

student development, thereby de-centering residential life from a place of prominence. Extracurricular involvement could assume many different shapes in a prospective student's imagination and was not necessarily tied to on-campus residence.

The patterns evidenced in OMS again differed from those observed in USMS. Unlike the shifter role assumed by leadership in USMS, OMS tended to define leadership by tying it specifically to service. Similarly, OMS tended to fill descriptive roles with regard to BCs in different Carnegie classifications. A&S and A&S+ colleges emphasized their residential nature in the OMS, while Balanced, Prof, and Prof+ colleges sounded themes of student activities and student development.

Diverse Target Populations

Breneman (1994) used the concept of a target population to indicate that genuine liberal arts colleges generally served 18–22 year-old students. OMS and USMS addressed questions of target population with greater unanimity than they brought to any other topic. We discovered no claims to serve traditionally aged students in our sample of OMS and USMS. Similarly, we detected few distinctions in the way that institutions across Carnegie classifications spoke of their target populations.

Claims to serve a particular group of students proved more common when the concept of a "target population" was extended beyond age groups. Colleges with histories of service to students from particular racial backgrounds often claimed to serve those populations. Whittier College's USMS mentioned "its federal designation as a Hispanic-Serving Institution." In its USMS, Tougaloo College proclaimed its status as "one of the oldest historically black colleges in the United States." Paul Quinn College, another historically black college and university (HBCU), indicated its heritage by noting its "affiliat[ion] with the African Methodist Episcopal Church." Bethune-Cookman College, Morehouse College, and Wiley College also mentioned their HBCU heritage in their USMS.

Paul Quinn College's mission statement highlighted a second group of BCs that proved willing to specify a target population. Religious schools often targeted students who espoused particular values and sought to study in a particular religious context. In its USMS, Paul Quinn proclaimed its status as a "Christ-centered liberal arts institution" that fostered "the academic, social, and Christian development of students." Bluefield College noted that it served students within a "Christian Context," while Covenant College indicated its religious orientation to prospective students by "[a]cknowledging Christ as the creator of all things, as the redeemer of people fallen into sin, and as the sovereign ruler over all of life." Calvin College, Freed-Hardeman College, Goshen College, Messiah College, and Williams Baptist College made similar claims about the primacy of Christian values in their USMS. Again, however, we observed some concert between USMS and OMS with regard to target populations. Each of these schools also mentioned the Christian nature of their campuses in their OMS.

The colleges' treatment of target populations paralleled their use of the term "diversity." Urciuoli (2003) argued that diversity came to prominence in the 1990s as a less-threatening alternative to "multiculturalism." Whereas multiculturalism clearly denoted the full citizenship of members of racial or ethnic minorities, diversity proved vague enough to be open to interpretation. Only a very small number (two) of colleges in our sample of USMS used the term in a way that clearly connoted racial diversity. Miles College, an HBCU, claimed to enroll "students from diverse academic, social, economic, and racial backgrounds." Olivet College appealed to history, citing its status as a pioneer in racially integrated higher education.

As Urciuoli (2003) predicted, diversity appeared far more often as a term that referred to something other than racial diversity. This pattern obtained equally among OMS and USMS. The OMS of Grand View College sought to prepare students for "responsible citizenship in their communities and in a diverse and changing world." Bay Path College issued the equally formulaic statement that it "values and promotes diversity." Whereas USMS were amended or embellished on many other subjects, they generally echoed OMS by speaking of diversity as a referent-less term. Ohio Dominican University presented itself as "a place where diversity is embraced and individualism is celebrated." Achieving admirable parsimony, University of the Ozarks simply claimed to enroll a "diverse student body." In both the OMS and USMS examples cited above, a college's use of the term diversity lacked content through which it could be interpreted. The sense in which the institution was diverse was not tied to racial diversity and therefore was open to the projections of prospective students.

Some colleges defined diversity in geographic terms. Exhibiting a fondness for enumeration noted above, USMS often measured diversity in terms of the number of states from which an institution drew students. Other institutions cast diversity in international terms. Earlham College, for example, claimed in its USMS that "classroom learning goes hand-in-hand with experiencing the diversity of the world." Similarly, Talladega College touted "the value of understanding all cultures." For these institutions, diversity indicated the presence of students from different nations across the globe rather than interaction with different racial groups within the United States.

