

# 2

*This chapter provides insight into the challenges facing higher education and provides a rationale for redesign along with effective strategies and management approaches, based upon the case study experience of Winebrenner Theological Seminary in Findlay, Ohio.*

## Winebrenner Theological Seminary: From Oppositional to Creative Agenda

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The Winebrenner Graduate School of Divinity was established by Findlay College—now the University of Findlay—in 1942 in Findlay, Ohio. The graduate school relocated to a different region of Findlay after receiving its own charter from the State of Ohio in 1961, thus allowing it to become an independent, degree-granting institution. The name *Winebrenner Theological Seminary* was selected to represent educational mission as well as recognize the founder of the Churches of God, General Conference (CGGC), John Winebrenner. In 2003, Winebrenner Theological Seminary relocated to its current property adjacent to the University of Findlay campus, where it continues to function as an autonomous institution governed by its own board of trustees.

Winebrenner Theological Seminary is accredited by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) and by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), and authorized by the Ohio Department of Higher Education. In February 2018, Winebrenner received formal notification of an initial 2-year accreditation from the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) for the Master of Arts in Clinical Counseling (MACC) degree. Winebrenner has received approval from HLC to offer the full Master of Arts in Practical Theology (MAPT) online and has submitted a similar petition to ATS. In addition to the MACC and MAPT, Winebrenner's academic programs include a residential Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry along with a nondegree program option.

As Winebrenner's current strategic plan nears completion, the board of trustees affirmed the following three strategic priorities for the 2018–2023 Strategic Plan:

- Collaborative Relationships
- Contextualized Theological Education
- Community of Learners

These strategic priorities emerged from a year-long process designed to better align overall decision-making with the revised mission of the Seminary to “equip leaders for service in God’s kingdom.” Much effort has been invested in “rightsizing” Winebrenner in comparison to peer institutions to confirm that necessary resources are available; currently the annual expense budget of approximately \$1.6 million and fourteen full-time employees (includes administration, faculty, and staff) are deemed adequate to fulfill the institutional mission.

### **The Case for Collaborative Relationships**

Creating a network of collaborative relationships serves the church, community, students, and alumni. These relationships provide new opportunities for innovation while strengthening the historic commitments of the institution to the CGGC and other partners. At a recent conference hosted by the Association of Theological Schools, much of the discussion detailed the reduction of financial support from denominational bodies to theological seminaries. Other challenges such as increased competition for students, dwindling financial resources from sponsoring denominations and overall financial challenges create a climate in theological higher education in which collaboration is viewed as a positive development. However, Winebrenner Theological Seminary is moving forward on the assumption that collaboration is a key tenet for achieving its unique mission and not merely a strategy for addressing the changing “marketplace” of higher education.

While there are multiple positive outcomes that result from collaborative relationships, Winebrenner Theological Seminary expects to work with other organizations in a mutually beneficial manner (while ensuring accreditation standards are met and maintained). This will lead to increased vitality but will not lead to a decision to merge or embed the Seminary within another institution as has become a recent documented trend. Upon graduation, Winebrenner’s students will carry this distinctive with them by manifesting growth in personal wholeness, spiritual formation, and professional character.

### **The Case for Contextualized Theological Education**

Developing delivery models, educational settings, and creative programs that provide theological education within a diversity of contexts deepens the educational experiences of both students and instructors.

Contextualized theological education acknowledges that there are many contexts for which Winebrenner is equipping leaders. Perhaps it was

once the case that students, who were primarily male, were being trained to serve as pastors. That is no longer the reality or the assumption from which Winebrenner fulfills its mission. This strategic initiative publicly announces our assertion that there are many different contexts for meaningful work within our religious commitments. It is our conviction that furthering our beliefs in the broader society requires willingness to engage contexts not previously considered the domain of Seminary graduates.

Graduates of Winebrenner Theological Seminary, both male and female, will carry this distinctive by understanding evangelical theology, content pertinent to their academic program, and by demonstrating a biblical worldview. Counselors, chaplains, pastors, as well as experts in ethics and conflict resolution are truly needed in today's familial, social, political, and religious climate; it is a belief of Winebrenner's faculty that graduates can effectively serve in these areas while making a contribution to the wider culture.

