



## Academic Library Mission Statements, Web Sites, and Communicating Purpose

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### ABSTRACT

Continual changes in information technologies over the past three decades have wrought substantial changes in library services and in information-seeking behavior among the general public. Thus the necessity for libraries to utilize the internet to communicate with stakeholders is even more important for academic libraries, as the rate of internet usage among those with college degrees continues to outpace that of the general population. The online availability of a well-crafted mission statement is therefore crucial. This analysis of the web sites of 113 ARL academic libraries—an update of Kuchi's (2006) study—considers the inclusion (availability) and placement (accessibility) of mission statements on library web sites and provides insights into the academic library's use of such statements for communicating mission and purpose to different stakeholders.

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### INTRODUCTION

Continual changes in information technologies over the past three decades have wrought substantial changes in library services and in information-seeking behavior among the general public. In the twenty-five years since the World Wide Web emerged, internet usage has continued to grow at a high rate. In the last ten years alone, the percentage of American adults using the internet has risen from 66% to 87%, with 89% usage in the 18–29 age group (Pew Research Center, 2014). The necessity for libraries to utilize the internet to communicate with stakeholders is even more important for academic libraries, as the rate of internet usage among those with college degrees continues to outpace that of the general population (Pew Research Center, 2014), indicating that both students and faculty are likely to turn to the internet first for their information needs. Thus, it is imperative that academic libraries use the internet as a channel to communicate mission and purpose to stakeholders.

Surprisingly, however, there is little published research about placement of mission statements on library web sites. Kuchi's (2006) analysis of academic library web sites and mission statements is so far the only study to investigate this crucial research problem. Conducted in 2004, the study found that, of 111 ARL libraries included in the original sample, only 87 (78%) of them offered an accessible mission statement on their web site. Moreover, of the libraries that did, few if any placed them in visible or reasonably accessible locations. The present study's intention is to determine to what extent, exactly one

decade later, the accessibility of academic library mission statements has changed.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There is no shortage of available literature about the centrality of strategic planning initiatives in libraries, most especially the creation, publication, and ongoing refining of such core articulations as the library's mission, vision, and core values statements. They are at once a means of creating the library's institutional identity (Hernon, 2007a) and a device for communicating that identity (Keeling, 2013). Although some studies have identified as many as eleven mission statement functions (Lazarev, 2001), a mission statement is, according to Moran, Stueart, and Morner (2013), "a short, succinct statement focusing on the purpose of the organization, its reason for existence, and what it hopes to accomplish" (p. 78) by identifying "who, what, and how" the library serves. Length can vary from a single sentence to whole paragraphs (Cottrell, 2011; Velasquez, 2013). Library mission statements occasionally get "bad press" as librarians and staff sometimes find little value in them (or, as Hernon, 2007a implies, ignore them altogether). Thus mission statements must not only emphasize function but also possess legitimate meaning, be credible—and, perhaps above all else, be testable (Davies, 2006).

While library missions have evolved over time (Rubin, 2010), it has been only within the past twenty years that libraries have been able to make their mission statements available online. Just like the statement itself, the library's homepage is an articulation of its organizational identity and thus has a profound effect on how current and potential users perceive the library as an institution, especially its values and service philosophies (McMenemy, 2007; Welch, 2005). Traditionally, academic library

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mission statements were framed around the simple notions of serving faculty and students (Pritchard, 2008). Today's mission statements, however, have become more sophisticated and focus on many different elements, among them: leadership in a global setting; collecting, organizing, providing and preserving access to users; fostering intellectual growth; and supporting the teaching and research missions of the parent institution (Hernon, 2007a). Some professional guidelines advocate the development of separate mission statements for specific user groups, for example undergraduates ("Guidelines", 2014). As Hernon (2007b) explains, in an evolving climate of assessment and accountability, academic library mission statements are receiving "increased scrutiny" (p. 11) from stakeholders and program accreditation groups and are thus beginning to serve as a basis for service and program evaluation. Visible mission statements are even becoming important for attracting potential donors and other institutional funders (Swan, 2002). Mission statements have therefore become one of the primary ways in which academic libraries maintain visibility on and off campus, at once aligning themselves with and distinguishing themselves from their parent institution's mission and goals. As Abbott (2009, p. 4) explains, "Everyone on campus should know what the library is about."

