



PRACTICING INNOVATION

FOSTERING ACCELERATED PASTORAL
DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS THAT THRIVE



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Introduction



It is common to hear phrases like “the current model of theological education is broken,” “higher education is fragile,” or “the current approaches to theological education are not sustainable.” Despite numerous attempts to address the need for change in theological education, only a few examples of innovation have brought about profound change within an institution. Over the past two years, we have worked with a handful of schools that provide accelerated pastoral degree programs (APDP). Our work has been focused on two things: 1) exploring thriving programs to see if there is a set of best practices for accelerated programs and 2) providing opportunities for schools to enhance their programs by leveraging these best practices.



One result of the project is this Innovation Playbook. Based on our research, conversations, and the ongoing work of our lead authors, this Playbook provides a framework for innovation that addresses why we need to innovate, the common barriers we encounter in theological education, a description of a missional innovation mindset, and a series of practices to overcome the common barriers. Then, we offer a list of proven accelerants for enrollment and operations.



As with all things, the information in this Playbook must be contextualized by each organization. Nonetheless, the information should be taken seriously. It builds not only on the exploration of accelerated pastoral degree programs but also on the most current research on innovation, which points to the importance of developing a climate or culture of innovation within organizations.

If you want to dive deeper into this conversation, feel free to contact us at hello@symporus.com

Greg Henson and Mike Cuckler

Executive Summary



Innovation must be rooted in the Mission of God and assessed through its transformational impact on organizations and the people with whom that organization interacts. It must focus on something other than growth because growth is not a strategy. If we focus on growth, we inevitably focus on developing new products (i.e., programs), which routinely fail. Larry Keely, co-founder of Doblin -- Deloitte LLP's innovation and design firm, reminds us that these beliefs not only distract but also push people down a path that is less productive and less focused. While growth is often an outcome of innovation, it is not a requirement. To adequately address the need for innovation, we must focus on developing a culture that engages in innovating. In his research on creativity, Swedish researcher Göran Ekvall refers to this as developing a creative climate.

To achieve this goal of creating a culture that engages in innovating (i.e., approach innovation as a verb rather than a noun), it is essential to consider why we innovate, what gets in the way, and what practices help us along the way. In his doctoral work on fostering fresh expressions of theological education, Greg Henson created expressions for practicing innovation within theological schools. We adopted that framework and added a series of mindsets and best practices related to accelerated pastoral degree programs. Greg's research covers 15 years of work connected to over 60 seminaries within the Association of Theological Schools and dozens of ministries spread across six continents.

We innovate because we are a people of God who, by the power of the Spirit, follow Jesus into the world as God calls us to participate in God's grand renewal project. As schools, we often bump into barriers created by competitive governance structures, conflicting institutional narratives, unexamined educational philosophies, scarcity mindsets, and creative paralysis. We must develop trustworthy communities, shared understandings of reality, and empowering structures to overcome these barriers. In our experience, this is best done by adopting an innovative mindset and engaging in a series of practices that cultivate a creative climate within our organization.

When we appropriately engage in these practices, it becomes much easier to implement and experiment with the proven enrollment and operational accelerants identified by schools with thriving accelerated pastoral development programs.



Why Innovate?



Three primary reasons we need to invest significant time, energy, and resources into the work of innovation:

01

Because we are following Jesus into the world (John 20:21)

We participate in the work of innovation because Jesus has sent us to participate in God's grand renewal project by the power of the Spirit. We cannot rest in our places of comfort and power. Instead, we follow Jesus into the world as we participate in the creativity of God – welcoming the change it requires of us.

02

Because following Jesus requires ongoing discernment (John 16:13)

We participate in the work of innovation because following Jesus is a formational, long-term, ever-unfolding, developmentally-oriented endeavor that requires ongoing communal discernment—that is, continual change.