### **The Case for Developing a Community of Learners**

A community of learners emerges as a by-product of healthy collaborative relationships and contextualized theological education. The executive team at Winebrenner includes the academic dean, director of enrollment management, director of development, director of finance, and director of institutional assessment and planning. The team embodies a commitment to a diversity of viewpoints; while founded by the CGGC, Winebrenner's administration reflects a multiplicity of denominational perspectives. Through the practices of scholarly engagement as it relates to orthopraxy and orthodoxy, students and instructors are encouraged to engage in academic conversations, research, publication, academic conferences, informal engagements, cocurricular events and groups, both within and beyond the Seminary setting.

A commitment to developing a community of learners is built upon the belief that leadership is no longer defined exclusively in terms of traditional organizational leadership roles but rather that leaders can influence others from a variety of positions. Winebrenner continues to provide leadership development at all levels of the community reflecting the needs of specific constituencies. However, each individual student has the ability to serve as an influencer, or leader, within his or her sphere of influence.

Through interaction in the various settings noted above, students are equipped to engage the world and the church and practice effective self-care in all settings. Individualized study is a by-product of the postprinting-press era and reflects a specific historical season as opposed to *the* best method of education. Winebrenner continues to value spiritual formation as an integral part of all Seminary experiences, and our belief is that this is best accomplished in community, not alone, while recognizing that advances in technology allow for community to develop despite geographic distance.

This distinctive is carried by Winebrenner graduates through the demonstration of engagement in reconciliation, servant leadership, and skills appropriate to his/her area of study. We believe that Winebrenner graduates are equipped to transform the world.

### **Specific Challenges Facing Winebrenner That Called for Redesign**

Winebrenner Theological Seminary's board of trustees announced a timeline for a presidential transition on December 3, 2014. Approximately 6 months later, on June 25, 2015, the Seminary was placed on probation by the HLC for lack of compliance in institutional planning, institutional assessment, and finances. Winebrenner is no longer in a "financial concern" category; however, this specific challenge is not uncommon for similarly classified institutions of higher education. Institutions are placed in this category of financial concern to provide additional oversight for a number of financial or federal compliance issues. Issues may include missing or late financial statements/audits, outstanding liabilities, or concerns of financial responsibility. On December 1, 2015, I became the seventh president of Winebrenner Theological Seminary and recognized immediately that this HLC sanction, alone, necessitated significant redesign.

At the time of the transition, the outgoing president, was the longest serving president at an ATS-accredited school, creating unique organizational dynamics in which many of the employees had long-time personal and professional relationships with him. He was dearly loved and respected, and he cultivated a strong sense of loyalty among the employees. As a result, a climate was created in which some problems obvious to a newcomer were not as readily apparent to those already working at Winebrenner. Individual staff members were often unaware that others might share similar concerns until after the issue was named, either by me as the new president, the accreditor, the auditor, or another employee. Even when problems were discussed, they were rarely attributed to his leadership or leadership style. This was an enormous challenge.

One specific example of how our approaches have changed since I became president relates to identifying and hiring new employees. Our current approach is to clearly identify the institutional need, develop a profile, and follow through with the hiring of the new employee who best meets that particular need. Previously, there were occasions in which employees of high character and positive work ethic were employed at Winebrenner on the belief that personal character trumps one's skill set. In many ways, this is the proverbial "chicken or egg" syndrome in employee "onboarding": Which comes first, a quality employee or clear institutional need?

Winebrenner Seminary is not alone in the struggle to effectively manage employees and employee headcount, leading to what is affectionately referred to as "administrative bloat" (McElroy, 2017). A previous director

of finance made the comment that “Winebrenner doesn’t have a spending problem, Winebrenner has a revenue problem.” This statement contributed to a climate in which big decision items were pursued for the sake of revenue as opposed to emerging from shared institutional planning and overall vision. As is noted later in this essay, there were some clear indications that expenses were an issue, and yet these concerns were often overlooked.

