

## **Educational Management in Theological Settings: Changing Contexts and Emerging Needs**

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### **Abstract**

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Theological educational institutions are navigating a rapidly evolving landscape, marked by shifting student expectations, changing workforce demands, technological advancements, and growing concerns around student well-being. This study explores the trends and challenges facing theological institutions and proposes adaptations of their educational management practices to ensure their continued relevance and effectiveness. The analysis delves into students' changing demographics and learning preferences seeking more flexible, personalized, and career-relevant programs. It also examines the transforming workforce, which requires a broader focus beyond traditional ministry paths and stronger connections with industry partners. The study further investigates the significant impact of technology on teaching and learning, highlighting the need for a balanced and values-driven approach to integration. In response to these evolving dynamics, the paper proposes a set of adaptations to educational management practices, including leadership approaches that prioritize flexibility and responsiveness. In addition, curriculum and instructional adaptations are needed to meet diverse student needs, adjustments to organizational structures and decision-making processes, and strategies for engaging with external stakeholders and partners. By embracing these adaptations, theological educational institutions can position themselves to provide transformative and enriching educational experiences that prepare students to navigate the complexities of the modern world while upholding the core values and principles of their religious traditions.

**Keywords:** Theological Education, Theological Institutions, Theological Curriculum, Theological Educational Management.

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## **Introduction**

The educational landscape in many parts of the world has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, marked by an evolving religious and cultural milieu (Glanzer & Talbert, 2019). Amidst these changes, theological educational institutions have faced the challenge of adapting their management practices to meet the emerging needs of their students and communities (Estanek & James, 2021). As religious affiliations and beliefs among students and families shift and cultural diversity within educational settings increases, theological institutions must navigate these evolving contexts to ensure their educational offerings remain relevant and responsive (Roebben, 2020). Understanding how educational leaders adapt their management approaches in these settings is crucial for supporting faith-based educational models' success and sustainability (Maddix & Estep, 2017). This paper examines how educational leaders in theological settings navigate changing religious, cultural, and societal contexts and adjust their management practices to address emerging needs and challenges (Feinberg & Lalich, 2021). By exploring the strategies and adaptations employed by these leaders, this study aims to contribute to the scholarly discourse on theological educational management in faith-based educational settings.

## **Theoretical Framework**

A substantial body of research has examined the unique aspects of educational management within faith-based institutions, particularly those with a theological orientation. The literature highlights the importance of aligning management practices with the institution's core mission, values, and beliefs (Rine & Guthrie, 2016). This includes prioritizing integrating faith and learning, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose, and maintaining a strong connection to the institution's religious traditions and heritage (Glanzer & Ream, 2009). Scholars have also explored the challenges faced by educational leaders in theological settings as they navigate the changing religious and cultural landscape. These challenges include addressing the increasing diversity of student and faculty populations, reconciling evolving societal expectations with institutional traditions, adapting to technological advancements, and shifting educational paradigms (Senge et al., 2015). Effective management in these contexts often requires a balance between preserving the institution's foundational principles and being responsive to emerging needs (Schein, 2017).



Theoretical perspectives on organizational change and adaptation in religious contexts provide a valuable framework for understanding the dynamics at play in theological educational institutions. Institutional theory, for example, highlights how organizations, including academic institutions, are shaped by their institutional environment and the pressures to conform to societal norms and expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This theory suggests that theological educational institutions may face competing institutional logic as they strive to maintain their religious identity while adapting to changing external conditions (Kraatz & Block, 2008). Additionally, theories of organizational learning and sensemaking can shed light on how educational leaders in theological settings navigate and make sense of the evolving contexts in which they operate (Weick, 1995). These perspectives emphasize the importance of institutional leaders' ability to interpret and respond to environmental changes, foster a culture of continuous learning, and engage in collaborative decision-making processes (Argyris & Schön, 1996).

This study explores the understanding of how educational leaders in theological settings leverage their institutions' religious and cultural foundations to adapt their management practices and address emerging needs and challenges.

### **Navigating Changing Religious and Cultural Contexts**

The educational landscape in many parts of the world has been shaped by shifting religious affiliations and beliefs among students and their families. Recent studies have documented a decline in traditional religious identification, particularly among younger generations, accompanied by a rise in religious pluralism and a growing proportion of individuals identifying as religiously unaffiliated or "spiritual but not religious" (Pew Research Center, 2021). These changes have significantly impacted the composition of student populations within theological educational institutions. Concurrently, theological educational settings have become increasingly diverse in terms of religious affiliation and cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Walton, 2020). This diversity has presented challenges and opportunities for educational leaders as they strive to create inclusive and welcoming environments that foster understanding and respect among individuals with diverse religious and cultural perspectives.

