

## CHAPTER 1—MISSION AND GOALS

New School University was chartered as a university in 1997, reflecting the reality that the institution, founded in 1919 for less than 100 non-degree adult students, had grown by 2001 to 7,000 degree candidates. Almost all of the expansion occurred when the institution was chartered as the New School for Social Research, a name that the university's trustees thought was no longer appropriate, given the number of new schools devoted to the performing arts and design. So, calling the institution a university recognized the organization's complexity and the challenge of having eight academic schools and colleges with diverse missions and histories of their own. Indeed, the question of university mission, the subject of this chapter, has emerged as *the* question of the Self-study Report, whether the topic is organizational structure, budget models, or institutional planning.

Given its distinguished but eclectic history, New School never found it easy to provide a clear definition of its mission.<sup>4</sup> In the mission and purpose section of its 1991 Self-Study Report, the writer argued:

An institution as protean as this one will naturally call out many understandings of function and purpose. Those wanting a single, precise, and neat definition will find the New School forever frustrating. But those many more who find exhilaration in ambiguity will continue to be attracted to this University.<sup>5</sup>

The New School amalgam, however, was officially chartered as New School University in 1997, and the new university is now in the midst of a transition, one building on its administrative foundation of three liberal arts colleges and five professional schools. This self-study, therefore, comes at an opportune time. What do we want the new university to be? What do we want the new university to do? The subcommittee now has the opportunity to offer a clear definition of the university's mission and three important goals associated with that mission.

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<sup>4</sup> The Middle States Association Commission for Higher Education correctly notes in its *Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education* that “[a] major index of an institution’s quality is the astuteness with which it has identified its task. The basic necessity is a clear definition of an institution’s mission and goals,” (5) which are consistent with the “basic aims of higher education” and “reflect its particular character and individuality” (7).

<sup>5</sup> In the mission and purpose section of the 1991 Self-study Report, the institution subscribed to five “characteristics” that President Fanton considered “at the heart of the New School” on page 5 of his *1986 Annual Report*:

- innovating and meeting unmet educational needs
- helping to define boundaries of the fields in which we teach and do research
- expanding educational opportunity and ‘adding value’ to the 30,000 students who study here each year
- deepening our connections to the world outside our academic walls and protecting complete freedom of inquiry and expression within
- making a contribution to and reflecting the diversity of New York City

The Report of the Evaluation Team (March 18, 1991) accepted the “five defining characteristics” as the equivalent of a mission statement. The five characteristics were recited again in New School’s Periodic Review Report of May, 1996.

The subcommittee thought it worthwhile to draft such a mission statement, which its members could agreeably affirm and which anchors the discussion that follows. The subcommittee should note at the outset that it has been kept informed of parallel efforts of university officers to draft a mission statement and goals with the intention of sharing both their work and the subcommittee's work with the trustees and the university community at large.

### **Mission**

First and foremost, New School University is the quintessential New York institution, an urban space open to women and men, from all walks of life and all parts of the globe, who want to pursue learning in free and creative association unconstrained by conventional boundaries, for their own self-improvement, the advancement of their professions, and the improvement of the city and world in which they live.

Our intention here is to clarify the university's mission as an end in itself, to establish, in other words, that [a] "university is not a machine for achieving a particular purpose or producing a particular result; it is a manner of human activity."<sup>6</sup> This view conveys our understanding of what a university is and how it serves its students:

...students badly need to find themselves in a place in which people are not ordered to a purpose, in which loose cannons are free to roll about. The only point of having real live professors around instead of just computer terminals, videotapes, and mimeoed lecture notes is that students need to have freedom enacted before their eyes by actual human beings.<sup>7</sup>

Certainly both professors and students have practical objectives of their own and any university should be held accountable for how well those objectives are served. But a university's fundamental mission is the pursuit of learning bound up in conversation and debate which "has no predetermined course, we do not ask what it is for."<sup>8</sup> This was at the heart of the founding concept, the 1918 "Proposal for An Independent School of Social Science for Men and Women," which called for a "new school" free to pursue spirited inquiry unconstrained by current dogmas or conventional oversight:

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Oakeshott, "The Idea of a University," (1950) in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 96. "There is plenty that might properly be criticized in our universities but to quarrel with them because they are not clear what their 'function' is, is to make a mistake about their character. A university is not a machine for achieving a particular purpose or producing a particular result; it is a manner of human activity."

