

So Much Depends on Mission

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William Carlos Williams penned the famous poem about a wheelbarrow and some chickens:

so much depends
upon

the red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

With irregular breaks and a disregard for grammatical convention, these words paint a vivid picture that has stumped many a high school English student over the years. However, the poem comes to mind frequently whenever I consider something of critical importance to success. So much depends on ... something simple, focused; something that guides decisions in the midst of all the activity around it.

When it comes to sustainability in theological education, so much depends on a schools' ability to focus on mission. With a clear mission, the school can devote resources – human and physical – to the long-term, sustainable success of the institution. Faculty development, future program offerings, curriculum delivery modes, facility upgrades, and leadership transitions all fit into a school's strategic plan. However, for it to succeed, so much depends on mission.

The pressures faced by theological schools are well documented, and many of these pressures will intensify rather than improve in the coming decade.¹ Mark Labberton, President at Fuller Theological Seminary, recently addressed issues at Fuller with words that extend universally calling this moment a “whirlwind of change and uncertainty” that brings both “disruption and opportunity” (Discernment in the Whirlwind 2018). In the midst of the turmoil, schools may choose to cut underperforming degrees or launch new programs to draw more students. They may enter into institution rescuing partnerships, leverage technology, or expand current offerings. In each case, the action taken might be an innovative change for success, or it might be a distraction that diverts time, energy, and resources away from the core mission of the school. One will lead to vitality and sustainability; the other may prove unfruitful at best, or even detrimental to the future of the school. In each case, success will depend on coming back to mission.

Financial viability plays a significant role in the long-term sustainability of an institution. However, for true success, a more robust consideration of sustainability is required. In his essay, “Sustaining What Matters in Theological Education,” Ferenczi pushes for a multi-faceted approach with an emphasis on the importance of human leadership capacity in the development of institutional sustainability (2016, 53). Leaders are crucial as the ones who articulate and execute the mission of the institution.

In partnership with several organizations, ScholarLeaders has had the privilege to work with more than 15 institutions over the last four years; working directly with leaders to clarify mission and develop holistic strategic plans for the purpose of sustainability. The project began with questions about developing faculty at a focused group of schools. However, questions of faculty development soon led to an interconnected series of challenges related to the success of the school. Faculty plans inherently rest upon a school’s expected programs and projected enrolments. In order for the institution to determine which programs it should offer, it must also understand the needs of the church and the issues facing both the church and society in its context. Degree programs, course offerings, and delivery modes relate to the vocational callings of students in response to the needs of the Church and God’s kingdom mission. Facilities, library resources, and administrative infrastructure provide further support to the programs. Of course, all of these plans must integrate financially with a plan to secure the resources to accomplish the objectives. A clear sense of mission provides the point of integration, helping leaders make choices, guide the process, and stay true to the calling of their particular school. We refer to this work as the *Vital SustainAbility Initiative (VSI)*.

¹ See Carpenter, Glanzer, Lantinga (2014), Ferenczi (2016), Porter (2013), and Hunter (2017) for descriptions of some of the challenges facing theological education in the Majority World today.

This issue of The Journal captures some of the results from that experience, so that others may learn from the particular experiences and solutions developed within context. In most parts of the world, theological institutions face considerable headwinds as they seek to make ends meet, acquire adequate resources, and form students for service in the Church and society. Success will depend on much more than finding sufficient funding. Describing the process at his school, one President said that at the beginning he thought sustainability was only about money, but for him, it has become clear that it is first and foremost about sustaining their mission. Mission guides student selection, the addition of new courses, the recruitment of faculty, the theology conferences they host and books they write. Mission guides the development of their campus and how they pursue funding from within their country. He views his job as the leader of the institution as one of finding ways to sustain their mission.

In the midst of all the swirling details of the outside pressures - social, political, and financial pressures – and the internal needs of students, faculty, and engagement with the churches they serve, mission must be the point of integration. So much depends on mission.

References

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