In response to these evolving contexts, educational leaders in theological settings have employed various strategies to navigate the changing landscape. One such approach is the



implementation of inclusive curricula and pedagogical practices that acknowledge and incorporate diverse religious and cultural traditions (Hess, 2018). This may involve incorporating texts and perspectives from various faith traditions, encouraging interfaith dialogue and collaboration, and promoting the exploration of intersections between religion, culture, and contemporary issues. Additionally, educational leaders have sought to foster community and belonging within their institutions by actively engaging with student and faculty populations to understand their diverse needs and perspectives (Glanzer et al., 2017). This may include creating dedicated spaces and support services for students from underrepresented religious or cultural backgrounds and developing professional development opportunities for faculty members to enhance their cultural competence and inclusive teaching practices.

Furthermore, educational leaders in theological settings have recognized the importance of collaborating with external stakeholders, such as religious organizations, community groups, and industry partners, to understand better and address the evolving needs of their students and the communities they serve (Hess & Payton, 2021). These collaborative efforts have helped to inform curricular and programmatic decisions, strengthen community ties, and enhance the relevance and responsiveness of theological educational offerings. By navigating these changing religious and cultural contexts, academic leaders in theological settings have the opportunity to foster more inclusive, diverse, and enriching educational environments that prepare students to engage effectively with the complexities of the modern world.

### **Addressing Emerging Needs in Theological Educational Settings**

As theological educational institutions navigate the changing religious and cultural landscape, they are confronted with various emerging needs and challenges that require innovative and strategic responses.

#### *Evolving Student Expectations and Demands*

The evolving expectations and demands of students in theological education settings are critical issues that institutions must grapple with. Recent research indicates several key trends. First is flexibility and personalization: Studies show that today's students, particularly younger generations, seek greater flexibility in their educational programs (Glanzer et al.,



2017; Hess, 2018). This includes options for online, hybrid, and accelerated learning pathways and the ability to customize their curriculum to individual interests and career goals. Second is practical relevance and career preparation. There is a growing emphasis among theological students on programs that provide tangible, career-oriented skills and knowledge (Fain, 2020; Vance, 2019). Students increasingly want to see clear connections between their studies and real-world professional applications, with a stronger focus on practical ministry training, leadership development, and job placement.

Third is diverse learning modalities. In addition to flexibility, students seek a wider variety of learning modalities beyond traditional lecture-based instruction (Hess, 2018; Naidoo, 2016). This includes more interactive formats such as small group discussions, hands-on workshops, experiential learning opportunities, and the integration of digital technologies. Fourth is holistic student support. Theological students also desire more comprehensive support services, including academic advising, mental health resources, career counseling, and community-building initiatives (Glanzer et al., 2017; Naidoo, 2016). Institutions providing a nurturing, holistic educational experience are increasingly attractive to prospective students.

To address these evolving student needs effectively, theological educators must engage in ongoing assessment, prioritize curricular and programmatic innovation, and foster a culture of responsiveness and adaptation. By maintaining fidelity to their institutional mission while innovating to meet student demands, these educational leaders can ensure their offerings remain relevant, accessible, and impactful.

### *Changing Workforce and Career Preparation Requirements*

Alongside changing student expectations, theological educational institutions grapple with the need to prepare students for a rapidly evolving workforce. There is a need for theological educational institutions to adapt to the changing workforce and career preparation requirements. It is a critical challenge that institutions must address to ensure their graduates are equipped for success in a diverse range of professional contexts. The traditional ministry-focused career paths are no longer the sole focus for many theological students. Today's students seek opportunities to apply their theological and ethical training in various professional settings, including nonprofits, social services, public policy, business, and



beyond (Rine & Guthrie, 2016; Sorenson, 2017). To effectively prepare students for this evolving job market, theological educators must take several key steps.

First, they must forge stronger industry partnerships. Institutions should establish closer connections with industry partners, community organizations, and potential employers to understand better emerging workforce needs and trends (Rine & Guthrie, 2016; Vance, 2019). These partnerships can inform curriculum development, provide invaluable experiential learning opportunities, and facilitate post-graduation job placement.

Second, adapt curricula and programs. Curricula and programs must be regularly evaluated and updated to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required in the modern workforce (Hess, 2018; Naidoo, 2016). This may involve interdisciplinary coursework, technology-infused learning, and practical, career-oriented modules.

Third, emphasize experiential learning. Theological institutions should prioritize integrating hands-on, experiential learning opportunities that allow students to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world settings (Glanzer et al., 2017; Vance, 2019). This could include internships, service-learning projects, case studies, and other immersive learning experiences.