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, "Education and Dogma," (*Dissent*, Spring 1989), 204.

<sup>8</sup> Oakeshott, 98. "The pursuit of learning is not a race in which competitors jockey for the best place, it is not even an argument or a symposium; it is a conversation...A conversation does not need a chairman, it has no predetermined course, we do not ask what it is for, and we do not judge its excellence by its conclusion; it has no conclusion but is always put by for another day."

...where well qualified investigators and thinkers can enjoy the advantage of one another's thought and discoveries, and where they can talk freely upon any theme they judge fit to such grown up and responsible men and women as may wish to seek their instruction... Such a school would become a center of the best thought in America, would lead in emancipating learning from the narrow trammels of lay boards of trustees, and would be a spiritual adventure of utmost significance. Nothing like it has ever been attempted; this is the hour for the experiment; and New York is the place, because it is the greatest social science laboratory in the world and of its own force attracts scholars and leaders in educational work.

(9-10)

The mission as expressed in the original 1918 document was not just about adult education; it was a conceptualization of education in general. It was geared to adults but more precisely for a group of intellectuals who would have sufficient knowledge to actively participate in the seminar style learning they were promoting. Such practices were later extended when the "university in exile" was established to support intellectuals and artists fleeing Nazi Europe. For all of the different elements that subsequently became part of the New School amalgam—Parsons School of Design, Milano Graduate School, Eugene Lang College, the Jazz and Contemporary Music Program, Mannes College of Music, and Actors Studio Drama School—conversation and debate have been the common currency in preserving and extending their respective traditions of learning, and in developing the capacities and potentials of their students.

The subcommittee's mission statement is also meant to reflect New School's "particular character and individuality"—to affirm its history, be inclusive and remain optimistic about the human condition. This is not a matter of sentiment but of understanding the culture of New School that distinguishes the institution in the minds of opinion-makers, potential donors, faculty and students. There is always an element of myth that animates the culture of any institution, and a strong culture depends, in part, on forgetting or ignoring inconvenient facts. Nonetheless, the culture of New School remains distinctly progressive and cosmopolitan.

The salient features of current mission statements of the university's colleges and professional schools speak to a varied conception of educated men and women but with a shared ethos. The New School sees an "informed and reflective citizenry." The Graduate Faculty addresses "skills and commitments," "peace" and "justice" in a "progressive political tradition." Parsons educates "leaders in design" in its "progressive programs." Milano prepares students "to be agents of social and organizational change." Lang College wants "creative students who will make a difference in the world." Mannes, Jazz and Actors Studio develop those of "unique talent" from "around the world." All of these draft statements seek to "enrich" their students, not just make them "richer," and much of the language is about improving the urban condition and making the world a better place through democratic and egalitarian communities.

Such a culture is reinforced by the self-selection of faculty, students and staff who come predisposed to what they think the institution stands for. On the one hand, the absence of an active alumni/ae body deprives the university of the normal following of those loyal to the institution for its own sake. But it does leave room for benefactors, disenchanted with a market-driven culture and the conservative institutionalism of richly endowed universities, who are drawn to the progressive spirit with which faculty and students engage contemporary problems and prospects. Self-selection thus provides a continuing pool of intellectual and artistic talent finding reassurance in the culture, which, in turn, is ratified by those whose support is not based on old school ties but on what the New School values.

The culture of the New School is nourished by the ceaseless engagement of its faculty, staff and students in the organizations, studios, recital halls and neighborhoods of this most international of cities. They use the New School as a base for their own explorations. It is difficult to understand the university that is emerging unless one uses this wider urban lens. Its origins and location are not separable from the progressive turmoil of a city that brings together scholars, working within their bounded fields of knowledge, with intellectuals, practitioners and students relying on their actual experience and individual perceptions.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the urban mix is continually enriched by émigrés to New York City who bring with them their abiding interest in different continents and the larger mix of world affairs.