Another challenge facing Winebrenner was and continues to be the changing demographics of those seeking a theological education. The market forces that impact the way in which theological higher education is packaged have undergone a radical shift in the past 25 years. For example, it was common practice in the 1990s for a seminary student to uproot a family and relocate to Findlay, Ohio, to complete a 3-year residential, face-to-face master of divinity degree at Winebrenner Theological Seminary. The norm today is students remain in their local context and seek education either online or at a local institution where they can continue to live in their current setting regardless of denominational affiliation. In many cases this lack of desire to relocate is accompanied by the rise of the “mega-church” in which prospective students are on staff at a large church that offers training internally at its location and does not want to lose a staff person for the duration of an academic program. The entry of larger churches, such as Church of the Highlands in Birmingham, Alabama, into Christian higher education serves a form of “disruptive innovation” (Christensen, 2000, p. xiii)—often these schools begin without accreditation and on a lower revenue margin. However, over time, improvements in quality and an increase in students begin to impact traditional institutions of higher education, such as Winebrenner.

Finally, there is a changing relationship between seminaries in general and sponsoring denominations. The expectation of how a seminary serves the sponsoring denomination is changing along with the potential funding provided by that body to a seminary.

## Redesign Approach

The redesign approach at Winebrenner Theological Seminary is built upon the assumption that an academic administrator is guided by the metaphor of “embodied scholarship” (Fritz, 2014) in which day-to-day administrative tasks are rooted in a particular theoretical or philosophical perspective as opposed to being driven by popular business approaches. Working from a position of embodied scholarship allows an administrator to respond to issues and concerns from a rooted position otherwise than traditional business language and literature.

The work of philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer (2000), specifically his concern with bias, “horizons” of significance, and the limits of one’s perspective within a public context, recognizes the need for a high level of

humility when engaging in an administrative task. Gadamer's commitment to "philosophical hermeneutics" suggests a "shift of understanding from the realm of the *a priori* to ongoing practical judgment [giving] hermeneutic understanding an ontological character that might be called emergent" (Arthos, 2018, p. 179). This perspective contributes to what can be considered a "constructive hermeneutic," which serves as a cornerstone of an embodied scholarship approach to administration. The risk within a moderately conservative evangelical theological context, such as Winebrenner, is that one may conclude that beginning from a position of humility is a pietistic endeavor. While this does influence the general disposition of the Seminary staff, my belief that any human being's perspective, including that of an academic administrator, is limited in scope. The counter to this position is one critiqued by Jacques Ellul where an administrator is working from a position guided by "la technique" in which "[o]ur own voices and identities are replaced by a technicized worldview of stereotypes and slogans" (Christians & Troup, 2018, p. 154). The risk of such an organization in higher education is one in which each plan or idea is simply one to be implemented as opposed to negotiated in dialogic engagement among administration, faculty, and staff. By way of example, Winebrenner's development of a new 5-year strategic plan has required multiple conversations negotiating the meaning of contextualization, community, and collaboration with intentional energy invested in resisting the urge to prescribe language and insist on a single interpretation.

A second element of the redesign approach taken at Winebrenner is a commitment to ask the question "why?" when engaging in both long-term planning and evaluation of past decisions. There is a history over the past few decades of moving directly from idea to implementation without analyzing why engaging in a particular idea or initiative will benefit and contribute to the long term health of the organization. Viktor Frankl (Frankl, 2006) popularized a phrase of Friedrich Nietzsche: "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how" (p. ix). There is a new commitment to make sure the "how?" and "what?" of specific decisions (e.g., seeking accreditation approval for the first fully online graduate program) are built upon a firm foundation for why? This journey makes sense at this time in the school's history. A clear articulation of why something is occurring provides motivation, momentum, and a sense of urgency moving ahead.

It is worth noting that approaching academic administration as embodied scholarship coupled with a willingness to ask "why?" is a different approach from the previous academic administration of Winebrenner. In the midst of the transition to more fully live into the current style, there have been many patterns identified that need to be broken in a way similar to a family system needing to break a cycle of poverty or addiction. To illustrate, Winebrenner has made an intentional effort to break the following cycles:

- Seeing accreditation agencies as the “enemy” and not giving ongoing attention to assessment and accreditation beyond the time that a visit or written update is imminent. This is a change from the previous administration in which accreditation reports were viewed as intrusive and mostly unhelpful.
- Collecting data simply for the sake of collecting data. Often what was collected lacked analysis and was treated as the property of individual positions or structures. The concept of data as property results in a lack of sharing across functions and a “you can borrow it but you will have to ask” environment as opposed to more intentional distribution.