Fourth, provide comprehensive career support. Institutions should invest in robust career development services, including career counseling, job search assistance, networking events, and alumni mentorship programs (Fain, 2020; Naidoo, 2016). This holistic support can help students navigate the evolving job market and successfully transition from their studies to their chosen careers. By addressing these critical areas, theological educational institutions can better position their graduates for success in an increasingly diverse and dynamic workforce while remaining faithful to their core mission and values.

### **Technological Advancements and Their Impact on Teaching and Learning**

Technology integration in educational settings has presented opportunities and challenges for theological educational institutions—the impact of technological advancements on teaching and learning in theological educational settings. Institutions must grapple with this complex and multifaceted issue carefully and strategically. They need to make relevant technological infrastructure to enhance teaching and learning. Learners should be exposed to diverse technologies that can improve their practical ministries.



The integration of digital tools and platforms in theological education can indeed present both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, technology has the potential to enhance the learning experience, foster greater connectivity among students and faculty, and provide access to a broader range of educational resources (Glanzer & Ream, 2009; Hess, 2018). Virtual classrooms, online discussion forums, and digital library archives, for example, can expand the reach and accessibility of theological education.

However, the effective implementation of technology in these settings also requires educational leaders to rethink their pedagogical approaches and address the potential risks and ethical considerations associated with technology use (Glanzer & Ream, 2009; Hess, 2018; Naidoo, 2016). Questions around digital privacy, intellectual property rights, and the potential for technology to exacerbate inequities must be carefully navigated.

Moreover, integrating technology necessitates a concerted effort to strengthen students' and faculty's digital literacy and competencies (Hess, 2018; Naidoo, 2016). Ensuring that all educational community members are equipped to effectively and responsibly utilize digital tools is crucial for maximizing the benefits of technological integration.

Ultimately, the successful implementation of technology in theological education settings requires a carefully considered and values-driven approach. Institutions must thoughtfully align their technological initiatives with their core mission, values, and pedagogical principles while remaining attentive to emerging trends, best practices, and their students' evolving needs and expectations (Glanzer & Ream, 2009; Hess, 2018). By striking the right balance between the opportunities presented by technology and the ethical and practical considerations involved, theological educational institutions can leverage digital tools and platforms to enhance the learning experience, foster greater accessibility and engagement, and prepare their students for success in an increasingly technology-driven world.

### **Addressing Mental Health and Social-Emotional Needs of Students**

For theological educational institutions, students' mental health, social-emotional, and overall well-being have become pressing priorities. This is a critical priority that institutions must proactively address to provide a transformative and enriching educational experience for their students.



Recent studies have highlighted the unique stressors and challenges students face in theological educational settings, including the demands of balancing academic, spiritual, and personal responsibilities (Hess & Payton, 2021; Naidoo, 2016). The pressures of theological study and the inherent emotional and psychological aspects of religious and ministerial training can significantly impact students' mental health and overall well-being.

In response, educational leaders must develop comprehensive support systems and foster a culture of care and compassion within their institutions (Hess & Payton, 2021; Watt, 2017). This may involve expanding access to counseling services, creating peer support networks, implementing stress-management workshops, and providing faculty and staff with the necessary training to identify and address student needs.

Moreover, institutions should strive to equip students with the social-emotional skills and coping mechanisms necessary to navigate the complexities of the modern world while upholding the core values and principles of their religious traditions (Hess & Payton, 2021; Naidoo, 2016). Integrating curriculum and programs that foster emotional intelligence, resilience, and holistic well-being can empower students to thrive during and after their studies.

By understanding and addressing their students' mental health, social-emotional, and overall well-being needs, theological educational institutions can position themselves to provide a truly transformative and enriching academic experience. This approach supports students' personal and professional development and aligns with the institution's core mission of nurturing the whole person and preparing them for lives of service and leadership.

### **Educational Management Practices and Trends**

There is a need for theological educational institutions to adapt their management practices in response to the evolving landscape of higher education. This is a crucial consideration as institutions strive to remain responsive, relevant, and effectively serving the diverse needs of their students and communities.

The changing dynamics in the educational sector, driven by technological advancements, shifting student demographics, and evolving societal expectations, require institutional leaders to re-evaluate and adapt their management approaches (Naidoo, 2016; Ryland, 2017). This may involve rethinking traditional administrative structures, decision-





making processes, and resource allocation strategies to better align with theological institutions' emerging needs and challenges.