In the early days of library web sites, Hightower, Shih, and Tilghman (1998) determined that, even in its infancy, the academic library web page was adopting a basic hierarchy of content: (1) the homepage; (2) directional pages, including hours, basic policies, and descriptive information about collections; and (3) subject-specific "reference" pages. Academic library web sites have since evolved into "a complex application integrating access to and interaction with a diverse set of information products and services with people" (McGillis & Toms, 2001, p. 356). They are now what some call the library's "virtual public face" (McGillis & Toms, 2001, p. 355; McMenemy, 2007), a "virtual front door" (Strothmann, McCain, & Scrivener, 2009, p. 272), and even an "electronic welcome mat" (Welch, 2005, p. 225), and thus should represent "an appropriate vision of what the library is about and the services it offers" (McMenemy, 2007, p. 654). McMenemy (2007) emphasizes the library web site's function to both shape the user's idea of the library's service philosophies (sometimes working against outdated ideas of the library's purpose) and thus not only reach current users but also non-current (i.e., potential) users.

The online availability of a well-crafted mission statement is therefore crucial. Yet few studies focus on the presence and accessibility of the mission statement on academic library web sites. One of the earliest, Cohen and Still's (1999) study of 100 university and two-year college library web sites, found that only 10% of these web sites contained a mission statement. Begum's (2006) study determined that nearly all academic library web sites in Pakistan were missing a mission statement. Carter and Seaman's (2011) exploratory study of the management and support of outreach in academic libraries investigated the promotional activities of over one hundred academic libraries and found that only a minority of them maintained a mission statement. Other studies, while not as concerned with the online availability of mission statements, use mission statements in their research design. For example, CannCasciato (2011) examines the mission and planning documents of nine academic libraries in Washington State to determine the extent to which accreditation evaluation plays a role in shaping mission and objectives; Ren (2013) uses library mission statements as a basis for evaluating service efficacy and goal attainment; and Stephan, Cheng, and Young (2006) assesses whether University of Mississippi library home pages successfully meet the library's goals and mission statement.

Although Detlor and Lewis's (2006) study of academic library web site content lists mission, values and goals as one among 33 essential elements of an academic library web site, their published findings focus on the availability of only a few major elements. Kuchi's (2006) study of the placement of mission statements on academic library web sites remains the only study of its kind to date that offers any specific data on the subject. Kuchi, who collected her data in the spring of 2004, examined 111 ARL academic library web sites by browsing each

site's homepage for direct and indirect paths to the mission statement and, in most cases, when paths were not immediately visible, used the site's search engine. Overall Kuchi found that 87 (78%) of the libraries in her sample had web sites that contained any form of mission statement. While this proportion seemed high, astonishingly not one library published the statement on the homepage and only one offered a direct link to it. "Considering that space on the main page is limited and has highly competing demands," Kuchi reasoned, "it was generally not expected that libraries would place the full content of mission statement on the main page" (2006, p. 150). Almost all of the web sites that did contain a mission statement included it on such secondary pages as "About Us" (this was most frequent), "Administration", "Services", and "Collections" pages. Kuchi concluded that, even among those sites that did include a mission statement, its placement was generally ineffective and thus (arguably) diminished the mission's importance to users and stakeholders. Among Kuchi's recommendations was that libraries consider placing the mission statement not in one very conspicuous place (e.g., the main page) but several places throughout the web site.

The passage of time, coupled with the growing literature on the increasing importance of online mission statements, suggests a simple but crucial question: have Kuchi's (2006) results changed over the past decade? The present study's researchers could find no recent research updating Kuchi's findings, only the suggestion that a repeat of the original study could reveal different findings. Revisiting the core questions of Kuchi's study while asking some altogether new questions would be not only valuable to researchers of library web sites and virtual services but also library missions and strategic planning initiatives. This study fills that gap.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Repeating an earlier study made the determination of research questions relatively straightforward. In the present study we explore some of Kuchi's original questions and add some of our own. This study's guiding research questions were:

- R1: What percentage of ARL libraries make their mission statement available online?
- R2: Is there a direct link from the library main page to the mission statement?
- R3: Is there a slogan for the libraries on the main library web page?
- R4: What is the mode number of pages navigated from the library homepage to reach the mission statement?
- R5: Is there a noticeable difference in accessibility of mission statements between public and private institutions?

As R1, R2, and R4 indicate, we believe a similar analysis of current ARL web sites followed with a comparison of our results with Kuchi's (2006) will not only reveal whether more ARL libraries make their mission statements available online but also give some indication whether or not academic libraries are more aware of the importance of accessible online mission statements than they were one decade ago. Moreover, since Kuchi did not directly consider the presence of slogans in her study, R3 adds to the inquiry: some libraries that would not necessarily offer a full mission statement on the library's homepage may in fact offer a shorter statement, inspired by (or taken from) the longer and complete statement. Last, considering the proportion of mission statement availability between public and private institutions (R5, another question Kuchi did not investigate), will extend the inquiry even further by considering whether or not one institutional type makes their mission available to stakeholders more than the other.

## METHODOLOGY

We analyzed the web sites of 113 Association of Research Libraries (ARL) members for the communication of mission statements. Of

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