Speaking personally as president, it would be inaccurate to suggest that I fully understood my own disposition in relation to academic administration. As one who made the move from a tenured faculty position to a chief executive officer-level academic administrator, I had no previous experience to rely upon. In many ways this lack of experience has served me well as I have been able to stumble upon my own unique posture as opposed to attempting to implement ideas from a previous role or position. As one trained in the academic field of communication, I am daily required to make decisions without ever having all of the available information; in a very simplistic way, this experience is the essence of the definition of rhetoric.

### **Rationale for the Redesign Approach**

Winebrenner lacked many necessary elements of infrastructure holding the various organizational pieces together. Despite the smaller size of the institution, there were many disparate parts held together by relational connections to the previous president. While the previous section outlined the philosophical dispositions taken at the institution, a *praxis* orientation suggests that actions must be taken to reveal a particular philosophical commitment in a given moment in time.

Our current organization is built to hold together by working toward a common purpose and mission as opposed to strictly along relational lines. Over time, relationships emerge as a by-product of working shoulder-to-shoulder in meetings, on projects; and, in turn, opportunities to interact outside of the workplace emerge more naturally as opposed to manufactured social settings and events. While a common approach in the United States is that interpersonal relationships begin from a position of closeness and intimacy, I believe that organizationally we are often better served when relationships begin with a sense of distance and even unfamiliarity. This shift in approach led to several occasions in which I was informed that I may need to “form better relationships” with faculty colleagues due to the expectation that my predecessor was “approachable” and “relational.” My belief that relationships would form over time has turned out to be true; however, it was a challenge to demonstrate the truth of this belief while

allowing adequate time to develop such relationships. Without strong support from the board of trustees, the concern about a lack of more “friends” and social relationships could have led to some level of intervention to attempt to artificially promote and create relationships.

At the core of the redesign was the belief that working toward (and from) a common purpose would bring unity. In order to accomplish this, a significant amount of organizational change was necessary. At least two different approaches to change are possible. The first is a surface level of change merely identifying how some other organization is addressing a problem that appears similar to one that the school is facing and then implementing the observed approach. A second method is to take, for lack of a better term, a basic problem/solution approach and attempt to more fully understand the problem in a particular context and then attempt to develop a solution—drawing upon many different sources and ideas—to solve or, at a minimum, respond to the problem. The challenge is that this approach appears to ignore more readily available options; however, the long-term benefit is that the solution meets genuine needs of the institution as opposed to implementing someone else’s solution developed for their particular set of circumstances.

At Winebrenner, the second approach is the chosen method—an attempt to identify the problem(s) and respond in turn with something, perhaps something unique, in response to perceived problems. In some ways, I would refer to the approach as a “common sense” approach, meaning that often the most obvious problem and the most obvious solution are correct. Each decision needs to make sense on its own terms but must also position Winebrenner well for future growth. Three specific examples help illustrate this approach.

- Upon my arrival, I discovered that the typical budgeting approach at Winebrenner was to identify expenses and then ask, “where will revenue come from?” In fact, in recent years, Winebrenner has struggled to consistently have revenues to meet expenses (i.e., a balanced budget). In some fiscal years the expenses exceeded the revenue by \$250,000. Although I lacked a background in finance, it quickly became apparent that this was not a sustainable model. Therefore, we implemented a simple proposal to begin projecting revenue based upon 5-year historical trends. This projected revenue was established first, and then a plan to bring expenses into alignment with the projected income was developed.
- Related to this point, a quick analysis identified personnel as the single biggest cost (which is not uncommon for any organization). This led to a deeper examination of how our institution compared to others of similar size and mission as far as the number of personnel. When it was discovered that Winebrenner was overstaffed for a school with our enrollment, positions were cut through natural attrition