A nonprofit institution that presides over revenue-producing divisions needs a clear definition of mission reflecting its particular character and individuality to help it rationalize its assets on grounds other than just their financial viability. Administrators need a standard that informs their judgment on how to allocate resources and evaluate programs. Otherwise, the institution risks becoming little more than a holding company, using for-profit measures to guide decisions. At a time when more than half of post-secondary education is in the hands of business and military organizations, it is important to understand what distinguishes this new university from those proprietary options and captive markets.

The subcommittee would have New School University be unequivocal in its commitment to openness and academic freedom—a place where learning is emancipated from the narrow confines of academic and professional divisions, where New York City is an extension of ourselves as investigators, artists and community members, where theory and practice are intricately interwoven, and where democracy and egalitarianism constitute the framework. It is a space for connections to be made, prevailing norms to be critically examined and self-understanding to be realized. This leads us to the discussion of three broad university goals.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The distinctions come from Daniel Bell in Lewis Perry's *Intellectual Life in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 438.

<sup>10</sup> To date, the Office of the Provost has prepared a draft list of obvious and exemplary goals appropriate to any mission statement (e.g., strengthening faculty, providing better student services), but our discussion is limited to those goals more closely tied to the mission statement set forth in our report.

### Three Important Goals

The subcommittee has paid special attention to a question posed by the Office of the Provost in its Self-study Design:

As the university evolves over the next decade, how should the administration foster collaboration within, and among, the schools? Which themes or initiatives promote the university *qua* university? (8)

In response, we have considered goals that both support the manner of human activity in which the colleges and professional schools are engaged and “promote the university *qua* university.” Three goals stand out:

- (1) providing the space for connections to be made among the arts, design and the social sciences;
- (2) providing a common education for undergraduates; and
- (3) developing the competence necessary to educate everyone who wants to be educated.

The university clearly recognizes the advantages it has by virtue of the distinguished history of its founding colleges, its location in a vibrant neighborhood in the world’s most diverse city, and its notable faculty in the performing arts, design, social policy and social research. But if New School University is to continue to outperform its resource base, the institution’s critical role is to facilitate collaboration among the schools and to ensure the quality of their undertakings.

*Goal #1: Provide the space for connections.* The study of material cultural and human action is intimately connected to the making of material culture for human action. The fundamental common ground is liberal education. As Michael Oakeshott observes, education in its most basic sense is a transaction between one generation and the next. It is a way to understand the human condition. The dynamic key word in this basic approach to education is “conversation.” While design, the arts and the social sciences each have a distinctive voice in the conversation, when they speak to each other, their common educational endeavor is greatly improved. The visual and the verbal present different but related ways to develop a language to take part in the conversation about what it means to be human.

The university has an opportunity to bring together elements of the conversation that have been falsely segregated, restoring and revivifying relationships that have been exhausted and eliminated in the past. It can provide the space for connections to be made: in joint seminars, in university lecture-discussion classes and in the development of joint research-creative projects. These might range from developing designs for the delivery of health care systems in sub-Saharan Africa to conducting joint sociological, economic and political research

in lower Manhattan to creating design and architectural projects for the re-development of our home town.

Design is an excellent example of an area that is full of possible connections to enrich the university conversation. The potential relationships among the arts, design and the social sciences already find precedent in collaborative projects such as the Center for New Design (Graduate Faculty and Parsons), the Chase Competition (Milano and Parsons), and seminars like the recent “Grass-roots Activism in Argentina,” which attracted students from the New School, the Graduate Faculty, Milano and Lang.

Although the practical matters to students who expect to be prepared for getting good jobs, university education should work with, rather than against, the pursuit of a liberal education, which allows students to take part in the liberal arts conversation. Thus, for example, when Dean Swearer seeks to revitalize Parsons, by advocating that “design itself should become a vital species of the ‘liberal arts of a technological society,’” he is suggesting that design, too, contributes to the discussion about what it means to be human.

