Abstract: A multifaceted understanding of sustainability is critical as Majority World theological schools face significant changes and pressures. Institutional sustainability entails three essential components: a viable business plan, the ability to adapt meaningfully to evolving contexts, and the capacity to sustain human leadership resources. Human resources, in particular, require special attention. In order to engage new practices and explore innovation effectively, schools must develop strategic models, support networks, and resources to sustain leaders and diminish overreliance on any one person.

Introduction

Theological education is undergoing profound introspection and transformation. The pressures facing theological school presidents, leadership teams, faculty members, and boards continue to multiply from a dizzying number of directions. At the same time, there seems to be an increasingly well-articulated understanding, at least in some quarters, of the necessity of theological education in some form as a point of theological grounding and creativity for the Church. Yet, exactly what this form of theological education looks like, how it responds to varied external actors and pressures, and how it is sustained, economically and otherwise, is far from clear. The following paper traces the emergence of this conversation, outlines briefly some of the forces shaping theological education, and puts forward a tentative understanding of sustainability in theological education.

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1 I trace my understanding of this development in Ferenczi (2015), especially Chapter 2.
My focus is on a subset of theological schools, namely those that serve broadly evangelical communities in the Majority World. The vast majority of these institutions arose in the post-World War II era, often with strong ties to American or European mission agencies, and with strong philosophical, theological, and financial input from outside their immediate contexts. Casual historical observation suggests that institutions expanded rapidly in the late 1960s and 1970s, with the development of significant infrastructures of financial support.

Numerous evangelical theological schools with aspirations for establishing post-graduate programs were formed in the late 1960s to early 1980s, including Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (now Africa International University) in 1983, Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui (1977), China Graduate School of Theology (1975), and South Asia Institute for Advanced Christian Studies (1984), among others. The formation of ministries such as Langham Partnership (1969), Overseas Council (1974), and the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (1980) was also influential.

Many involved in these theological schools and organizations longed for the day when such institutions would stand as peers to leading theological schools in Europe and North America. In many ways, this dream has become a more tangible reality in recent years, as many Western institutions have come to see theological schools in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as peers.

While the development of this sense of “peership” is related in part to shifts in missiological thinking away from a Western-centric model, it also reflects the significant institutional development of theological schools around the world. Much has been invested in the development of graduate-level theological education in the Majority World, in the forms of both financial resources and, more importantly, human labor. Much has been done to develop these schools in a way that is appropriate to their contexts. Today, many theological schools in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have developed to points they could scarcely have dreamed of fifteen years ago. A growing number have adequate, if not excellent, facilities. Diverse faculties with doctoral degrees from prestigious universities can

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2 The situation among theological schools associated with the World Council of Churches was studied during the third mandate of the Theological Education Fund (1969-1977), resulting in the Zorn (1975) publication. Although much of the quantitative data in that volume is dated, the insights gleaned and questions raised remain worthy of attention, particularly regarding the “transplanted” forms of theological education, and the difficulty of sustaining them in economic, political, and social environments profoundly different from Europe or North America.

3 The history of this movement is not well-recorded or interpreted. It is my hope this history will receive greater attention in the coming years.
be found in Singapore, India, the Philippines, Kenya, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Ghana, and Brazil, among other places. Substantial academic libraries have grown up in many institutions. Doctoral programs at these institutions, most of which have emerged since 2000, now enroll more Majority World students than do PhD programs at Evangelical seminaries in the United States (Hunter 2016). There is indeed much to celebrate. In terms of facilities, faculty, and libraries, it is my sense that many who dreamed about the future of Majority World theological education in the 1970s would be quite excited by what we see today.

From another perspective, the needs for pastoral formation in the growing Majority World Church have grown more acute, and these institutions, despite their growth and strength, remain far from where their leaders and constituents would like to see them. The continued expansion and emerging needs of the Church, especially in Africa, makes every advance seem fleeting. It seems both painfully unfair and strategically untenable that many institutions located in places where the Church is growing fastest also have the fewest resources.