Perhaps in a nod to the current debate regarding the political leanings of colleges and their faculty, other colleges articulated their commitments to intellectual diversity. Whittier College's USMS, for example, espoused "respect for diversity of thought." Bowdoin College's USMS claimed that its students are "diverse (in backgrounds, ideas, and experiences)." Junianta College espoused "the free exchange of diverse ideas" in its OMS. Diversity to these schools seemed to represent a kind of lernfreiheit enjoyed by students who may be demographically similar. Some colleges extended the concept of intellectual diversity to include students' range of religious practices. Bluefield College claimed to maintain "a climate of diversity in religious tradition and practice" in its USMS. Grand View College echoed this claim, noting that it sought "students from all walks of life and faith traditions." Here, diversity indicated the freedom of students to worship in the manner of their choosing while collegians.

The interactions between the concepts of target population and diversity evidence a pattern that is familiar from our discussions in the preceding sections. Colleges' claims of geographic, intellectual, and religious diversity provided some content to the term diversity. They did so without eliminating the possibility that the college maintains a racially diverse student body. Yet the colleges also did not explicitly invoke racial diversity, perhaps because some prospective students may regard this specific use of the term as unattractive. Diversity, therefore, benefited both from referents that provided it with content—as a geographic or intellectual marker—and from vagueness that made the term safe. These qualities simultaneously legitimized the college and made the institution appear more alluring to different types of prospective students. References to a college's target population functioned in a similar manner. No college proved willing to restrict its target populations to students of a traditional college age. Even when the concept of target population was broadened beyond Breneman's (1994) original usage, only a few colleges with histories of serving specific racial or religious groups claimed specific target populations.

This unanimity proved striking, given that analyses along other conceptual lines generally produced differences both between OMS and USMS, and among members of different Carnegie classifications. In both their OMS and USMS, most institutions avoided making statements that might limit the pool of prospective students from which they could draw. Only HBCUs and colleges with strong religious identities broke from this pattern. Other colleges in our sample found ways to take both their target populations and the concept of diversity "to the bank."

Discussion

The BCs in our sample submitted revised or even wholly different documents to *U.S. News* than they published for other audiences. Our findings suggest that the communication patterns of BCs are both vague and idiosyncratic. OMS generally provided modestly adorned descriptions of the colleges. In other words, these official documents generally evidenced modified, but normative, versions of liberal arts elements (Breneman 1994). Analysis of these documents allowed us to answer research question one. We found that claims to the liberal arts tradition and to the benefits of small enrollments were common to most BCs. Mentions of residential life proved less common, and explicit references to a traditionally aged student population were absent entirely from the sampled documents.

Research question two asked whether different types of colleges would use elements of Breneman's (1994) definition of a liberal arts college differently from one another. Our analysis of OMS revealed that BCs employed these normative concepts in different ways. Several scholars (e.g., McPherson and Schapiro 1999; Winston 1999, 2004) noted that small private colleges draw from profoundly different levels of resources. This pattern of stratification was particularly evident among the OMS included in our study. A&S and A&S+ colleges were more likely than their Balanced, Prof+, or Prof counterparts to present themselves as exclusively liberal arts in orientation. They also proved more likely to reinforce these claims by operationalizing the concept of "liberal arts," thereby reinforcing the value they placed on general education and common academic experiences. A&S and A&S+ colleges often combined curricular claims with statements about their residential settings. By contrast, colleges with a greater professional focus generally mentioned liberal arts courses as one of many curricular options available on their campuses. These institutions also proved likely to emphasize extracurricular activities or student development philosophies rather than on-campus residence. The theme of stratification indicates that few of the colleges made inaccurate curricular claims.

