

Three strategies to support student success beyond COVID-19

BY KATHERINE H. SMITH

As the global pandemic wears on, theological schools looking to support student success beyond COVID-19 find themselves uncertain about which "temporary" adjustments will eventually be left behind and which are here to stay. This strategic ambiguity touches all areas of institutional life—from enrollment modeling and fundraising, to curricular design and student services—and student feedback tells us that typical strategies for promoting student success are inadequately addressing a growing list of needs. We know we need to do something, but with an already exhausted faculty and staff and limited resources, how should we prioritize?

This liminal season offers opportunities for schools to reimagine the mindsets, toolsets, and skill sets needed to support student success beyond the present pandemic. Here are three things your school can consider to position the institution more nimbly for the future:

1 *Specialists or generalists?*

The professionalization of higher education and the pressure on institutions to proactively manage risks has led to highly specialized role differentiation. Theological education is no exception. Student services personnel often have deep knowledge of financial aid policy, Title IX processes, or required course paradigms. This specialized knowledge is a reservoir of expertise that creates job security for the employee and is a great comfort to students once they know who to contact, but it can also lead to silos of information that can be



isolating for staff and confusing to students. In a scenario likely familiar to many, I've known students who complain about being shuffled around to different personnel in hopes of solving a relatively simple problem. These hurdles can compound a sense of alienation and disorientation for students of color and first-generation students at predominately white institutions, in particular, who may already carry heavier burdens navigating the institutional system in which they have been asked to enroll.

By contrast to this high level of specialization, planning beyond the pandemic may be a moment for schools to imagine hiring and training (or re-training) student services personnel who are generalists. Generalists may not have the same deep knowledge in a particular area, but they share key attributes that may be of greater value to students: an agile mindset, responsive listening skills, a willingness and ability to ask good questions to understand underlying issues, and broad familiarity with the tools and resources available to students within and beyond their institutional contexts. Right now, for example, many schools report that they are drowning in the volume of student need and they are not sure

how to navigate students' organic migration toward the faculty and staff members to which they feel the greatest connection. Fostering a culture of generalists, who can be deployed nimbly in response to the changing needs and priorities of the student population, may help schools to quickly expand capacities for intake processes and student support.

2 Consider the cost of change.

The familiar truism “work smarter, not harder” is annoying, yes, but employing it may help your student support personnel (and your students) to feel less overwhelmed. Now may not be the time to take on the curriculum redesign or strategic planning process that will demand emotional and psychological energies alongside a substantial investment in time. “The Great Resignation” is a reminder that our colleagues are feeling frayed and fragile, and so are our students. Many are reprioritizing what is most important based on our core commitments. If the pandemic has limited the long-term imagination among your team, consider pruning back the number of big projects you ask colleagues (and students) to take on, including service on committees, working groups, and task forces. Encourage student support personnel to prioritize basic outreach to vulnerable students.

If your team is stretched too thin, the answer may be to do less, better. Just because “we’ve always done it this way,” doesn’t mean it is the most effective and efficient way to do it now. How might existing work need to take a new form to better meet the shifting needs of the community? This pruning and prioritization is especially challenging when so many of our schools are making big changes in program offerings and delivery modalities that require significant investment of personnel time. As your school weighs which goals to prioritize (tuition revenue? class size? student satisfaction?), ask yourself: which changes are likely to be of greatest positive long-term impact to student success?

3 Meet students where they are.

No doubt your student support personnel can attest to the ways major shifts in theological education have affected how we engage with students, including the increasing percentages of students who are partially- or fully-remote, bivocational, and are pursuing a much wider range of vocational pathways. We have known for a long time that the “Field of Dreams” mantra—“If you build it, they will come”—isn’t true of the institutional church or its seminaries anymore. This disruption shows up especially for enrollment managers, vocational and career planning staff, and student life personnel responsible for worship, programs, and events. But a lack of students signing up for office hours or attending worship or programming events does not necessarily mean there is not an interest or need.

Our increasingly diverse student populations hunger for schools to understand the contexts in which they work

and serve, the demands on their personal and family life, and the needs they have for community engagement that may not be met by the ways we have traditionally

supported it. Even if your school remains predominantly residential, meeting students where they are requires reimagining the shape and form of student organizations, spiritual and vocational formation opportunities, social time, and career advising, to name a few. Are faculty and staff available to support programming at the times students most need it? Do student organizations need to be reimagined to address the engagement of students who are not primarily campus-based?

Drawing on a practice often used by admissions offices, consider using sample personas to better understand the population of students you have. What are their goals? Motivations? Challenges? Considering these factors can help theological schools adapt nimbly to address student needs and predict student behaviors, including

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determining which efforts are bearing fruit and which may need reimagining during and beyond the pandemic.

Adapting our student success infrastructure to the changes facing theological education may feel a bit like eating an elephant. Though the task can seem overwhelming, figuring out what is possible (and what is not)

can help to take things in manageable bites and reduce anxiety among staff and faculty. These small changes will also help signal an institutional commitment to student success practices that are responsive, flexible, life-giving, and sustainable over time.



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