My work with Cornerstone Trust since 2011 has brought me into contact with many approaches to leadership development outside of graduate and formal theological education. It is abundantly clear that institutions providing graduate theological education in a formal way must see themselves as part—a critical part—of a much broader ecosystem of Christian leadership development that includes church-based theological education, programs focused on the laity, non-formal modes of education, approaches geared toward Christian professionals, and such.4

Within this broad ecosystem, many continue to raise good and provocative questions about the relevance of graduate theological education. At the same time, I hear few voices questioning the need for academic theological education and for institutions that serve as theological communities playing a limited, yet extremely important role in theological and thought leadership for the Church. In other words, such “flagship institutions” remain a critical part of the ecosystem of leadership development for the Church.


4 I first encountered the idea of ecology applied to theological schools in Benefiel (2008).
This is a challenging time to lead in any form of higher education. In the broader North American environment of higher education, this has been a particularly challenging season, as administrators are seemingly called to balance oft-competing demands. An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the leading newspaper of higher education in the United States, recently described the situation in especially stark terms:

> We expect colleges to be, as Lincoln might say, the better angels of our national nature. Can colleges do it? Can they answer calls to prevent sexual assault, quash racism, and redress income inequality on their campuses, all while keeping tuition down, graduating productive employees into the work force, and fostering world-class research? Where do they even start? (Biemiller 2015).

Although the particular issues dominating the North American conversation may seem far removed from the offices of theological educators in the Majority World, the same sense of trying to balance an overwhelming set of demands often arises in my conversations with such leaders, who face challenges from many quarters.

A few of the changes and challenges facing leaders of Majority World theological schools include:\(^5\)

1. **Declining “traditional” enrollments:** Although I am not aware of any “hard” data on this trend, strong and widespread anecdotal evidence suggests that many theological schools have seen a marked decrease in enrollment in recent years. This is not universal and varies from region to region, and even from institution to institution within a given city or nation. It seems safe to say, however, that the quantity of students seeking a traditional theological degree has decreased in recent years and may continue to decrease. Some schools have offset this trend by developing new programs, training opportunities for the broader laity, or new modes of instruction.

2. **Declining involvement of missionary faculty:** Many institutions have relied heavily on expatriate faculty serving as missionaries. These men and women have often brought the broad experience, cross-cultural depth, and degrees that satisfy external accreditors. Although many missionaries continue to serve in theological schools, their numbers appear to be decreasing in tandem with the general decline in long-term missionary service. At

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\(^5\) I am indebted to Dr. Emmanuel Bellon. He and I prepared and presented a presentation on the sustainability of theological education at the ICETE Consultation in Antalya, Turkey in November 2015. The following points were deeply influenced by Dr. Bellon.
the same time, many institutions have seen compatriot faculty members return with doctoral degrees from abroad. While the increasing number of compatriot faculty is almost universally celebrated, the economics have proven more challenging. While missionary faculty members drew little from schools’ resources, compatriot faculty members with doctoral degrees constitute a significant and ongoing expense. The impact of this on one institution in Ethiopia is described well by the school’s president in a recent article (Heliso 2015).

3. Increasing competition and costs of program delivery: As Larry Smith (2015) has pointed out repeatedly, theological education is hardly a lucrative business. Yet, in many places, theological schools continue to proliferate. I was recently told that there are 14 theological schools, mostly denominational, in the capital city of a small Asian nation, serving a growing, yet still very small, Christian community. Marcos Orison de Almeida (2015) describes this situation in Brazil, pointing to the challenge of maintaining high standards while numerous other programs are providing degrees more cheaply and/or quickly. Increased options and competition often lead to greater expectations on the part of students, leading to increased program delivery costs.