03

Because it is an act of stewardship (Matthew 25:19-21)

We participate in the work of innovation because we are stewarding vast storehouses full of God's resources (i.e., ten talents). We must not strive merely for sustainability or survival. Faithful stewards are productive conduits (as opposed to protective managers) of God's blessing. This requires ongoing attentiveness to how God's resources are utilized and the fruit we are seeing, thereby encouraging ongoing change.

Common Barriers



1. Competitive Governance Structures

2. Conflicting Views of Reality

3. Unexamined Educational Philosophies

4. Resource-Dependent Mindsets

5. Creative Paralysis



A background image showing a group of people in a meeting or classroom setting. A woman with long brown hair is in the foreground, looking towards the right. In the background, a man with a beard is holding a pencil, and another woman is visible. There are computer monitors and a whiteboard in the background.

Barrier #1:

Competitive Governance Structures

While shared governance is touted as a lofty goal in the world of higher education, it has become the source of several issues – most of which stem from the fact that schools often approach governance, as Dan Aleshire remarked, by thinking about “control and who has it rather than mission fulfillment.”

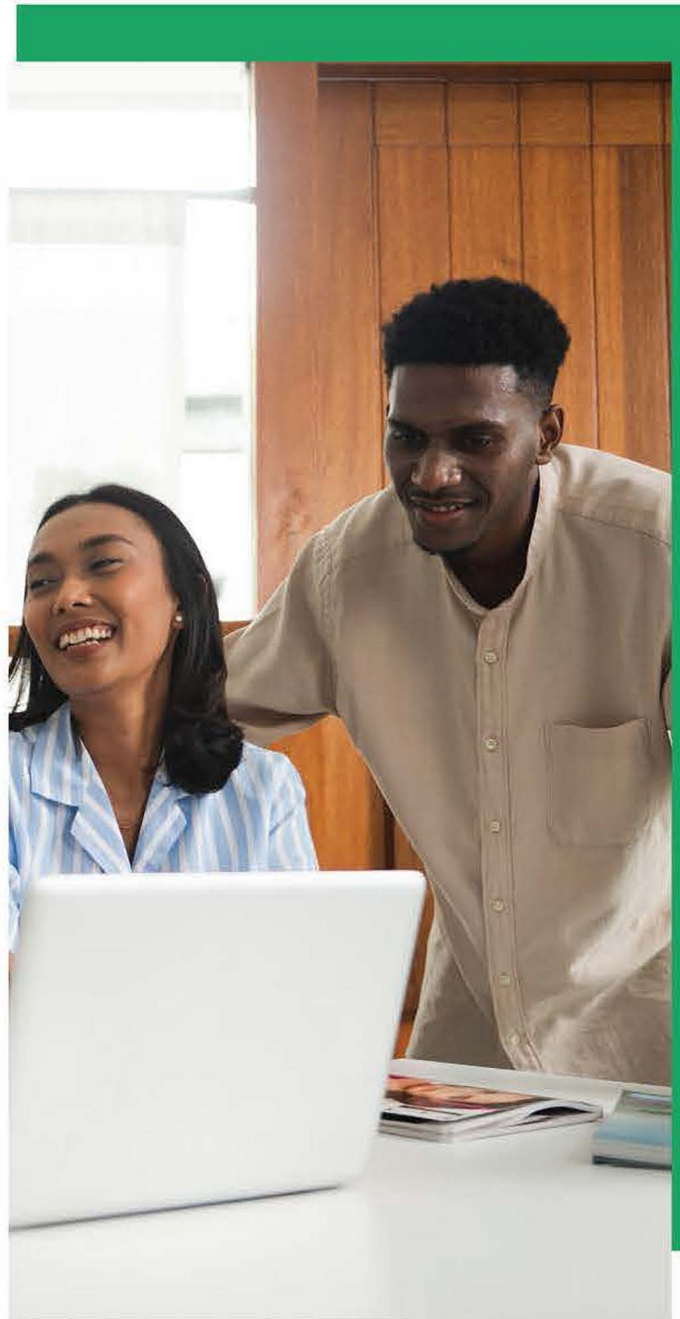
As a result, governance has become a competition for power, resources, influence, time, energy, and attention. In our attempts to divvy up the work of an institution, we set the stage for people to put on blinders, focus on one particular aspect of the work, and then become champions for that one cause. While this seems like a great way to increase productivity, engagement, and efficiency, our history tells a different story. In reality, it often fosters distrust, disintegration, silos, and battles over finances, control, and decision-making. Perhaps most importantly, it fosters conflicting views of reality.



