
A REPORT ON CREDENTIALING IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

for Reimagining Theological Education, an initiative of Convergence Network, 2016

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The fundamental problem in Theological Education is not accreditation or the delivery system. Accreditation is necessary, insofar as it provides quality assurance and enables portability of degrees. On the contrary, the real problem is the underlying assumption that theological education can be and should be universalized, homogenized, and systematized. This is a modern, university-based assumption that prioritizes academic over contextual learning and reinforces race and class based disparities—which impact theological education, church leadership, and the future of church.

The major accrediting body for theological education, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), is primarily interested in the MDiv, as are denominations (for now). This is an over-saturated, shrinking, and increasingly competitive market in terms of providers, and innovation will be limited. Therefore competing with ATS accredited programs should not be the goal. ATS experimental programs and \$6m of Lilly funding will likely fuel incremental innovation in the accredited ecosystem. However, more radical innovation is still needed.

New forms of theological education are emerging and thriving in various contexts (some of which were represented at the first RTE Summit in October 2015). These new forms have in common that they are:

- Outcomes based—focused on what kind of leaders are needed for the Church or for a particular setting, and what skills and formation they need

- Less expensive – reduced overhead also reduces the cost passed on to students
- Flexible, learner-centered
- Not tied (or less tied) to accreditation and degrees, but instead focused on the practical equipping of leaders
- Employing hybrid online and intensive/retreat delivery models
- Focused on context, praxis, action/reflection, mentoring, and formation
- Aware that content is cheap and readily available, but added value comes from the learning community, integration, contextual application, mentoring, and spiritual and leadership formation.

The need right now is in theological education for those not served fully by the ATS MDiv system. People included in this category would be:

- Non-white, non-middle class, non-ordination track leaders
- Denominations recognizing a need for alternative credentialing
- Denominations/congregations who don't currently require the MDiv but are looking for substantive theological education for leaders
- Congregational learning, edutainment, personal enrichment, vocation in daily life
- People wanting more flexible programs, integrated learning (art/social work/business/etc. and ministry)
- People needing more flexible learning locations and/or desiring learning in context
- People in discernment of ministry not ready to jump into the MDiv (or the debt frequently accumulated through graduate theological education)
- People seeking skills theological education offers, but not for denominational ministry ("soulful community builders", Sunday Assembly, etc.).

True innovation will happen among marginalized people and in communities in which ATS MDiv based leadership training has already failed (for instance, in the "none-zone" or those who specific no religious

affiliation, communities of color, and rural contexts). We must start with outcomes and include marginalized voices—otherwise we will recreate the very system we are trying to reform.

Toward Developing a Prototype

As we began the work of reimagining credentialing/accrediting system for theological education, we kept the following three contexts in mind.

Context 1:

Theological education for ministry leaders is currently framed and controlled by the ATS accredited MDiv at seminaries and divinity schools—either in concert with, or in opposition to, this dominant form. There are, and long have been, people and communities not being well served by this model, and it is clear that this model will not be dominant into the future, yet few viable alternatives exist in the imagination of most people and systems.

Context 2:

Theological education has already changed among people and communities for whom the ATS MDiv education and credentialing model has been insufficient and/or has failed to meet the needs of equipping leaders for ministry in context. Until recently, these people and communities have been in the minority, have existed on the fringes of the church, and have been isolated from one another. This is changing as these people and communities are drawing together, and as their experience and context becomes more and more common among people and communities who had previously been well served by the ATS MDiv system.

Context 3:

There is an opening, a need, and a desire for an alternative credentialing and accreditation system for theological education that has the potential to persist as ATS MDiv seminary based theological education radically shifts, and perhaps crumbles, in the coming decades.

Our assessment is that each of these three contexts is a real situation for a subset of the population involved in or pursuing graduate theological education. Once these contexts were identified and held in the foreground of our thought, we began to analyze what might be the underlying problem(s) we need to address as we build an alternative credentialing system.

The problem is not how to fix the ATS MDiv system, nor is the problem how to create ATS MDiv 2.0 or any new iteration of the system that has served the previous incarnation of the church (which is now passing away). Instead, we frame the problem like this:

ATS accredited MDiv theological education is not working for an increasing number of people and communities, and as a result there needs to be an alternative model for both theological education and accreditation.

If this is the problem that we must address or the task to which we are called, then we highly suspect that the path forward will be to recognize, find, organize, link, and coordinate the existing and emerging forms of alternative theological education into a community of practice and engage that community in creating the accreditation and other structures that will allow it to become a community of influence for theological education for the future. Such a task is fraught with difficulties and will require a high amount of time, money, and energy; yet with such great risk comes the potential for great reward. Moreover, if we are to avoid going down with the sinking ship of theological education in its current form, then we must be bold enough to take on this challenge.

