

LEGACY MISSION VISION

By Donna Lucas-Fitzpatrick

Purpose. Clarity. Action. An organization's mission creates buzz and draws in members and others to its work. And if the mission is relevant to the current social environment, it will generate energy and attract additional resources, investors, participants, and collaborators.

Marion Talbot and Ellen Richards dreamed of collegiate women uniting in "practical education work," and they created an organization to implement activities to fulfill this mission. It is doubtful they could have predicted that their 17-member association would evolve into the iconic institution that is the American Association of University Women today.

Currently two corporate mission statements exist. The AAUW Legal Advocacy Fund, a distinct program of the AAUW Educational Foundation, also has a mission of its own.

- AAUW promotes education and equity for all women and girls, lifelong learning, and positive societal change.
- The AAUW Educational Foundation provides funds to advance education, research, and self-development for women and to foster equity and positive societal change.
- The AAUW Legal Advocacy Fund provides funding and a support system for women seeking judicial redress for sex discrimination.

These statements tell the world why and for whom the Association and the Educational Foundation exist as well as illuminate how the organizations plan to effect change in the world. And, these missions inform members and stakeholders about the expectations of organizational priorities.

With the AAUW's 125th anniversary approaching, the boards of directors of the Association and Educational Foundation approved, in 2005, a strategic process to address long-standing challenges and identify future opportunities.

The strategic process team found that most AAUW members and external supporters do not differentiate the missions or care that there are separate corporations. Through surveys and values discussions held since November 2005, more than 11,000 members have indicated they care about equity and education for themselves and others as well as community involvement and programs.

Belief in the missions is alive within the membership, but does the belief translate into action?

A Striking Discovery

Over the last year, the strategic process team worked to understand why AAUW and other mission-driven organizations are struggling to thrive when their missions are still so relevant.

With millions of women graduates from colleges and universities, it is natural to expect that thousands might find AAUW a dynamic voice to represent their interests. But, young women, women of color, working women, and Generation X-ers are not drawn en masse to the Association's and Educational Foundation's missions. "Our strategy for the future must be to address the women whose needs we don't currently meet. We have to demonstrate to them we give them a voice. ... We have to let them know what we are doing," says Mary Purcell, AAUW president from 1981 to 1985.

And Mary Ellen Smyth, president of the Educational Foundation from 2001 to 2005, agrees. "We're not changing our perceptions as rapidly as the times are." Even with close to 100,000 members in its ranks, AAUW's most visible challenge today is member recruitment and retention.

The strategic process team discovered that over time, the missions have become diffused and even subservient to the institutions. Efforts to preserve institutional structures, pathways to leadership, and member programs have become, in some cases, a higher priority than programs promoting the missions: education and equity for all women and girls.

If these missions are not attracting new resources and members, then the most challenging organizational issue is recommitment to the missions—the very core of the Association's and Educational Foundation's existence.

Missions' Success

Prompted by AAUW's mission-based work, social change ensured that girls in classrooms received equal attention, deterrents to access were exposed, and women began growing in ranks with four-year and advanced degrees. One could say AAUW has been marginalized by the success of its mission, lulled into a comfortable perception of a job well done.

Attention shifted to immediate organizational needs: raising funds, electing officers, and creating more programs and structures to support the "work." And naturally, as the member base grew older—72 percent are age 60 and older—like-mindedness grew stronger, and in

some cases, program topics became less relevant to the missions and more relevant to personal interests.

AAUW slowly became more about the members—what they liked or disliked, what they wanted to hear—than the mission. “Our institutions have become more important than the mission,” says Katherine Eaton, founder and president of the Legal Advocacy Fund from 1981 to 1985. “We need to link the mission of equity to provocative topics. We need a vision, and we have to keep the core of equity and education, but we must begin to look at how we use the mission to move the organization forward. We need commitment to mission and the changes required to do it.”