Official mission statements differed notably from USMS. We used a comparison of OMS and USMS to answer our third research question, which asked what a linguistic framework might reveal about the communicative patterns found within sampled mission statements. Viewed through Urciuoli's (2003) concept of SDSs, USMS emerged as documents through which colleges signaled multiple meanings to prospective students. These meanings appear carefully crafted both to prove a college's consonance with normative expectations and to leave room for the different interpretations that prospective students might have of these normative concepts. In other words, our findings suggest that colleges use USMS as recruitment materials, rather than statements of values or even aspiration.

Because our findings suggest that USMS are intended as recruitment vehicles, we viewed the communication patterns evidenced in these documents with particular interest. In much the same manner that Silverstein's (2003) oenophile might use the term "bouquet" to signal to his status as an insider to another oenophile, colleges reliably used at

least some of the elements of Breneman's (1994) definition of a genuine liberal arts college. Such appeals to normative markers allowed the colleges to claim legitimacy for themselves. Terms were given enough substance to provide context for a novice. Prospective students seeking an excellent college that embraced diversity were welcomed by USMS, but allowed to attach their own meaning(s) to these terms. This juxtaposition simultaneously communicated the institution's legitimacy and remained open to interpretation by savvy consumers.

As with the OMS in our sample, we detected significant levels of variance among BCs' uses of USMS. If the OMS proved a realm of description, the USMS proved a realm of ornamentation rather than outright invention. The colleges making the fullest liberal arts claims generally were A&S and A&S+ institutions that conferred a high percentage of their degrees in liberal arts fields. Balanced, Prof+, and Prof schools tended to add little more than a brief phrase such as "liberal arts tradition" to their descriptions of their curricula. This phrase generally was surrounded by a list of the college's other curricular offerings. Thus, we found few incidences of BCs that made unsupportable claims about their curricular or extracurricular offerings. Yet, the use of terms such as "liberal arts" did not appear to be accidental and is consistent with previous research documenting the signaling role of mission statements (Morphew and Hartley 2006).

Stratification around the question of target population and diversity assumed a different form. Here, differentiation stemmed from institutional histories rather than from Carnegie classification. HBCUs and some religious schools proved far more willing to identify target populations than did other institutions. These colleges provided rare disruptions to a general pattern in which institutions spoke with as few specifics as they could manage while still invoking legitimizing concepts. In much the same way that balanced, Prof+, and Prof institutions sought to speak of their curricula in broad terms, the vast majority of institutions in our sample preferred not to define their target populations. These institutions thereby avoided restricting the student population from which they could draw. The colleges followed a similar strategy with diversity, a term that was rarely defined to indicate the presence of students from different racial backgrounds. Instead, colleges spoke of geographical, intellectual, or religious diversity. According to Urciuoli (2003), diversity was given these meanings because they are less restrictive than the notion of racial diversity and therefore appeal to a broader audience, including prospective students and parents who may not value racial diversity.

The claims that colleges made often proved less interesting than the manner in which they made them. The terms and structures that colleges carefully employed proved as important as what the colleges explicitly claimed. A consideration of these patterns of usage answered research question four, which sought to assess the utility both of mission statements as communicative devices and of Urciuoli's (2003) framework as a lens of analysis. With the exception of the A&S and A&S+ schools, few of the institutions in our sample seemed willing to commit to a definition of "liberal arts." We do not mean that the colleges had backed away from the use of curriculum as a recruitment tool. We did, however, perceive a shift in the timbre of the recruitment pitch. The Balanced, Prof+, and Prof colleges eschewed explicit claims of general education in favor of broad claims that no prospective student would find objectionable. Colleges regularly claimed excellence for their curricula. Some touted their curricular breadth, placing professional offerings alongside tacit mentions of their liberal arts heritage. Many removed leadership from its association with service (an association made widely in OMS), instead placing these elements as two of many extracurricular possibilities on a long list of options. Colleges even proved unwilling to specify their overall enrollments, relying instead upon terms such

as "small class size" that few would find objectionable. The general pattern in USMS, then, showed colleges avoiding precise language rather than over-reaching to make aspirational claims. In the process, mission statements told us 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.

