

Better together: CHANGE Initiative can bring institutional sustainability for mission-driven future

BY JEFFREY WILLIAMS

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic altered how many ATS institutions operated, leaders shared their deep concerns about the sustainability of theological schools. At some institutions, higher expenses and lower revenues called their long-term viabilities into question. Others with a more solid financial foundation but costly infrastructure asked whether their schools would be better served if they could leverage more of their resources toward initiatives that positively impacted their missions. The Lilly Endowment's Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative could provide the opportunity theological education desperately needs to innovate in ways that promote institutional sustainability and more robust missions. While any number of directions will emerge through the initiative, attention to administrative services holds particular promise.

A more sustainable institutional structure that simultaneously provides essential resources for more mission-driven activity lies at the heart of the formation of the CHANGE Initiative and its Phase Three Lilly Pathways for Tomorrow concept paper. By collaborating with a variety of ATS institutions using surveys, interviews, and focus groups, the CHANGE Initiative will seek to work alongside leaders to identify administrative services that could most easily and effectively be provided in



alternative ways and which services leaders would be willing to receive in alternative ways.

The CHANGE Initiative would use this learning as the basis for the development of comprehensive and viable business and operational plans that effectively respond to the needs and desires of institutional leaders. These plans would then be presented back to leaders of collaborating institutions to enable them to evaluate the potential impact for their own institutions and offer additional insight to the CHANGE Initiative that could be used to refine implementation strategies.

By the end of this process, institutions would have the data they need to evaluate the potential benefits of institutional change and the CHANGE Initiative would have the data it needs to provide cost-effective and high-quality services to schools that might choose to work with it. Such a process would also enable institutional leaders to ask the most important question of all:

how might they put their financial and human resources to better use in their work to further their primary missions?

Undoubtedly, this process is far from simple. How, for instance, do institutions explore these issues on their campuses without prematurely disrupting their existing cultures? How do leaders overcome a common fear in periods of innovation that a change in institutional structure might somehow signal a sense of failure instead of new opportunity? While

deft leadership can certainly navigate these questions, creating a new pathway that delivers the type of returns that can improve sustainability is also larger

than any single institution can solve on its own. This is why a collaboration of schools working together to identify the greatest needs and opportunities for sustainable change increases the possibility of success; we'll arrive at better and more impactful solutions working together than we ever would apart.

As an academic administrator for nearly twenty years, I have had the opportunity to participate in several programmatic initiatives that convinced me that our fiduciary responsibilities to our institutions—coupled with our obligations to develop and sustain academic programming that meets the needs of students and the communities they serve—require innovation in our administrative models.

My introduction to the financial and operational challenges ATS schools face in their administrative structures, particularly our diseconomy of scale and obstacles to the effective delivery of administrative services, came early in my first administrative position. Shortly after I was hired as a full-time administrator in a department where I was the only employee, the dean wondered with me whether or not the position I held was really full-time. It didn't take me long to begin to ask the same question.

While a simple financial solution to such a problem would have been for the dean to restructure the position to something less than full-time, a variety of dynamics, including how the school complied with accreditation and legal requirements alongside fears about a decline in the quality of services the school provided its students, would have made such a move challenging. Institutional leaders in such situations—and, in my experience, there are many—become caught between fiscal responsibility

and other pressures in ways that limit their options for improving the overall health and mission of the institution.

After moving to another institution

that had a very different administrative structure because of its relationship to a mid-sized university, I glimpsed a financial and operational alternative to the dilemma at my previous freestanding institution. My new institution required fewer administrators on its payroll, paid the university far less for services than if it provided those services on its own, and gave its students access to a diverse, highly-trained, and expert staff. At the same time, I grew in my appreciation for the freedom in governance that comes with being a freestanding institution. Our missions as graduate theological institutions are unique and, frankly, often not well-supported or understood within the broader world of higher education. I wondered, then, how it would be possible for freestanding institutions to access high quality services at minimal cost while maintaining their institutional independence? Further, I wondered how institutional missions might be energized by the additional financial and human resources that emerged through this different administrative model.

This wondering has led me in a variety of directions during the last several years. I have learned the enormity of the economy of scale that benefits large universities,

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harms even the largest ATS seminaries, and devastates the smallest. I have learned about technological developments that offer hope of closing this gap. I have also learned that my wonderings are not unique to me. In a recent post on Engage ATS that solicited interest in an initiative aimed at reducing administrative expenses, more than 10 percent of all ATS institutions responded. Even more, close to that number participated in a follow-up conversation sponsored by the In Trust Center for Theological Schools. Genuine interest in substantive alternatives exists across the ATS landscape. How might we channel both the need and the desire for change into reality?

Our schools were formed to prepare effective leaders for the church. Over time, a variety of factors forced us to

direct more of our budget, staff, and energy to support services instead of strategic innovation in our staffing and programming. Given the challenges before us and the opportunity provided by the Lilly Pathways for Tomorrow initiative, now seems to be a time for us to implement new ways to ensure our students, faculty, and staff have access to the highest quality services while institutional leaders gain the resources and flexibility to fulfill their missions for the twenty-first century.

Are you interested in collaborating with or learning more about the CHANGE Initiative? If so, email [Jeffrey Williams](#), [Ron Ringenberg](#), or [Michele Smith](#).



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Pathways for Tomorrow is a Lilly Endowment-sponsored initiative providing a series of grants to ATS member schools to strengthen and sustain the capacity of theological schools to prepare and support pastors and congregational lay ministers. In spring 2021, the Lilly Endowment awarded planning grants to more than 250 ATS member schools. In early August 2021, final proposals were due for project grants of up to \$1 million each.

Grants will be awarded later this year. The CHANGE Initiative is in the process of applying for the final phase of Pathways grants—awards of up to \$5 million for large-scale collaborative projects designed to strengthen educational and financial capacities of the participating institutions to prepare and support pastors and congregational lay ministers *and* to develop compelling and sustainable models for theological education. Concept papers are due November 1, 2021.