- (i.e., retirements that did not lead to replacement positions) and intentional conversations with employees about the need to eliminate their position in an effort to save funds and better prepare Winebrenner for sustained impact.
- Winebrenner Theological Seminary had long been working to establish a Pennsylvania campus and on June 6, 2013, purchased the former Scotland School for Veteran’s Children from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for \$1.8 million. In January 2015, SCI took responsibility for the day-to-day operations of the property in cooperation with Winebrenner. In March 2017, after receiving the necessary authorization from the HLC, the ownership of the property and associated debt were transferred from Winebrenner to SCI. This decision allowed SCI to operate with even greater autonomy and relieved Winebrenner of the debt obligation, which had jeopardized its accreditation status with the Higher Learning Commission. In June 2017, the Winebrenner board of trustees made the decision to suspend operation of academic program offerings at the Scotland Campus, effective August 2017. The Winebrenner Seminary board made this decision after evaluating the program offerings and determining that Winebrenner lacked the financial resources necessary to develop a viable and thriving campus at the Scotland Campus location. Supporting this decision was the research that demonstrated it typically requires 4 years to move into a new geographic region. Four years had passed and the location was not meeting budget needs and projections.

Despite being a theological institution, it is imperative that “faith” is not viewed as a strategy. We have worked hard to think in terms of strategic positioning (as opposed to strategic planning), which honors our faith heritage without allowing it to become an excuse for poor planning, that leading to a result that lacks the necessary buy-in from internal and external stakeholders.

### **Where Are We in the Process of Redesign (Our Timeline)?**

Since my arrival in December 2015, Winebrenner has undergone many significant changes. Each of these decisions has been part of an intentional plan to either address concerns present at the time of the presidential transition or respond to issues raised by the HLC, ATS, or our local auditor. Also of note, each of these changes has been processed through the appropriate channels (board of trustees or administrative executive team) to ensure the item is “owned” by the leadership and is consistent with Winebrenner’s mission to equip leaders for service.

On June 29, 2017, Winebrenner Theological Seminary was removed from probation and placed on “notice,” indicating that Winebrenner is in full compliance with HLC requirements but must continue to

demonstrate ongoing attention to HLC's concerns. We see this as positive affirmation that the actions we are taking are addressing the concerns related to institutional planning, institutional assessment, and finances that were first raised in 2015.

As noted in the introduction, in February 2018, Winebrenner received notification of an initial 2-year accreditation for the MACC from the Council for Accreditation of CACREP. Additionally, all students who graduated in the 2017 year will be considered graduates of a CACREP accredited program. The letter indicating this accreditation notes,

... that when the CACREP Board grants accreditation for a two-year period, the Board believes the program "substantially meets the requirements for accredited status," but there are one or more minor standards-related deficiencies that the Board desires to see addressed more thoroughly by the program. Although this program has standards cited, as outlined on pages 3–4 of this letter, the faculty deserve to be congratulated for the time, energy, and commitment that they have given throughout this accreditation process. CACREP recognizes that this has been a cooperative endeavor and believes that the requirements can be met within the prescribed two-year period.

Winebrenner will submit a follow-up report, due to CACREP in October 2019, requesting an additional 6 years of accreditation, which would extend the program's accreditation through March 2026.

If received, this is a significant accomplishment for the Master of Arts in Clinical Counseling program faculty and the institution as a whole.

On April 2, 2018, the University of Findlay purchased the building that housed Winebrenner Theological Seminary since its construction in 2003. In turn, all offices of Winebrenner have been colocated on the second floor of the facility in an effort to create a more collaborative workspace. The changing dynamics of higher education, including the rise of online education, provided a context in which the Winebrenner board of trustees could consider the University of Findlay's offer to purchase the building and see it as a way to position the organization for a successful future.

In June 2018 there was a focused visit from HLC exploring whether Winebrenner would be permitted to take the first graduate program (MAPT) fully online, and approval for this online program was granted by HLC in September 2018. The first online course at Winebrenner was offered in 2003, and this serves as the culmination of 15 years of incremental change in culture and a response to the changing demographics of the student body. The board of trustees, at its May 2018 meeting, approved the framework for *Strategic Plan 2018–2023* identifying three strategic initiatives outlined earlier in this essay. The full plan will be presented to the board at the November 2018 meeting. In January 2019 we have an accreditation visit from HLC and the Ohio Department of Education to hopefully

confirm that Winebrenner has met all requirements and will be removed fully from any sanction. We have not yet achieved a balanced budget, but we are positioning ourselves well to accomplish this during the 2018–2019 fiscal year (July 1–June 30).