One key aspect of this adaptation is fostering greater institutional agility and responsiveness (Ryland, 2017; Watt, 2017). This can be achieved by implementing more flexible and collaborative management practices, which empower faculty, staff, and students to actively participate in decision-making and contribute to the institution's strategic direction.

Additionally, diversifying student populations with varying backgrounds, learning preferences, and support needs requires institutions to adopt more inclusive and equity-focused management practices (Naidoo, 2016; Watt, 2017). This may involve the development of targeted programs, the provision of tailored support services, and the cultivation of a campus climate that values and celebrates diversity.

Furthermore, integrating technology in educational settings necessitates adapting management practices to ensure the effective and ethical deployment of digital tools and platforms (Hess, 2018; Naidoo, 2016). This includes the development of robust digital infrastructure, the implementation of data-driven decision-making processes, and the establishment of clear policies and procedures to address issues of data privacy, cybersecurity, and intellectual property. By embracing these adaptive management practices, theological educational institutions can position themselves to navigate the evolving landscape, respond to the diverse needs of their stakeholders, and fulfill their core mission of providing a transformative and enriching educational experience.

### **Leadership Approaches that Prioritize Flexibility and Responsiveness**

Effective leadership in this changing context requires a mindset and approach prioritizing flexibility and responsiveness (Rine & Guthrie, 2016). In the rapidly evolving landscape of higher education, a leadership mindset that embraces adaptability and continuous learning is essential for navigating stakeholders' changing demands and expectations (Rine & Guthrie, 2016; Ryland, 2017).

Effective leadership in this context requires a fundamental shift from traditional top-down, hierarchical models to more decentralized and collaborative approaches (Ryland, 2017; Watt, 2017). Educational leaders must be willing to empower faculty, staff, and students to



actively participate in the decision-making process, tapping into their diverse perspectives and insights to inform strategic planning and problem-solving.

By fostering a culture of transparency and shared accountability, leaders can cultivate a sense of collective ownership and commitment to the institution’s vision and mission (Hess & Payton, 2021; Naidoo, 2016). This, in turn, can facilitate the implementation of innovative practices and the rapid adaptation to emerging challenges, as the entire community is engaged and invested in the institution’s success.

Moreover, educational leaders must be attuned to their stakeholders’ shifting needs and expectations, including students, alumni, community partners, and religious/denominational affiliates (Ryland, 2017; Watt, 2017). This requires a deep understanding of the nuanced and often complex dynamics within the theological education landscape and a willingness to experiment with new approaches and gather feedback to inform continuous improvement.

Ultimately, cultivating a flexible and responsive leadership mindset is critical for the short-term adaptability of theological educational institutions and essential for their long-term sustainability and relevance (Naidoo, 2016; Watt, 2017). By empowering their communities, embracing innovation, and maintaining a steadfast commitment to their core mission, educational leaders can position their institutions to thrive in the face of an ever-changing higher education landscape.

### **Curriculum and Instructional Adaptations to Meet Diverse Student Needs**

Theological educational institutions adapt their curriculum and instructional practices better to serve the diverse needs of their student populations. As the student demographics within theological education continue to evolve, with learners from increasingly varied backgrounds, learning styles, and lived experiences, institutions must proactively address these shifts through curricular and instructional adaptations (Hess, 2018; Naidoo, 2016).

One key aspect of this adaptation involves incorporating more inclusive and interdisciplinary course content (Naidoo, 2016; Ryman & Fulford, 2016). By expanding the traditional theological canon to encompass diverse perspectives, narratives, and scholarly traditions, institutions can better reflect the rich tapestry of their student body and create learning environments that are more representative and engaging. This may include the



integration of non-Western theological frameworks, the exploration of intersections between theology and other disciplines, and the centering of marginalized voices and experiences.

Furthermore, implementing personalized and flexible learning pathways is crucial in meeting students' diverse needs and preferences (Hess, 2018; Ryland, 2017). This can involve the development of modular curricula, offering hybrid or online learning options, and providing individualized support and mentoring to help students navigate their educational journeys. By empowering students to shape their learning experiences, institutions can foster a sense of ownership and investment, ultimately leading to enhanced engagement, retention, and academic success.

Alongside curricular adaptations, developing pedagogical approaches that accommodate diverse learning preferences and cultural contexts is essential (Hess, 2018; Watt, 2017). This may include the incorporation of experiential, project-based, and collaborative learning activities, integrating digital technologies to support multimodal learning, and cultivating inclusive classroom environments that value and validate the diverse lived experiences of students.

By embracing these curricular and instructional adaptations, theological educational institutions can position themselves as inclusive, responsive, and transformative learning communities, better equipped to nurture their increasingly diverse student populations' holistic development and academic success (Naidoo, 2016; Ryland, 2017).