Putting the Mission First

Indeed, a membership association serves the interests and needs of its members, however, “serving members” has never been the dominant mission. Our institutions were organized for the express purpose of serving others—women and girls.

“I like the concept of AAUW as a mission-driven organization. Let’s commit to it and then commit to what we have to do to fulfill it—that’s critical. We must have the courage to change and be viable,” says Jackie DeFazio, AAUW president from 1993 to 1997.

One mission has to dominate: to be the beacon and driving force of the organization to the world, the world that includes those millions of college and university graduates known to us as daughters, granddaughters, neighbors, and friends.

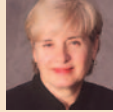
In the coming months, the boards of directors and members will recommit the organizations to the core mission of equity and education through multiple initiatives that will expose inequities affecting women and girls, in addition to gaining visibility for AAUW, the Educational Foundation, and growing the membership.

The power of mission drives organizations—and members are the fuel by which that mission is propelled in the world. ■

Donna Lucas-Fitzpatrick is a strategic process consultant based in Alexandria, Va. She has been working closely with AAUW for more than a year.

Voices of Experience

The current and former presidents of AAUW, the AAUW Educational Foundation, and the AAUW Legal Advocacy Fund share their perspectives on the challenges and core issues influencing AAUW’s future.



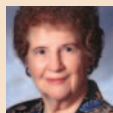
“Often, AAUW in all its aspects (branch, state, region, Association) thinks of program in quite different ways. Indeed, with 100,000 members, there may be 100,000 definitions of “program” and almost as many ways to conceive, plan, implement, and assess value of our programming. In other words, we lack ... focus.”

—Ruth Sweetser, AAUW president (2005 to present)



“Using a sports analogy, AAUW needs to function at the “sweet spot” of the intersecting components of our mission: the center, where education, equity, and positive change overlap. Outside the “sweet spot,” our efforts—program—lose impact because they aren’t actionable, or actionable in a way that builds AAUW’s visibility and credibility.”

—Barbara O’Connor, Educational Foundation president (2005 to present)



“It is absolutely essential for AAUW to retain our *raison d’être*.”

—Katherine Eaton, founding mother and president of the Legal Advocacy Fund (1981-1985)



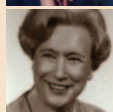
“Women’s lives are going to continue to change. Are we building roads or fences?”

—Sarah Harder, AAUW president (1985-1989)



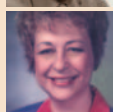
“AAUW members want to feel the organization is relevant to them and to have a connection to the national organization.”

—Alice McKee, Educational Foundation president (1989-1993)



“I wouldn’t like to change the mission. If it is too vague, then hone it down, but keep equity and women in our mission.”

—Mary Grefe, AAUW president (1979-1981) and Educational Foundation president (1985-1989)



“Women’s lives are so different now that it makes belonging to an organization a different experience. We must focus on the mission and action.”

—Sharon Schuster, Legal Advocacy Fund president (1985-1989), AAUW president (1989-1993), and Educational Foundation president (1999-2001)



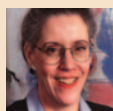
“The key strategy for the future is collaboration; our greatest triumph of the future will be if we reinvent ourselves and remain relevant in 2020. Let’s start with redefining the mission.”

—Sandy Bernard, Legal Advocacy Fund president (1993-1997) and AAUW president (1997-2001)



“Our mission is still a good one. Our focus on women in education needs to be reviewed and reaffirmed as equity and education will still be an issue. What will be the issues of women and girls in a few years?”

—Augustine Pounds, Legal Advocacy Fund president (1997-1999)



“We need a real commitment to change in whatever ways the [strategic] planning process suggests. We need some way to have honesty about it; we need to hear that these are the facts that have come to us from you—the grassroots. We’re reflecting back what you have said you want. We’re too many things to too many people—we have no niche.”

—Maggie Ford, Educational Foundation president (1997-1999)