## Implications and Outcomes

Higher education is changing so rapidly that I do not believe that Winebrenner should wed itself to one particular approach, whether business or philosophical. Many options will be considered to move us forward in this current climate. The major challenge that remains is to reach a point in which we achieve a balanced budget on a regular basis. A professional staff member of the HLC team noted in an accreditation visit that you cannot “cut your way to prosperity”; however, cutting expenses has value equal to increasing revenue over the long-term. Also, we need to make sure we have a product line of programs that meets the needs of these students and does not simply reflect the desires of faculty and administration independent of external market forces. While some schools may choose to expand their academic programmatic offerings to create multiple pathways toward enrollment, Winebrenner is taking a minimalist approach and is intentionally narrowing the list of programmatic offerings while maximizing the pathways in which students can complete those programs through online offerings and collaborative partnerships that align with our strategic priorities and could include churches and other faith-based organizations.

HLC assisted us in clarifying the problems that needed immediate attention. As our culture continues to improve and options grow, a new challenge is emerging in that we are finding that it was a much simpler task to respond to the priorities dictated by HLC than develop an original agenda that lacks such clear opposition. In other words, as clear opposition disappears it is more of a challenge to determine a clear path forward. Finalizing this chapter coincided with the latter stages of planning for the 2018–2023 Strategic Plan. As a way to invite feedback and promote conversation around what is written, I circulated a draft of this chapter to our executive team. Understanding our emerging strategic plan in the context of what is written here has led to a general sense that we are entering a new phase in the life of Winebrenner. The specifics of what this means are yet to be determined; however, I do know that one concrete item that will shift is how I, as president, utilize my time. As our infrastructure improves I am becoming more available to our external stakeholders such as donors, denominational leaders, and prospective students.

To paraphrase the words of James (Jim) Collins (2001) in his book, *Good to Great*, my belief is that Winebrenner now has the right staff in place in the right roles. The need now is for a creative “anxiety” to be present within our context. Anxiety is defined by the Google online dictionary as “a feeling of unease, typically about an imminent event or something with

an uncertain outcome.” This is not to suggest that employees lose sleep over the existence of a problem but do lose sleep over how to solve the problem. Creative anxiety is not clinical anxiety and is a potentially problematic term in our current cultural context fascinated with psychological well-being. However, appropriate anxiety focused on important issues related to one’s role is a simple demonstration of appropriate understanding of what is at stake in the organization. In many ways, this functions much like speech anxiety in a public-speaking context in which a speaker can potentially channel the energy from being anxious in front of an audience in an appropriate manner, which, in turn, can be a demonstration of caring about a topic and how the audience will respond. It is when the clinical and uncontrollable anxiety takes over that a problematic issue emerges.

Having the best employees for their respective roles also leads to another positive outcome in that the borders between roles and areas of responsibility are negotiated, as opposed to being dictated by the institution’s president. This does not work for all employees, and some have struggled with the idea that the lines between the different areas were not as clearly delineated as they would have preferred. Currently, the director of enrollment management has oversight of marketing; however, the director of institutional assessment and planning serves as a social media specialist per an internal director-to-director agreement that emerged from conversations about skill set and time management. Such an arrangement is only possible when employees truly view themselves as colleagues who are working together toward a common goal that, ultimately, trumps personal preferences and agendas. The best employees also create what I have started referring to as a “permission-giving” environment (as opposed to “permission-withholding” environment), a term that I heard used by Bill Easum, a writer and leadership coach, some years ago. This kind of environment allows staff and administration to freely interact with awareness of a minimalist set of restrictions. Typically, we spend way too much time making lists of restrictions to keep people out as opposed to being a genuinely welcoming environment.

Winebrenner Theological Seminary provides a wonderful opportunity to contribute to higher education within a context directed by faith and mission. As outlined above, the challenges are very real but we are guided by a genuine hope that our efforts will be rewarded through a more robust theological Seminary and greater platform to equip more leaders for service to the world. Shifting from an oppositional to creative agenda is a fitting phrase and summary of what the future will require from us if we desire to be productive, healthy, and effective.

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