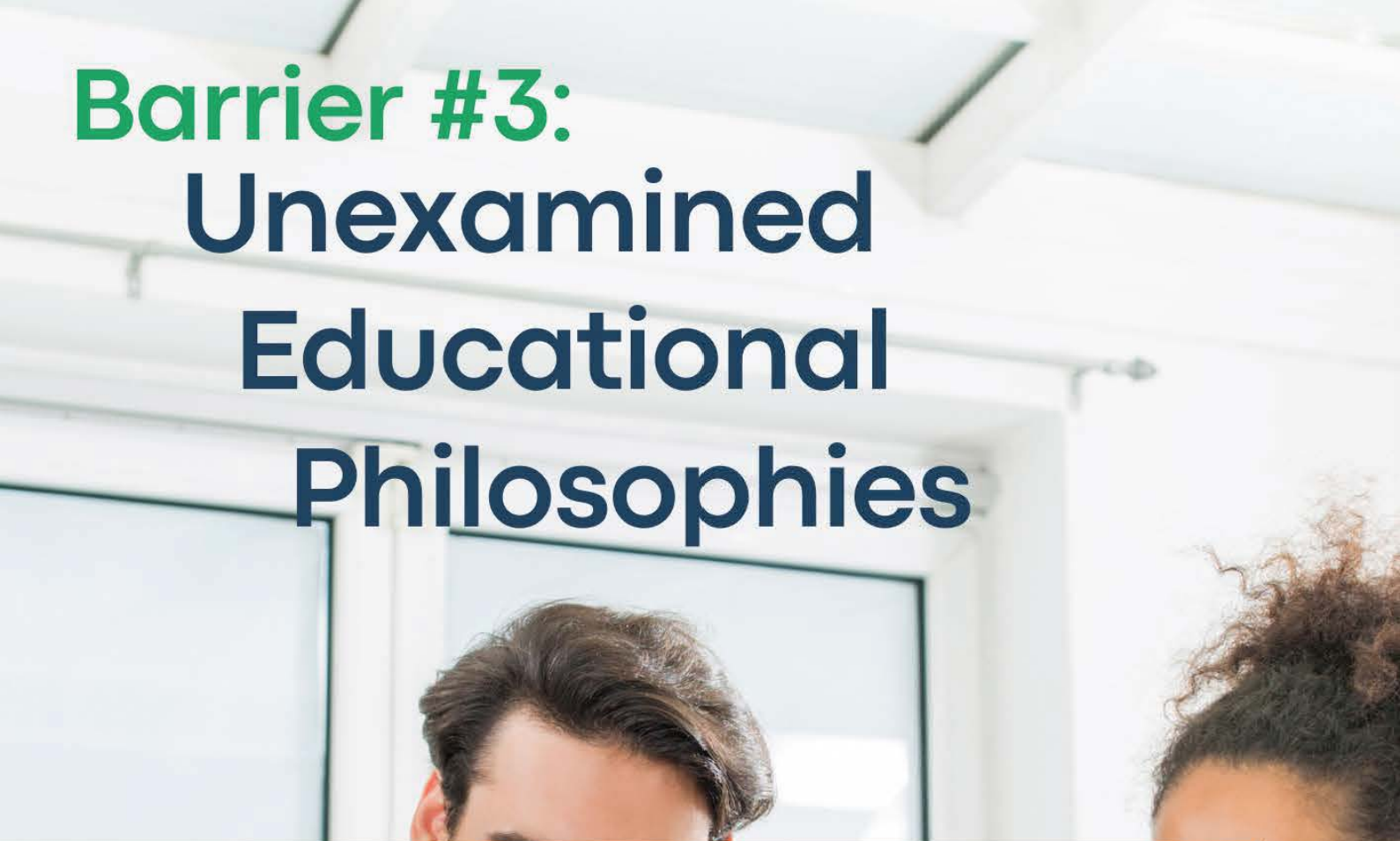
Barrier #2: Conflicting Views of Reality