If we reflect upon the meaning of design in society and in history, we will understand the human condition more accurately. Design problems are linked with discussions about the true, the beautiful and the good. Swearer addressed this when he closed his presentation to a University Seminar in April 1999 with reflections on the dark side of modernism and the activities of designers and architects during the Nazi era. Considering the problematic relationships between politics and design is important to the training of designers in a knowledge driven society, an immediate practical concern of the Parsons Dean, and also to the education of citizens of such a society, as a contribution to a liberal education.

*Goal #2: Provide a common education for undergraduates.* At both the undergraduate and the graduate level, New School University is committed to the liberal arts. This is the heart of what is meant by “common education.” The liberal arts are vital to a democratic culture because, properly understood, they are its life force. At an historical moment “enframed by technological imagination,” the liberal arts are of even greater import because they are supportive of all forms of educational inquiry and creativity, even those that may become commodified and enveloped by technological categories.<sup>11</sup> To be precise: the liberal arts allow us to examine a disparate number of cultures and human activities, be they written, visual or aural. They are understood as providing students with “the capacity to reflect” and the ability to engage in “cultural discourse” on the human activities of their own and other societies, both in the past, the here and now and the imagined and projected future. The role of New School is to make routes available for its students to engage in this kind of discourse.

“Common education” is not simply utilitarian but critical, able to subvert conventional wisdom using tools and materials that position both the university’s faculty and students to engage in public deliberation on the key questions of the human experience.<sup>12</sup> The university

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<sup>11</sup> Agnes Heller, “Does democracy need a cultural elite?” (1999).

<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, “Civility and Subversion: The Liberal Arts in a Cynical Society,” (The Gellert Lecture, October 27, 1999).

understands that its curriculum, however reflective it is of its diverse and distinct divisions, accepts the charge to “educate our students to know the world, be critical of it, and act confidently in it.”<sup>13</sup> Through a “variety of modes of inquiry—scientific, artistic, political,” we are “to teach students how to handle the plurality of the ways of understanding.”<sup>14</sup> It is a “common education,” built on core and critique, or “knowledge and critical capacity.”

*Goal #3: Developing the competence necessary to educate everyone who wants to be educated.* Who is admitted to the “conversation” at the university? In its 1991 Self-Study Report, the institution insisted that “both quality and openness” are possible and that “value can be added to all human beings at any stage in their lives” (5). But this has raised a more difficult question:

[T]he choice is not between educating an elite and educating everyone, but rather facing up to the challenges of the second: do we have the will, and the commitment to develop the competence necessary to educate everyone who wants to be educated?<sup>15</sup>

In the August 2001 Self-Study Design, the Office of the Provost noted the progress that has been made through the Diversity Initiative, now five years old:

Compared to its non-metropolitan peers, New School University is a model with respect to the diversity of students enrolled, both national and international, and with respect to staff diversity. In other respects, questions could be raised about the extent to which the institution is adapting quickly enough to the non-European demography of the metropolitan area. Asian enrollment is growing, but the percentage of African-American students is low. (8)

But numbers of who is represented, alone, do not address the talents, curricula and pedagogies needed to educate them. The university can be the necessary catalyst in helping to develop the competencies of its respective faculties so that positive learning outcomes become the primary measure of its commitment to wider access.

Our subcommittee believes the three goals discussed here build naturally on the strengths of a reflective and critical university in the social sciences and public policy, and an innovative and creative university in the arts and design. As the institution better connects these strengths and rethinks the projects of the liberal arts in a global world, it has a special opportunity to be an innovator in higher education consistent with its history and culture by enabling students to pursue their learning across divisional boundaries and preparing them to challenge and transform the professions they enter.

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<sup>13</sup> Randy Swearer, “Designing the Liberal Arts,” (Speech for New School University Seminar, April 19, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> S. Heidi Krueger, “What Herpyllis Knew: Recovering a Vision of Undergraduate Liberal Education,” (University General Seminar, New School, March 9, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Krueger, 30.