4. Increasing regulation and oversight: Two decades ago, it was rare for a government to show much interest in theological schools. This has changed dramatically in most parts of the world, due in part to the mushrooming of private higher education in general. In an understandable desire to regulate quality and prevent abuses, many governments in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere have enacted much stricter controls on all private educational institutions, including theological schools. In a growing number of places, state recognition of theological degrees has become possible or, in a few cases, required. In some places, especially Africa, governments have required theological schools to offer a wider degree of courses (cf. Carpenter, Glanzer, and Lantinga 2014). This presents both opportunities and threats to theological educators. In addition, scrutiny of the “hardware” of private education – facilities, fire codes, accessibility, faculty qualifications – have led to costly demands on theological schools that did not exist before.

5. Decreasing support and increasing restrictions on giving: For many years, many institutions received regular support from external denominations, mission agencies, or local or external partners. Again, although hard data is unavailable, a wide variety of anecdotal evidence suggests that most schools have faced a decline in such ongoing operational support. At the same time, the giving that does continue often carries greater levels
of donor restriction, and is often issued as “project support,” without adequate consideration of operational costs.

All of these areas present varied and often contradictory challenges to theological educators. Although many theological schools have grown and developed significantly in terms of institutional capacity over the past fifteen years, their financial situation remains very unstable. A recent survey of theological schools suggests that theological educators perceive that their schools are “financially unstable” (47%, globally). In Africa and Latin America, 80% and 82% of respondents, respectively, believe that theological schools are either “unstable” or “in crisis” financially (Esterline, Werner, and Johnson 2013). How can leaders manage so many competing demands and seemingly irreconcilable financial realities?

**Sustainability: Toward an Understanding**

“Sustainability” has become, in many educational, philanthropic, and missionary circles, a term that is at best a buzzword and at worst a cliché, filled with so many divergent meanings as to become meaningless. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) in North America, in a multi-year effort to better understand the sustainability challenges facing their members, has come to employ the term “economic equilibrium,” which is reached “when a school has sufficient resources to conduct its mission with quality, preserve the purchasing power of its financial assets, maintain its physical assets, and provide fair compensation to employees. Equilibrium is maintained through an ability to adapt year-to-year to changing circumstances” (Graham 2015, 8). This project has done much to shed light on the understanding of sustainability, including the insight that “schools need basic common language and concepts to discuss and address financial challenges” (Graham 2015, 7). I wish to suggest, however, that our thinking must go one step further to include the sustainability of human leadership capacity.

Graduate theological schools differ somewhat from many other institutions, as the cost of running such institutions is often considerably higher, especially as the number of highly qualified local faculty grows. Recent experiences have raised substantial questions about the sustainability of these emerging “flagship institutions.” My use of the term sustainability in this case is expansive. I have in mind primarily these three facets of the term:

1. The *durability* of the business plan for generating sufficient financial resources to adequately allow for operations and necessary onward development.

2. The *ability to generate and deploy human and financial resources for*
adapting to and innovating within the changing landscapes of educational regulation, educational process and delivery, and human resource requirements. Furthermore, many schools must also adapt to increasingly complex and chaotic political, social, and economic contexts.

3. The human capacity of leadership (CEOs, leadership teams, boards, faculty) to endure and persevere in the necessary work of innovation.

These three facets, ordered from the most tangible (first facet) to the most abstract (third facet), are deeply interrelated and necessarily overlap. The three facets also build on one another, with the third being foundational to the other two.

The Business Plan

The first facet of sustainability is a durable business plan. For many years, the business plan of many seminaries in the Majority World relied on missionary staff members who brought their own support, combined with significant funding from mission organizations and other Western donors. Informal research conducted by Overseas Council (OC) in the late 1990s suggests that many seminaries in the OC network did not charge students any meaningful tuition, and in some cases, even paid a stipend for living expenses, in addition to providing room and board. This same survey shows that the average institution generated 50% of its operational income from abroad, with some schools in the Middle East and Eurasia deriving up to 98% from foreign support.