In my years of experience, the “problem” most schools are trying to solve through innovation has been needing more money. While that perceived “need” seems to be shared, the reasons for why it is a problem are never shared. Faculty have one reason, administrators another, and the board could have a third or a combination of the two.

The heart of the issue is an internal competition for power and resources created by our default approach to shared governance. As a result, we define problems – reality – in ways that support our needs and desires. Since our needs and desires are not shared, we develop conflicting views of reality. The more profound institution-shaping ideas and structures, therefore, remain unexamined. The most important of which is the educational philosophies that are often taken for granted.



Barrier #3: Unexamined Educational Philosophies



Our innovation efforts are stunted by the fact that we rarely envision our educational philosophies as part of the problem. By avoiding an examination of these philosophies, we open the door to a never-ending blame game wherein we continually point at other things as “the” problem.

As demonstrated by the ATS data, we consider various ways to deliver, price, and assess learning. All of those petitions, however, tend to stay wrapped up in the modern assumptions of higher education that have formed and shaped our institutions for hundreds of years. The educational philosophy that animates the work within the institutions we serve, especially when those institutions operate within the context of higher education, impacts every aspect of our work and must be examined.

Barrier #4: Resource Dependent Mindsets



If we believe our educational philosophy is spot on and we need to do a better job in program development, marketing, etc., then whatever “innovative” thing we want to do is seen to require additional resources. We need to keep the machine running (so the thinking goes), which means the time and energy we have to invest in an alternative future is wrapped up in a search for additional resources. God has entrusted us with all the necessary resources to do the tasks God has laid before us. When we enter the innovation space under the impression that we need more of something, it results in an unhelpful, perhaps even deforming, resource-dependent mindset.

Barrier #5:

Creative Paralysis

The best way to be innovative is to do something, learn from it, and adjust. Unfortunately, we tend to think that innovation is fundamentally about creating ideas. This kind of focus is the enemy of execution. It paralyzes our ability to move forward in an iterative and ongoing fashion.



Practicing Innovation



What, then, do we do to overcome these barriers and foster fresh expressions of theological education within our institutions and the community of schools within ATS? Eight practices can be grouped into three areas of focus. Together, these practices provide a structure for discerning, developing, implementing, and evaluating the work of innovation by helping shape communal participation in the ongoing journey of following Jesus on mission.

Trustworthy Community

For innovation to take root in a seminary context, we must create a trustworthy community. That is to say, we must create a community (e.g., a shared sense of belonging) that is trustworthy (e.g., exhibits characteristics that encourage loyalty). Such a community comes when we align our values and practices, solve problems together in love, and be transparent even when it is hard.

PRACTICE 01.

Reveal Data: Stewarding resources with transparency

We need to embrace "radical" transparency to foster fresh expressions of theological education. It's only radical because it is very different from what we currently do. All I mean is sharing the same quantitative data with an institution's staff, board, and faculty. Audited financial statements, giving reports, student enrollment numbers, monthly financial statements, debt and endowment figures, etc., should be available to everyone – all in the same format. There are many data resources within an organization, and it can be overwhelming to see all of it simultaneously. To combat this, I advocate for creating an institutional dashboard (which can be created as part of practice #3). This data is shared monthly with everyone, and there are opportunities for all data to be accessible.