### **Adjustments to Organizational Structures and Decision-Making Processes**

Theological educational institutions need to reassess their organizational structures and decision-making processes to remain agile and responsive to the evolving needs of their stakeholders (Glanzer et al., 2017; Naidoo, 2016).

As the higher education landscape continues to undergo rapid transformation, driven by factors such as changing student demographics, technological advancements, and shifting societal expectations, traditional hierarchical and siloed organizational models may no longer be sufficient to navigate these challenges effectively (Glanzer et al., 2017; Ryland, 2017).

To address this, theological institutions should consider flattening their organizational structures and embracing more collaborative governance models that empower cross-functional teams to contribute to strategic planning and decision-making (Hess & Payton, 2021; Naidoo, 2016). This decentralization of authority can foster a culture of shared



ownership and collective responsibility, where faculty, staff, and even students actively shape the institution's direction and respond to emerging needs.

Moreover, establishing flexible and adaptive decision-making processes can enable theological institutions to pivot more quickly in the face of changing circumstances (Glanzer et al., 2017; Ryland, 2017). This may involve the implementation of agile project management frameworks, incorporating continuous feedback loops, and cultivating a data-informed, evidence-based approach to decision-making.

By empowering cross-functional teams to collaborate on strategic initiatives, theological institutions can leverage their community members' diverse perspectives, expertise, and insights, leading to more innovative and holistic solutions (Hess & Payton, 2021; Watt, 2017). This, in turn, can enhance the institution's capacity to anticipate and respond to the evolving needs of students, alumni, community partners, and other key stakeholders.

Ultimately, the adjustment of organizational structures and decision-making processes within theological educational institutions is a crucial component of the broader shift towards more flexible, responsive, and adaptive models of leadership and governance (Glanzer et al., 2017; Naidoo, 2016). By embracing these changes, institutions can position themselves to thrive in higher education's dynamic and ever-changing landscape.

### **Strategies for Engaging with External Stakeholders and Partners**

To effectively navigate the changing landscape, theological educational institutions must strengthen their engagement with various external stakeholders, including religious organizations, community groups, industry partners, and professional associations (Hess & Payton, 2021).

In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, the ability of theological institutions to effectively collaborate with a diverse range of external stakeholders is crucial for ensuring the relevance, responsiveness, and impact of their educational offerings (Hess & Payton, 2021; Ryland, 2017). By fostering partnerships with religious organizations, community groups, industry leaders, and professional associations, theological institutions can gain invaluable insights into the evolving needs, expectations, and challenges faced by the communities they serve (Naidoo, 2016; Watt, 2017). These collaborative efforts can inform the development of more relevant and responsive curricula and facilitate the creation



of meaningful career pathways and experiential learning opportunities for students. For example, by partnering with local religious communities, theological institutions can better understand their constituents' unique spiritual, social, and cultural needs and tailor their educational programs accordingly (Hess & Payton, 2021; Ryman & Fulford, 2016). Similarly, collaborations with industry partners can help institutions align curricula with the emerging skill sets and professional competencies required in various sectors, ensuring their graduates are well-prepared to navigate the changing job market. Moreover, engagement with professional associations and research organizations can provide theological institutions with access to cutting-edge knowledge, research methodologies, and best practices, enabling them to stay at the forefront of the field and contribute to the broader advancement of theological education (Glanzer et al., 2017; Watt, 2017).

By strategically leveraging these external partnerships and collaborations, theological educational institutions can position themselves as dynamic, responsive, and relevant hubs of learning, research, and community engagement (Naidoo, 2016; Ryland, 2017). This, in turn, can enhance their ability to attract and retain diverse student populations, foster meaningful connections with alumni and industry stakeholders, and ultimately contribute to their graduates' holistic development and success.

## **Conclusion**

This exploration of the evolving landscape for theological educational institutions reveals several key findings. First is students' shifting expectations and demands for more flexible, personalized, and career-relevant programs. Second, the changing workforce and career preparation requirements necessitate a broader focus beyond traditional ministry paths and stronger connections with industry partners. Third, the significant impact of technological advancements on teaching and learning requires a balanced and values-driven approach to integration. Fourth, there is a growing need to address the mental health, social-emotional, and overall well-being of students within these educational settings.

These findings highlight the importance of adaptable and responsive educational leadership within theological institutions. Leaders must be willing to embrace a culture of flexibility, innovation, and continuous learning to meet the evolving needs of their students



and communities effectively. This may involve rethinking organizational structures, decision-making processes, and engagement strategies with internal and external stakeholders.

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