The situation has changed markedly. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many schools in the Majority World today are deriving a majority, if not the vast majority, of their operational support from local resources. These resources include tuition payments and fees. One of the most fruitful means of income generation has been

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6 Data were gathered from 76 seminaries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East in the autumn of 1999. Seminaries responded to a set questionnaire. Answers to some questions, especially financial questions, were at times imprecise, but the data still illuminate something of the situation at the time.

7 Data were available for 59 institutions and varied markedly by region. Many schools in Southeast Asia, southern parts of Latin America, and some parts of Africa derived a great majority of their income from local sources, while some schools in Africa, India, Eurasia, and the Middle East relied on outside support for up to a vast majority of their income. Five institutions in Eurasia and the Middle East derived over 90% of their income from outside sources.

8 Overseas Council continued to survey theological schools in their network on similar questions through approximately 2008. Unfortunately, the fact that questions were asked in differing ways and to differing sets of schools decreases the validity of the data. Although anecdotal in nature, current reflections are based on the author’s ongoing interactions with dozens of theological schools, as well as with organizations working with theological schools around the world.
the exploitation of campus facilities for rental income. This ranges from the rental of dining halls or chapels for wedding services to the running of guesthouses and hosting of conferences. Larger-scale projects have involved construction specifically purposed for rental and income generation.

Other approaches are more deeply aligned with the educational mission of the institution. One African seminary began a primary school, which later expanded into a secondary school, in order to meet a need for high-quality private education. This school has come to play a significant role in the city and community, and in 2012 contributed approximately 20% of the seminary’s overall operating budget.9 A West African seminary has commenced an agricultural training program that is deeply and holistically integrated with their theological training, while also generating income, while another West African seminary has established a medical clinic to respond to the needs of the immediate community. The fundamental question in these types of projects is to what degree they cohere with, rather than distract from, the core mission of the institution. We are, it seems, still in the beginning stages of understanding this relationship.

Another significant change in many schools over the past fifteen years has been the greater focus on fund-generation as a significant part of the school’s work. Most “flagship” schools, as well as many others, now have senior staff dedicated primarily to the task of income generation. Most schools have seen an increase in local donations, although anecdotal evidence suggests that these remain a smaller portion of the budget than local income-generating projects.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that nearly all institutions have seen a decline in funding from abroad. Many schools’ operational budgets are of a “bare-bones” nature, reflecting meager salaries, little to no maintenance of facilities, and little investment in growth and development. Perhaps most importantly, there is little margin for error.

Adapting to Context

A second facet of sustainability is the ability to generate and deploy human and financial resources for adapting to and innovating within the changing landscapes of educational regulation, educational process and delivery, and human resource requirements.

Edward Farley’s diagnosis in 1983 of “fragmentation” as the key weakness of theological education remains valid today (1983). Although most theological

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9 This project, in Bangui, Central African Republic, also illustrates the fragility of such endeavors, as the model was severely disrupted by civil disturbance in the country in 2012-2015.
schools are comparatively small institutions, they are almost always highly complex institutions where meaningful and deep change is difficult and, at times, contentious. Many theological schools have been remarkably conservative in institutional terms, safeguarding practices from year to year and generation to generation. Theological schools have also proven to be remarkably durable institutions (cf. Aleshire 2008). Sustainability in the current context of change requires extraordinary leadership capacity to gather often fragmented and divergent parts of a community with long-established cultures and guide them toward meaningful, purposeful innovation.

What does it take to adapt to an increasingly dynamic context? While the inherent durability of many long-standing structures in theological education has been brought into question by some of the environmental factors discussed above, the resulting innovation has not always been well-grounded. The pendulum can swing too far in the other direction, with schools pursuing the innovation du jour in hopes of a quick solution (cf. Trebesch 2015). True and durable innovation requires institutions as a whole to reflect honestly and clearly on their mission, and on the dynamic environment in which they seek to accomplish it. Such honest, generative reflection will almost certainly lead to marked change. Careful missional reflection, however, leads to well-grounded, durable innovation that builds on what has come before, rather than to radical ruptures with the past that can tear the relational fabric of the organization without any returns in terms of long-term sustainability.