However, we can't stop at quantitative data because it is one side of the resource story. We also need to be transparent with information about the school's work, the opportunities in front of us, and the allocation of our time and energy. The best way I have seen this done is to create a regular and consistent "reporting" mechanism that shares information with everyone – again in the same format. By being transparent with data, we help the school align its values and lived experience and build loyalty.

Practice What You Preach: Aligning espoused values and lived experience

In most cases, our espoused values tend to compete with those of modern academic and hierarchical structures. To combat the misalignment, we must engage in practices that require an ever-deepening embodiment of espoused institutional values in service of mission.

We engage in this practice by empowering all voices in our community, fostering transparent conversations that name our values, defining our values in practical terms, identifying areas of misalignment so that lofty words like "justice" are described in real-life terms using real-life examples, and assuming we are continually misaligned which cultivates a posture of learning thereby nurturing new processes for empowering and listening to all voices in the community. This will be disruptive because the traditional processes for including voices will become antiquated and harmful.

PRACTICE 02.

Build Loyalty: Developing a community that withstands adversity

While shared meals, time together, and collaboration can be helpful avenues for building loyalty within a community and are often the means by which schools tend to approach the task, data from the National Survey on Brand and Trust co-authored by Kurt Bartolich and Cory Scheer, shows that loyalty comes through trust, which is built or lost through competence, problem-solving, and concern for others. Each of those must be addressed through the lens of people and policies.

This framework is a wonderful tool for helping us build a resilient community while engaging in Practices #1 and #2. By fostering conversations that focus on alignment and doing so with transparency, we bring to light our concern for others, demonstrate competence, and solve problems together as a community. In this process, we demonstrate loyalty to those who work within the organization and loyalty to the mission and calling of the organization itself. This cultivates the trust required for two-way loyalty to be present within a community. When we have resiliency, ongoing and transformational innovation becomes possible because we begin to trust that insights, wisdom, and innovation can come from anywhere in the organization. No longer must programs be developed solely by faculty or strategic wisdom that comes only from the board. Trustworthy community welcomes, even encourages, distributed wisdom.

PRACTICE 03.

Shared Reality

Our hopes for fostering fresh expressions of theological education will be dashed if we fail to develop a shared reality. With it, innovation is easier because our efforts become fragmented at best and derailed at worst. Because one's view of reality shapes one's understanding of the problem, it dictates the possible solutions. As a result, solutions and innovations vary widely and even compete with each other. The following two practices leverage the preceding three by connecting values, information, people, and policies to the work of problem identification and strategy development.

Define reality: Rallying around the problem you are trying to solve

The best way to define reality is to humanize it. Yes, defining reality requires us to be radically transparent, to say the hard things about numbers even when they are not the things people want to hear and to bring to light the fact that our educational philosophies may very well be the problem (e.g., credit hours are a social construction that privilege certain classes of people and have no bearing on learning or reality). More importantly, it requires us to listen attentively to the people who have avoided us (and the institution) and especially to those who have seen the underbelly of the institution's history. When our conversations focus on numbers, budgets, programs, and the like, we easily miss the tangible impact of our words, opinions, and decisions.

This can create space for conversations with students, graduates, prospective students, partner organizations, pastors, business leaders, nonprofit leaders, faculty, staff, and board members – conversations that fit within cultivating a trustworthy community. It also requires us to have relevant, reliable, and transparent data, which can help us see reality in the aftermath of those conversations. Finally, in these conversations, we must remain focused on problem identification. These are not conversations about solutions. Our conversations commonly veer toward solutions we think might work well, leading to discussion or disagreement on those solutions. We must work to keep the conversation focused on the problems we are trying to solve.

PRACTICE 04.

Listen to the Spirit: Clarifying direction while welcoming diversity

The danger with defining reality is that once we do it, we tend to let that frame be the one we have used for many years. This creates a box around our understanding of the world. We then develop a plan to address that box's challenges and launch our new initiatives. I refer to this as taking a bounded set approach to strategy.

