Timothy Peters

Memorable and Meaningful

A Better Mission Statement for Academic Libraries

The life of the academic library is one of cycles. We do something, and a month or a year or a few years later we do it again. Every month we compile a battery of statistics about our operations. Every year we draft an annual report, complete with a newly minted set of annual goals. Every few years we engage in strategic planning workshops that give direction to our activities over the next three years.

And every so often (typically less often than the activities previously mentioned) we revise our library mission statement. Feedback is gathered, meetings are held, drafts are created, and from it comes a new and improved mission statement. It's placed on the library's website for all to see, shared with higher-ups outside the library, referenced in staff meetings, and displayed prominently in annual reports and communiques to Friends groups. Employees are encouraged to "Learn it, know it, live it."

Soon afterward, however, the typical mission statement is forgotten by most library staff. Everyone remembers there *is* a mission statement, but if asked to repeat it, almost all library employees (the very people who crafted the statement) would be unable to do so.

It's not their fault; library mission statements are inherently unmemorable. They just don't stick in people's minds. Here are some reasons why:

- **Too many mission statements deal in *how* when they should deal in *why***. Management thinker Peter Drucker said a mission statement should state *why* you do what you do, not *how* you do it.[1] But a quick survey of academic library mission statements reveals a frequent focus on the *how*, with libraries promising to "provide access to collections and resources" and "support teaching, learning, and research." A simple restatement of the work we do every day does not make for a memorable mission statement.
- **Mission statement language is vague**. Words like *empower*, *enrich*, and *cultivate* appear frequently in library mission statements. But what do these words really mean to a library employee? When we consider our daily activities, can we point to the things we do that *empower* or *cultivate*? Vague language creates uncertainty and robs a mission statement of resonance and guarantees it won't be remembered.
- **Its outcomes are difficult to measure**. How does a library measure its impact in relation to empowering its users or fostering academic success? Can we quantify the way(s) we enrich lives? Is it possible to point to a student's success and identify the library's contribution separate from that of other services and individuals and experiences? If something can't be quantified, it's unlikely to be remembered.

Timothy Peters is associate dean of the university libraries at Central Michigan University, email: peter1t@cmich.edu.

© 2026 Timothy Peters

- **It's not actionable**. If a mission statement's language is vague, doesn't indicate a clear path forward, or seems to be a fancy way of saying what they're already doing, library employees won't be able to identify the actions they should take to fulfill the mission. The result is inactivity.

With such shortcomings endemic to academic library mission statements, it's easy to understand why they are largely forgotten. And it's worth pointing out that a mission statement that isn't actively motivating the staff really isn't doing the library any good.

By way of remedy, I propose a better and bolder mission statement. To my knowledge, it is not in use anywhere, but I believe it should be because it is concise, memorable, and suited to every academic library regardless of size, budget, and organizational structure:

We shorten the distance between people and the information they need to be successful.

This brief sentence is an unequivocal improvement on the academic library mission statement as we know it, and here's why:

- **It is user focused**. This mission statement puts the emphasis on the library's users instead of on the library. Gone are library-centric words like *collect*, *teach*, and *promote*, replaced by a mandate for library staff to apply their skills to help users be successful. This statement gives us a *why*.
- **It is actionable**. This new mission statement is a call to action. Every library employee can think of at least one example of how the library is intimidating and overwhelming for students. We can "shorten the distance" by streamlining our websites, simplifying services, and making using the library as painless as possible.
- **It is measurable**. Our successful attainment of this mission can be easily measured. The average turnaround time on a reference question can be measured. The number of steps it takes to request the delivery of a document can be measured, as can the number of clicks it takes a user to get from the library's homepage to the library's hours calendar. It would be simple to compare the performance of the pre-new mission statement library with the post-new mission statement library.
- **It is inspirational**. A mission statement must be inspirational. It should resonate with employees and motivate them to perform. This new mission statement is a charge for us to use our skills directly in the service of our users and to do so more proactively and effectively than we have done in the past. Service to our users is a fundamental professional concept, one which all of us take very seriously, and this mission statement puts service right out front.

Placing the focus of this statement clearly on our users is intentional, as is the emphasis on it being actionable and inspirational. Academic libraries exist in an age of information ubiquity; it has never been easier for our users to find, access, and share information. And the rise of AI-powered tools has significant, and troubling, implications for our future. The best thing we can do is reaffirm our commitment to our users by making their success our primary charge.

The new statement also brings value to library employees by transforming the library mission statement from something indistinct and unmemorable into something clear, actionable, and meaningful. A concise and easily understood mission statement in which they see their contributions reflected will benefit them as well.

Note

1. Peter Drucker and Frances Hesselbein, *Peter Drucker's Five Most Important Questions: Enduring Wisdom for Young Leaders* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016).