The remainder of this report will highlight our initial hypothesis, our findings from a set of interviews, and our roadmap for how implementation might occur.

Initial Hypothesis

It will be helpful to design a stackable credentialing system, implemented by a network of alternative theological education partners with a 60/40 shared core (40-60% of the content is dictated by the accrediting body, and the other 60-40% is specific to the program's own context) and accredited by a new, national board.

Even before this group was formed, the stackable credentials approach came highly recommended. Philip Clayton's white paper from the May 2015 RTE consultation identified stackable credentials as a good method for creating portable, skill-based, and on-demand credentials. After this group was formed, our initial research on stackable credential models pushed us further in this direction. A booklet produced by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) on competency-based education provides examples of real-world programs, such as at the University of Maryland University College and Northern Arizona University, where curriculum is designed around exhibiting certain competencies, leading itself to practical application.¹ In "Portable Stackable Credentials: A New Model for Industry-Specific Career Paths," authors cite a number of positive outcomes as well as some drawbacks to the stackable credentials model. The positives, not surprisingly, are that the credentials are portable, stackable (meaning one can add on certifications or expertise as the need arises—analogue to various certifications in the IT industry), and they designate a career path with clear learning objectives or outcomes. Among the negatives, the authors cite the difficulty of managing the number of stakeholders involved in designing a system of stackable credentials. For the purposes of theological education, the list of stakeholders might include denominations, individual churches, students, the communities out of which the student/leader emerges, and/or faith-based advocacy and non-profit groups.

As the group began to assess whether or not a competency-based or stackable credentials approach might work well with theological education, we conducted interviews with a number of established leaders

¹ Bamford-Rees, Diana, et al. *2013 CAEL Forum & News: Competency-Based Education*. Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2013.

in theological education, asking their input on these models and (when applicable) their reflection on their own attempts at instituting competency-based or stackable models. The four interviewees were:

- Kent Anderson, President of Northwest Baptist Seminary
- Alan Webb, co-founder of OpenMasters.org
- Michael DeLashmutt, former Vice President and Dean at Trinity Lutheran College
- Jonathan Sorum, Dean of Academic Affairs, Lutheran Institute of Theology, Brookings, SD

While detailed notes of these interview are available upon request, here we will simply highlight our most significant take-aways from the interviews.

1. Competency-based education works best with a mentorship model. Northwest Baptist Seminary has built a robust mentor/student relationship as a major component of their MDiv curriculum. The mentor then leads the student through practical application of the competencies as they are learned. Likewise, OpenMasters encourages students to develop mentorships that include significant work on projects, such that a student's "transcript" might simply list the mentors with whom the student has worked and the projects completed with that mentor.
2. Building competencies or credential requirements should start with churches and religious organizations at the table. Rather than a top-down format, designing a credentialing system starts with the end-user or the groups to whom the student will be ministering, asking what their needs are or what they hope that the student will get out of theological education.
3. Stackable credentials also allow greater flexibility in the learning plan, which means that students can form more multi-disciplinary degree programs or credentials, equipping them for a wider field of activity upon completion.

The reading and interviews we conducted confirmed our initial hypothesis that a stackable credentials approach would be a helpful model for theological education. As we continued our work, we began to refer to this as a connected credentials system, rather than stackable, since a connected model does not imply a specific or pre-determined order necessitating a sort of lowest level "fundamentals" course or

credential. Instead, students might connect the various credentials that they find necessary for the work they intend to do upon completion or are already doing.

Results

Our initial work around a prototype credentialing system showed promise. A possible business model emerged, and an alternative method for developing a system of accrediting alternative programs appeared possible. However, several problems quickly surfaced. The initial prototype was recognized to still be in the same framework and system as the current ATS model, and subject to all the limitations of standardization in higher education (including high overhead cost). While financially feasible, it seemed unlikely that the “value added” would be compelling enough to the potential partners for high costs to be economically justified. This is certainly true in the start-up phase, but less clear beyond that. Financial sustainability would require the alternative credentialing program to have high brand-value, with little to no competition. This would require large-scale roll out, tremendous buy-in, and large financial investment. Despite efforts to include leaders marginalized by the current system (particularly leaders of color) and develop a grass-roots rather than top-down system, the prototype quickly revealed these issues of the current system to be present in the emerging system as well. And yet, our desire to network and develop best practices remained.