Instead, our strategic work needs to focus on discerning and identifying the direction in which the Spirit leads us. Doing so helps us define reality in terms of direction rather than specific programs, staffing models, organizational structures, and numerical goals. As a result, our shared view of reality remains open to ongoing reflection, discernment, and refinement. It can be continually shaped by our conversations about alignment, the data regarding the resources God is entrusting us with, and the opportunities the Spirit places in front of us. In most cases, engaging in this practice will require us to dismantle our approach to conversations about strategy (to become more real-time and iterative) and reconsider the artifact those conversations produce (so that it points in a direction rather than specifies a plan).

PRACTICE 05.

Empowering Structures

Our governance structures, organizational design, and change management processes all have the power to fuel or snuff out innovation. Even if we successfully build a trustworthy community and a shared understanding of reality, our work will come to a grinding halt if we implement empowering structures. As long as our work is bound up in structures that either push against innovation (often unintentionally) or assume innovation is primarily a task of helping the faculty generate and implement new ideas in the form of new programs or educational offerings (i.e., "new products"), we will not see meaningful fruit.

PRACTICE 06.

Think Broadly: Configuring ecosystems

Anything we do in the life of an institution engaged in theological education impacts everything we do in that same institution. That is to say, our work is thoroughly integrated. Therefore, whatever fresh expressions we hope to launch must be integrated as well. I refer to this as "integrated innovation," which builds on the work of Jay Doblin and Larry Keely. This approach requires organizations to consider multiple aspects of their work simultaneously rather than focusing energy on building a better product (i.e., launching a new program).

Putting this into practice means facilitating conversations about the integrated nature of our work as organizations so that everyone can see how the pieces connect. It also means leveraging platform thinking by configuring an ecosystem that empowers external collaborators to build value for students and the more comprehensive network connected to a given institution.

PRACTICE 08.

Release power: Empowering new voices through collaborative governance

The internal competition for resources, time, energy, and attention is a natural byproduct of shared governance structures rooted in a "divide-and-conquer" approach to organizational development. It is also natural for such structures to privilege certain voices, thereby imbuing them with extraordinary power; for innovation to take root within our organizations, that power must be released and distributed, thereby empowering new and alternative voices to be engaged in the collaborative work of governance.

Given the history and formative influences at play within higher education, the board and faculty often must release power. Power for curricular control must be distributed among staff, administrators, external partners, and students. Power for strategy development, financial oversight, and institutional identity of the wider community must be distributed in the same fashion.

PRACTICE 07.

Adapt freely: Celebrating failure and resisting permanence

Building on following the Spirit and adapting freely requires following the same process of listening, analyzing, adapting, implementing, and listening again. In this step, however, we add the opportunity to celebrate "failure" and drive home that developing something "permanent" is not our goal. We are simply developing the next iteration. Warner Burke perhaps said it best when he noted, "The change initiative must never stop."

We can practice this by giving conversational space to what we learn from our frictionless experiments, interactions with students, and input from external constituencies - especially when they "fail" to produce the intended fruit. It is this attention to continuous improvement that nurtures innovation. We never fail. We only learn.

Innovation Mindset



CULTIVATING A MINDSET TOWARD INNOVATION

Creating a creative climate where these practices for innovation can be implemented often requires a shift in the mindset of the school. The shift may need to happen within the board, faculty, and administration. We refer to this as an “innovating mindset” because innovating is a verb - it requires action. Those actions are shaped by the mindset of the people engaging in the work. Based on our conversations with schools with thriving accelerated pastoral development programs, the following list describes a mindset that creates fertile ground for engaging in innovation practices.





Theological education must be affordable.

It is the school's responsibility to drive down the price of education by reducing its cost to educate a student. It is not the responsibility of donors, the government, or other scholarship avenues.

Theological education must be accessible.



Ensure your strategies are communicated clearly and consistently to all relevant stakeholders. You can effectively convey your message through multiple channels, such as meetings, emails, and presentations.



Theological education must be contextual, experiential, and faithful.