Nothing testified more eloquently to the care with which these small private colleges crafted their communications than the stunning number of occasions on which the colleges said nothing at all. Indeed, our focus upon the colleges' mission statements led us to neglect an intriguing, if unorthodox, data source: what the colleges chose to omit from their USMS. A&S institutions such as Beloit College, DePauw University, and Knox College failed to mention the residential nature of their campuses in their USMS even though these institutions maintain extensive residential facilities and programs. Such silences may simply constitute oversights. However, silences also may highlight points of great significance. Some institutions simply may have decided that certain elements of their identity do not sell well, even if Breneman (1994) identified those elements as core tenets of a genuine liberal arts college. This insight provides eloquent testimony to the utility of Urciuoli's (2003) framework. A more conventional analysis might emphasize what colleges do and do not say about themselves, thereby de-emphasizing the manner in which BCs make these claims. Analysis through the lens of the SDS therefore has allowed us to develop more nuanced interpretations of our data than would simple consideration of the presence or absence of normative concepts.

Implications

Implications for Future Study

Morphew and Hartley, both in their study of more than 300 mission statements across the 4-year spectrum (2006) and in their subsequent study of college viewbooks (2008), noted the nonspecific qualities of many college publications. Their research suggests that colleges and universities are determined to camouflage their distinctiveness via the use of ambiguous, ubiquitous terms. Our study provides more support for the claim that college recruitment materials—in this case USMS—are intriguing primarily for their homogeneity. On the other hand, our findings conflict with Delucchi's (1997) contention that colleges with professional emphases make extensive liberal arts claims. We argue instead that few institutions in our sample made substantively inaccurate liberal arts claims. Our divergent findings may be a function of method. It is unclear from Declucchi's discussion of his methodology whether a college citing a "liberal arts tradition" would be coded as making a "primarily liberal arts claim" (p. 416). If so, his work would likely produce results that differ from our study.

Our study also provides further support for the findings of Morphew and Hartley (2006) and Hartley and Morphew (2008) that intentionally religious colleges are more likely than other institutional types to emphasize their distinctive qualities to prospective students. Unlike the ambiguity we identified in the USMS of other BCs, religious colleges in our sample used terms in their USMS that would limit the number of prospective students with a continued interest in applying for admission. These colleges' use of terms like "Christ-centered" to describe their student development philosophy or curriculum were boldly inconsistent with USMS that typically sought to appeal to the greatest possible number of prospective students. This finding is consistent with other academic studies that emphasized

the centrality of the language of faith in the mission statements of religious colleges (Mixon et al. 2004; Smith and Jackson 2004). Further investigation of these colleges' philosophies in recruiting students could build upon this scholarship to explore the processes by which these organizations tie religious and academic elements into their missions.

An exploration of the motivations and strategies behind the construction of mission statements constitutes another useful area for future study. Colleges and universities presumably have invested significant time and resources in developing an OMS. Yet many elements of the OMS do not appear, or appear only in modified form, in the mission statements that reach prospective students, their families, and other external groups via *U.S. News & World Report*. A qualitative study of the process whereby colleges generate recruitment materials (including viewbooks, USMS, and synopses for college guides) would likely reveal the processes by which colleges decide what to include, what to revise, and what to remove from internal documents when communicating with prospective students.

Implications for Practice

Meyer and Rowan (1977) famously posited that the "logic of confidence" guides organizations that operate in institutionalized fields. That is, these organizations make occasional "displays of confidence, satisfaction and good faith, internally and externally" (p. 358). Such displays convince the organization's various audiences that the organization is legitimate, even though its goals may be unclear and its production processes difficult to assess. The effects of the logic of confidence upon an organization's audience can be extraordinary. In Meyer's (1977) terms, even an employer who questions the value of a college degree often considers that degree to be a qualification for a job. The logic of confidence explains this decision. The employer values the degreed applicant not because he or she values the degree, but because he or she knows that other employers value the degree.

