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## **Starting a new degree program is the last thing a dean should do**

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Blog Series: Theological School Deans

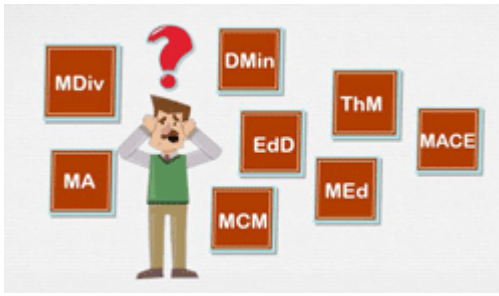
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When a school discovers a declining trend in enrollment it's time to huddle for some frantic strategic planning. If anxiety about the enrollment numbers is high enough some will want to talk about how the times they are a changin' for theological education--and how little there is to do about it. Others will focus on branding, some will start asking questions about what the admissions staff is doing--and whether it is doing the right things. Others will lament the loss of an idyllic past when classes were full, student housing had a waiting list, entering students could write, full time enrollment was above average, and there were more bodies around the faculty conference table.

Sometimes the conversation turns to vision and mission. That's always a conversation worth having; it can help people focus on the foundational purpose of the shared enterprise all members of the system commit to, from faculty and staff to administration and trustees. But in the case of enrollment, the challenge is seldom about vision or mission. Rather, the remedy often lies in more pragmatic strategies.

For example, when enrollment is flat, or declining, the best potential for increasing overall enrollment is to expand the student body profile by offering a new degree program. A new degree program diversifies a school's offerings and attracts a previously unreached population. However, starting a new degree program *is the last thing a dean should do*.



The *first* thing a dean should do is lead the faculty, administration, and key staff in a rigorous assessment of the need for a new program and its viability. There is a risk in plunging too quickly into starting a degree program that sounds like a good idea to the school's stakeholders, but may have little value to the potential audience the school imagines is eager to storm the school's registrar's office when the new program is announced.

Here are some actions the dean may want to implement before starting a new degree program:

- Check accreditation standards and requirements to ensure the school can meet what is necessary to receive approval. Assess the potential institutional impact a new degree program will have. Will a new degree program require additional faculty members? Will it require additional support staff?
- Conduct a study that can confirm the viability of a new degree program. Assess the comprehensive impact of a new program on all systems: classroom space, course schedule, faculty teaching load, advising load, scholarships and financial aid, student services, program support, assessment components, recruitment activities (how much will it cost to recruit one new student in the program?), etc. Will creating a new program require that an existing anemic one close in order to not compete with each other?
- Help internal parties guard against self-referencing as rationale. Help the stakeholders focus on data and responsible study and interpretation as the basis for decision-making. Similarly, beware of over-enthusiastic interpretation of alumni surveys about satisfaction and about what new degree program *they* think the seminary should offer. Alumni are disconnected from the internal factors that must inform the decision, unaware of broader issues impacting the seminary, and may not really understand what *future* alumni need from a new degree program. Their frame of reference is the experience of seminary *they have already had*.
- Seek or generate the data necessary to make a responsible and realistic decision.
- Perform a potential vs. risk assessment audit. See the attached download: Assessment Of Potential Degree Worksheet.
- Assess if the new degree program will align with the current faculty profile. One dilemma is a new degree program that expands the scope of the curriculum but may not be supported by the expertise or scholarship of the current faculty members. This may yield resistance from faculty members who do not feel equipped to teach in the proposed program, or, it may require a commitment to reconstitute the faculty--by adding additional faculty members, replacing current faculty, hiring affiliate faculty, or partnering with another institution. This is where the dean will face the challenge of

cultural change as opposed to merely programmatic changes.



A new degree program is too complex and costly an enterprise for a "let's try it and see if it flies" approach. If a program does not have the potential to grow over the course of three to five years it is likely not a sound option for the school, regardless of how many may think it a good idea. Can you identify a large enough prospective student body to start and grow the program? Bear in mind that any number of people may respond to a survey saying they'd be "interested" in the program you are thinking of offering, but a very small percentage of those are viable prospects who will commit to the course of study.

Once the dean leads the faculty and other key offices in a rigorous enough study that yields confidence that a particular degree program is appropriate and viable, then *the last thing you should do is start a new degree program.*

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