We must deploy educational opportunities in a multitude of contexts. Those contexts should not only inform the modality but also the standards of excellence and particularities of the content.

Theological education must be experiential.



Applicants come into our degrees with a broad range of skills and experience. We must use that experience to accelerate degrees through prior and project-based learning.



Theological education must be faithful.

We are not simply selling degrees. We are joining with the Church as it develops followers of Jesus.

We must have a high tolerance for ambiguity.



Following the Spirit requires us to embrace ongoing change and improvement constantly.



Missional unity, clarity, and alignment are paramount.

We are mission-driven, first and always. To stay clear and focused on our mission, we must consistently compare our stated mission and values to our operational practices.



Collaboration.

A university's faculty are not the only experts! Theological education is a system of interconnected and interdependent parts. Therefore, we collaborate with networks to create and deliver academic content and programs.

Ongoing Innovation.



We embrace the frontier and create a climate for ongoing innovation. We identify and change assumptions, policies, strategies, etc., that may hinder innovation and growth.



Accountability.

We hold ourselves accountable to the outcomes we can control.

Partnership-Facing.



Everything we do begins with the assumption that it can be done better in partnership with someone else. This applies to all of the various types of partnerships in which we engage.



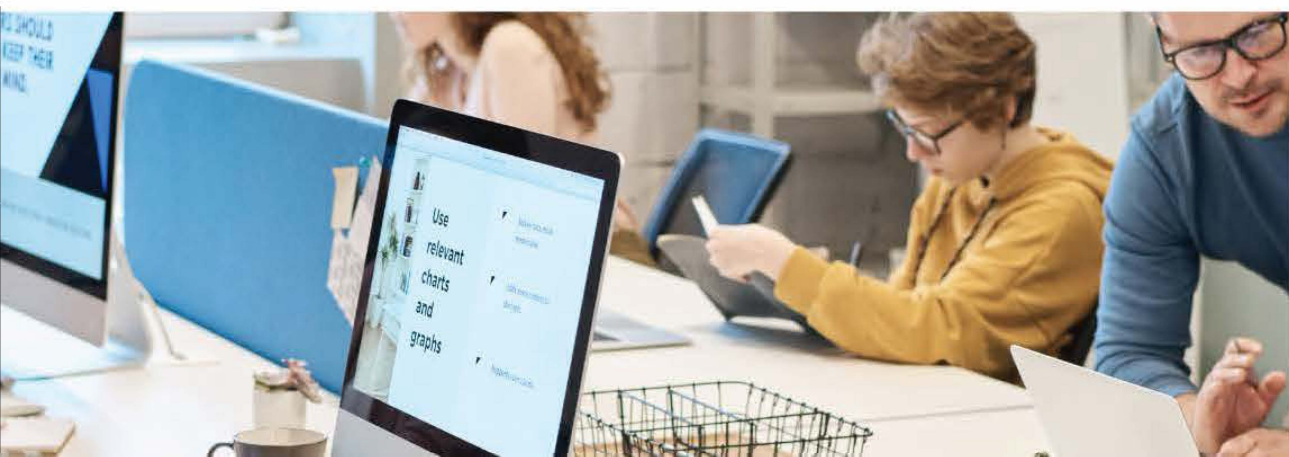
Yes.

When there is a perceived missional alignment with a partner or project, we start with "yes" and then figure it out.

We are a Network.



Residential learning is one of many delivery options, and all students are of equal value and importance regardless of their location or modality of learning.



ACCELERATING ENROLLMENT GROWTH

Growing enrollment in accelerated pastoral degree programs (APDP) has proven to be difficult for many schools. Over the two years related to this project, we researched APDP programs and explored the activities leveraged by some of the fastest-growing programs. The following activities should be considered if schools want to grow their programs.



Assess program quality through the outcomes demonstrated by the students rather than assuming it through the program's structure (i.e., number of credit hours, types of courses, and learning path). Doing so allows the program to take many forms and leverage many of the ideas listed below. Assessment of learning and impact comes after the program, so set aside assumptions about what will and won't produce high-quality graduates.

