

# Defining Core WHY is crucial for sustainability

BY CHRIS MEINZER

*In August 2023, 22 ATS schools joined in two cohorts to explore the concept of sustainability for the work of their Pathways for Tomorrow grants. The schools sent teams of three and four people to Chicago, where they were guided through a process intended to consider their project goals, ideals, and learnings, and to explore how each would be sustained well after the grant has concluded.*



The concept of sustainability is critical for an ATS school. Whether a school is trying to find ways to sustain its mission, a degree program, a class, or a grant project, there are many facets to consider. And the most important question to start with is, “what are we actually trying to sustain?” What is the core purpose, the core mission, the Core WHY that we are trying to sustain or—more importantly—have thrive?

I devised a framework for theological schools to support these conversations about sustainability using the work of Simon Sinek—particularly the concepts he developed in his book, *Start with Why*, that I highly recommend. Sinek uses the structure of a Golden Circle to talk about WHAT, HOW, and WHY. WHAT represents the product or services an organization offers. HOW represents the things that make an organization special and sets them apart from others. WHY is a purpose, cause, or belief for the very existence of the organization. According to Sinek, most organizations can say WHAT they do and

HOW they do it, but very few organizations can say WHY they do what they do. And it is this Core WHY that will inspire and compel others to participate.

In my observation, theological schools spend much of their time considering the WHAT and HOW, but not enough time developing and supporting the Core WHY of what they are doing.

## **WHAT is the product or service provided**

If you look at the mission statements of most ATS schools, you will find that they center around preparing and educating students for some aspect of God's mission in the world. These are certainly worthy commitments, but not necessarily unique. ATS schools often claim a certain exceptionality, but it is not likely found in the WHAT. What schools are trying to sustain must be beyond the WHAT.

## ***HOW* represents the things that make an organization special or sets them apart from others**

In theological schools, there are often conversations about offering unique programs taught by respected faculty in a variety of modalities. These elements alone do not set an institution apart. For example, if you ask any ATS school, it is blessed with a world class faculty. I believe it. But if every ATS school has a world class faculty, then that is no longer your differentiator. In addition, most modalities offered by ATS schools are ubiquitous. There must be something more that will inspire beyond the HOW. What schools are trying to sustain must be more than the HOW.

Theological schools must know (or, perhaps, regain) their core purpose or Core WHY. And I believe there must be a concerted effort to identify, develop, and put forth an institutional Core WHY. In the absence of an institutional Core WHY, there will likely be multiple—perhaps, competing—core purposes within an institution, and those competing interests will keep a school focused on the WHAT and the HOW.

Using this framework in August, the participants were asked to consider the Core WHY of their institutions and the Core WHY of their *Pathways* grants. The full-day exercise included activities for school teams to consider how congruent the Core WHY of the institutions and the *Pathways* grants were. The participants found these exercises to be engaging and fruitful in helping them determine what they were seeking to sustain. It shifted focus from the WHAT and HOW of the project and

even the WHAT and HOW of the institution to the Core WHY, which then opens the possibility of reimagining the project work.

Sustainability of a grant project certainly has economic implications, but economics are not the only consideration of sustainability. During the daylong event, the schools were also introduced to the 4 Ps of Sustainability: Profit, People, Practices, and Processes.

## **1 Profit**

Sustainability requires a consideration of the sufficiency of all resources—human, financial, physical, and others. Ideally, the project or institution should generate more revenues than expenses such that a profit is generated, and the profit is used to build reserves for future initiatives or "rainy days." Additionally, the institution needs adequate and sustainable human resources to accomplish its core purpose and live into alternative opportunities. It is important to recognize that constrained resources must be allocated in such a way to support and further the Core WHY.

## **2 People**

Sustainability requires a consideration of impact on people. The project or institution needs to consider how its value is demonstrated and narrated, both internally and externally, to inspire people to participate in and then proclaim the value to others. It is important to frame these discussions around the Core WHY of the project, program, or institution because it is this Core WHY that will inspire others to participate.



Chris Meinzer talks to participants about sustainability during the August 2023 *Pathways* gathering in Chicago.

### 3 Practices

Sustainability requires a consideration of theological reflection and practice. The project or institution needs to be grounded in meaning, purpose, and story. Sustainability takes on more depth for the community when it is built upon a deep reflection on the importance of faithful stewardship and how the project promotes the Core WHY of the institution.

### 4 Processes

Sustainability requires a consideration of practical internal processes. The project or institution must consider how other resources, departments, and goals are impacted and influenced both positively and negatively by the project in question. Others must understand how their work is impacted and how these new influences assure the accomplishment of the Core WHY.

Since the August event, the framing of the Core WHY has been used in a variety of settings. It was presented at the *ATS Financial Officers' Conference* in November 2023, and at the *ATS Executive Leadership Intensive* in December 2023. It was the focus of a two-day gathering of denominational schools in January 2024, that brought together

board chairs, presidents, and academic deans to consider that the schools might be better collaborators in what they perceive to be their collective Core WHY. The idea will be presented again at the In Trust Center's *Wise Stewards Initiative* and at the *ATS Student Personnel Administrators' Conference* in March 2024. Finally, another cohort of 16 *Pathways* schools will gather in April 2024 to consider the implications of Core WHY on their non-degree and online degree programming.

I am certainly convinced that theological schools have a role to play in the fulfillment of God's mission in God's world, but I do wonder if that role is evolving and shifting given some of our current realities. And I wonder if it needs to shift more than we realize or want to admit because our focus remains on sustaining institutions as we have known them—Sinek's WHAT and HOW—and not on the possibility of sustaining our collective Core WHY.

If you have questions, comments, observations, or a group that you think would benefit from this framework, please feel free to contact me at [meinzer@ats.edu](mailto:meinzer@ats.edu).



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