Mission statements are the kind of ceremonial document Meyer and Rowan (1977) viewed as essential to an organization that seeks to maintain widespread confidence in its operations. So long as mission statements reliably serve as public reminders that these colleges are functioning as they "ought" to function, these documents serve the pragmatic purpose of deepening confidence in the BCs that generate them. Our findings suggest that mission statements may not always serve this purpose, however. Instead, we have discovered instances in which OMS and USMS are two different statements. Further, analysis using Urciuoli's (2003) framework suggests that USMS function less as declarations of organizational purpose or aspiration—that is, as documents designed to develop confidence in the college—than as documents that carefully and intentionally communicate with prospective students. In other words, documents whose primary purpose seems to be the installation of confidence in an organization's audience seem to risk that very confidence by claiming to offer one thing when they in fact offer something very different. Administrators at private BCs therefore may want to pay greater attention to the different "mission statements" emanating from their organization, lest confusion ensuing from the presence of two such documents undermine confidence in the college's legitimacy.

References

Astin, A. W. (1998). The changing American college student: Thirty-year trends, 1966–1996. *The Review of Higher Education, 21*(2), 115–135.

Astin, A. W. (1999). How the liberal arts college affects students. *Daedalus, 128*(1), 77–100.

Breneman, D. W. (1994). *Liberal arts colleges: Thriving, surviving, or endangered?* Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
Delucchi, M. (1997). "Liberal arts" colleges and the myth of uniqueness. *The Journal of Higher Education, 68*(4), 414–426.
Ehrenberg, R. G. (2003). Studying ourselves: The academic labor market. *Journal of Labor Economics, 21*(2), 267–288.
Gilbert, J. (1995). The liberal arts college—Is it really an endangered species? *Change, 27*(5), 37–43.
Hartley, J. M., & Morphew, C. C. (2008). What's being sold and to what end? A content analysis of college viewbooks. *Journal of Higher Education, 79*(6), 671–691.
Kushner, R. J. (1999). Curriculum as strategy: The scope and organization of business education in liberal arts colleges. *The Journal of Higher Education, 70*(4), 413–440.
Labaree, D. (1997). Public goods, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal, 34*(1), 39–81.
Lombard, M., Snyder-Duch, J., & Bracken, C. C. (2002). Content analysis in mass communication research: An assessment and reporting of intercoder reliability. *Human Communications Research, 28*, 587–604.
McPherson, M. S., & Schapiro, M. O. (1998). *The student aid game: Meeting need and rewarding talent in American higher education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
McPherson, M. S., & Schapiro, M. O. (1999). The future economic challenges for the liberal arts colleges. *Daedalus, 128*(1), 47–74.
Meyer, J. W. (1977). The effects of education as an institution. *American Journal of Sociology, 83*(1), 55–77.
Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology, 83*(2), 340–363.
Mixon, S. L., Lyon, L., & Beaty, M. (2004). Secularization and national universities: The effect of religious identity on academic reputation. *The Journal of Higher Education, 75*(4), 400–419.
Morphew, C. C. (2002). A rose by any other name: which colleges became universities. *The Review of Higher Education, 25*(2), 207–223.
Morphew, C. C., & Hartley, M. (2006). Mission statements: A thematic analysis of rhetoric across institutional type. *The Journal of Higher Education, 77*(3), 456–471.
Neely, P. (1999). The threats to liberal arts colleges. *Daedalus, 128*(1), 27–44.
Readings, B. (1996). *The university in ruins*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Silverstein, M. (2003). Indexical order and the dialectics of sociolinguistic life. *Language & Communication, 23*(3–4), 193–229.
Smith, N. C., & Jackson, J. F. L. (2004). Religious institutions in the United States: Research challenges. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 124*, 31–48.
The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. (2008). Undergraduate instructional program description. Retrieved April 8, 2008, from http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/index.asp?key=786.
Turner, F. M. (1996). Newman's university and ours. In F. M. Turner (Ed.), *The idea of a university* (pp. 282–301). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Urciuoli, B. (2003). Excellence, leadership, skills, diversity: Marketing liberal arts education. *Language & Communication, 23*(3–4), 385–408.
Winston, G. (1999). Subsidies, hierarchy and peers: The awkward economics of higher education. *The Journal of Economic Perspectives, 13*(1), 13–36.
Winston, G. (2004). Differentiation among U.S. colleges and universities. *Review of Industrial Organization, 24*(4), 331–354.