CREATE MULTIPLE ON-RAMPS

1. Partner with local churches that already offer local training opportunities.
2. Embrace prior learning credit, even for young students, using competency-based learning portfolios.
3. Leverage dual-enrollment opportunities with local high schools, especially Christian/private schools.
4. Maximize advanced standing from multiple BA programs rather than only Bible/Theology/Ministry programs.

REMOVING BARRIERS TO ENTRY

1. Create easy ways for students to express interest in the program.
 - a. Checkboxes on every application for admission rather than special applications for just this program
 - b. Reduce the program entry requirements to create a large funnel of prospective students, which can be reduced through various stages of admission.
2. Allow advanced standing from multiple BA programs rather than only Bible/Theology/Ministry programs.
3. Maximize transfer credit from other schools.
4. Create seamless movement between programs.

IMPLEMENT COURSES THAT ARE NOT RESTRICTED BY TIME

1. Award as much credit as possible for church residency/internship experiences.
2. Use competency-based delivery modalities where possible, even if not using an entire competency-based degree.



IMPLEMENT COURSES AND PROGRAMS THAT ARE NOT RESTRICTED BY LOCATION

1. Do not require students to attend courses on campus. Instead, make that campus experience an enticing option (i.e., invite them, do not require them to be on campus).
2. Allow students from multiple locations (i.e., partner sites, local churches, etc.) to interact with each other online.
3. Create multiple church residency options. Do not require students to move. Invite them to move to a church but also allow them to engage in church residencies where they are located. This will require multiple ways for churches to work with the school.

TAKE FULL ADVANTAGE OF PROGRAM FLEXIBILITY ALLOWED BY ACCREDITORS

1. Use a minimum number of credit hours for all degrees.
2. Maximize shared credit, advanced standing, prior learning, and internship/practicum experiences.
3. Connect credit to conferences, church-based learning opportunities, and competency-based portfolios (e.g., Exponential, Catalyst, Orange, TheosU, 10|Ten, and others).
4. Remove electives and build program specialization through church residency experiences.



TAKE A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH


1. Partner with multiple schools other than your own (community colleges, universities/colleges, seminaries, etc.).
2. Work with local churches to create localized courses.
3. Create easy ways for churches and denominations to partner with you.



ACCELERATING OPERATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS



While the accelerants, as mentioned earlier, can encourage enrollment growth, an institution's operational practices can stifle it. After reviewing the work of schools with thriving programs, we identified several operational realities that create fertile ground for enrollment growth.



Once again, assessment systems should be developed to assess program quality through the outcomes demonstrated by the students. Often, this requires developing new approaches to student learning and program assessment that are not built on current practices implemented at a school. Doing so encourages flexibility and experimentation.

Remove structural barriers to innovation and experimentation

1. Create governance structures that allow accelerated programs to implement curricular changes without broader institutional approval.
2. Place accelerated degree programs inside of a nimble, executive-led team with the authority to move quickly.
3. Empower small teams to make decisions without requiring approval from the entire institution.
4. If necessary, create separate departments, colleges within a university, or divisions that can operate accelerated degree programs independently of traditional structures to create space for ongoing change and experimentation.

Empower alternative voices

1. Allow voices from across the institution to speak about the program's structure and operations (i.e., it should not be built solely by faculty or solely by administrators).
2. Create ways for partners (e.g., churches, denominations, conferences, etc.) to develop alternative pathways for the students they serve.

Ensure institutional leadership fully supports accelerated degree programs and is willing to experiment with modalities and practices outside the organization's current reality (i.e., if the school is primarily residential, ensure the leadership is open to non-residential learning).

Create affordable and accessible programs that are not dependent on grant funds

1. Do not use grant funds to provide scholarships.
2. Do not use grant funds to create unsustainable operational practices.
3. Use grant funds to accelerate "time to market" but not to subsidize ongoing operations.



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