While an alternative system for accrediting theological education programs is still extremely valuable and even necessary, at present the greater need is for a relational network to support small and emerging theological education programs and share best practices.

New Hypothesis

A network should be developed, using the Brewers Association as a model, that supports theological education programs from the very smallest (homebrewed) to the medium-sized (micro brewed), while recognizing the continued need (and market dominance) of the ATS accredited system (macro brewed). Rather than competition among one another, or with larger established programs, these

smaller programs could support one another in an emerging market, which is in fact made up of many localized, contextualized, and underserved markets. The network will enhance theological education as a whole, particularly among those without access to the larger system.

Next Steps: Toward Founding the Network

The following outlines a design process through which a network of alternative theod programs could be built and out of which an alternative credentialing system will likely and hopefully emerge. This design process is bottom-up, or driven by the programs that will come together to form the network and which the network will serve. As a result, we propose to begin with a listening campaign before moving toward identifying the problems and potential solutions that a credentialing system would solve.

Design Process

Initial Questions to ask:

1. What challenges and opportunities do you face in ministry in your context?
2. What sorts of skills and capacities are needed for leaders in your ministry context?
3. How are these leaders currently being formed? Where are the gaps and needs for other training/formation?
 - a. What is working?
 - b. What is not working?
 - c. What else do your leaders need?
4. Would access to a network of educational opportunities to equip your leaders in this way be of value to your leaders and your ministry context? Would a system of connected credentials that recognizes and certifies these various skills be beneficial?

Phase 1: Listening

- Initial presenting problem around which to listen: ATS accredited MDiv theological education is not working for an increasing number of people and communities, and there needs to be an alternative model for theological education and possibly alternative accreditation.
- Convene a series of one-to-one conversations with various stakeholders not well served by current ATS MDiv system:
 - Students and potential students—particularly those marginalized (by race, class, socio-economic context, and location)
 - Congregations unable to call/afford MDiv leaders and/or looking to raise up indigenous leaders
 - Denominational/congregational leaders at various levels looking for alternative ways to equip leaders
 - Seminaries with a desire, but not a plan, for alternative forms that are open to radical innovation outside the bounds of current assumptions

Phase 2: Discernment and problem setting

- Gain clarity around current challenges, strengths, and desired outcomes through consulting stakeholders experiencing challenges with current theological education and associated accreditation systems as identified in Phase 1.
- Guiding questions:
 - Who needs to be at the table? Who from our listening has the passion, interest, and capacity to help move this forward?
 - What are our shared values and/or guiding principles?
 - What forms of theological education are happening on the ground and on the margins? What forms are desired? How might we gather these resources in new ways? What elements of the shared core are emerging?
 - What is not happening that could?
 - What should we NOT do?
 - How can we keep focus on adaptive rather than technical elements?

- After listening to the stakeholders experiencing the challenges related to this, is the problem as stated initially (ATS accredited MDiv theological education is not working for an increasing number of people and communities, and there needs to be an alternative model for both theological education and accreditation.) still the problem on which we need to work?

Phase 3: Prototyping

- Identify and develop prototypes to address the problem(s) as clarified in Phases 1-2.
 - Prototype 1: Shared connected credential model and system to accredit
 - Prototype 2: Network of innovative theological education programs sharing resources, best practices, systems, and technology
 - Other Prototypes
- Prototypes must offer solutions or movement on the problem we have identified.
- Process must continually ask: Who else needs to be at the table?

Phase 4: Testing and evaluation

- Gather a diverse spectrum of evaluators to offer feedback on prototypes created in Phase 3:
 - Who needs to weigh in on these prototypes?
 - Who is best equipped to beta-test and to provide honest and critical feedback?
 - Does this prototype address the problem set before us?
 - Does this prototype contribute something unique?
 - Is this prototype in line with the values and outcomes we have named?
 - Are there other presenting problems, values, outcomes, etc., that we are missing?

Phase 5: Synthesis

- Return to problem setting and values—are these still right?
- Refine prototype(s)
- Re-evaluate with stakeholders

Phase 6: Develop full implementation proposal and next steps

Concluding Thoughts

Though this work will be cumbersome, we feel confident that the reward will be worth the risk and worth the time, energy, and finances required. The opportunity for radically changing the landscape of theological education is at our door, and we believe that the steps outlined are a significant and vital response to this opportunity. Establishing a network of alternative theological education programs and engaging the network to build an alternative credentialing system will decisively reshape theological education in North America, making it more contextualized and democratized.

References

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