The Factor of Human Sustainability

A recent study, commissioned by Overseas Council, of nine theological schools in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America that were perceived to be using “unconventional educational practices” has led to several discernible trends (MacLeod 2013):

1. In each case, the “unconventional educational practices” emerged from a deep sense of responsibility to local needs, and an attendant willingness of leaders to engage in educationally and institutionally innovative practices in order to meet these needs. Each of these innovations emerged squarely from perceived local needs, not from external models of what was perceived to be quality theological education. At times, the innovation emerged in some tension with perceptions of quality.

2. Leading institutional innovation in theological education was physically and especially emotionally demanding for leaders. In each case, there was little sense of support in the work of innovation or sense of access to tools or models that might be helpful in sustaining innovation. These innovations were, as a result, extremely fragile and, in some cases, in danger of failure.
Nevertheless, the status quo is no longer an option. Theological schools around the world are either adapting or, in an increasing number of cases, failing. Adaptation and innovation call for a different style of leadership than would have been the norm even ten years ago. Institutional stress levels are, in most cases, very high. It does not help that more than a few theological institutions operate in environments that are far from stable. Many are increasingly managing not only change, but also chaos.

Institutional leadership in nearly every place and every sphere involves some degree of managing chaos. A mechanical, bureaucratic understanding that imagines institutional leadership as a continual fine-tuning of organizational processes, management of steady streams of resources, and resolution of technical problems is becoming increasingly remote. More and more, leaders are being called on to re-imagine their organizations, which often requires going down to the bedrock questions of mission. The ATS economic equilibrium study points to the inadequacy of traditional solutions to economic challenges: increased enrollment, increased contributions to the annual fund, and elimination of staff positions. More fundamental change is needed (Graham 2015). Necessary change is not a matter of minor tweaks, but is rather significant and adaptive. In speaking to the Church, Michael Herbst points to the importance of asking “why” before asking “how” or “what,” and before simply taking action (Herbst 2015).

The challenges described are especially acute for leaders of Majority World theological schools. Many of these leaders were not prepared academically for the kinds of institutional leadership questions they currently face, although I am always encouraged by the way women and men around the world continue to rise to the challenge. As my research elsewhere has shown, theological schools in the Majority World are intensely CEO-centric institutions, with governing boards providing only modest support and cover for the institutional leader (Ferenczi 2015). The winds of change will continue to force these leaders to deal with adaptive problems (Heifetz, Linsky, and Grashow 2009), generative thinking (Chait, Ryan, and Taylor 2005), and the “why” questions. Will they have the appropriate support – personally and professionally – to accomplish the task? Will they be able to summon the necessary emotional energy to lead well in such challenging circumstances? It seems to me that the future of many theological schools rests on the answers.

The aforementioned Overseas Council study and the ATS economic equilibrium project begin to point to solutions. Both stress the importance of seeing beyond the context of one particular institution in order to share with and learn from others in the ongoing adaptive process. MacLeod points to the importance of access to models that are functioning elsewhere, as well as best practices as a means of sustaining fragile innovation. The ATS study, on the other hand,
points to the fact that widely differing financial realities make it difficult to develop transferable models. At the same time, the researchers found that the accountability provided by the multi-institution project, and the opportunity to interact with both peers and coaches brought real value to institutions addressing difficult financial issues. Most institutions also noted that engagement in the ATS project led to greater involvement by their board members (Graham 2015, 11). How can our common approaches to sustainability move away from overreliance on one leader to strengthening a community that supports leaders through difficult and demanding change? How can external service agencies, such as the ICETE, assist in this process?

It is undoubtedly easier to pose questions than to offer answers. Although I speak at length about “models,” I believe that the best solutions will be local solutions that make sense within the organizational culture and environment of each institution. Yet, such innovation cannot be sustained in a vacuum. Perhaps it is around the common theme of institutional fragility, and to some degree, human fragility, that the most fruitful, supportive conversations about the future of global theological education can emerge.

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