
BETHANY COLLEGE DISCERNMENT SUMMIT (OCT 4, 2014)

FINDINGS, PRIORITIES, SCENARIOS

PREAMBLE

What follows is a summary of the key findings and priorities that emerged out of Bethany's Discernment Summit, held on Oct 4, 2014. This meeting was a gathering of board members, denominational leaders, pastors, business leaders, educators and alumni who gathered together for the purpose of diagnosing the causes of Bethany's current situation and reflecting on possible pathways forward. The discussion was facilitated by Rod Schellenberg, pastor of Hepburn MB Church.

The day generated a huge amount of data and opinion so the challenge was always going to be how to "digest" it in order for it to be useful for Bethany's Board of Directors as they plan and make decisions. To that end, a working group was formed Bethany's Lead Team and Faculty and this group met in order to discern key findings and themes and to summarize priorities for the college going forward. While there is some editorializing included in what follows, the hope is that it is a fair representation of what was heard at the Summit.

KEY FINDINGS

These findings have been grouped thematically, roughly in line with the data that seemed to have the most explanatory significance with respect to our current situation.

VISION OF BETHANY

1. Bethany appears to be suspended between two related, but different visions, each of which leads to different educational paradigms and strategies.
 - a. If our main objective is to **train leaders (both pastors and lay leaders) and resource the church**, then our campus and location are likely impediments. Leadership training and theological education can conceivably be offered in a wide variety of formats, many of which have significantly lower overhead costs than a residential college campus.
 - b. If our main objective is **young adult discipleship and formation** then a community experience in a residential context is a crucial component. In this case our campus and location are key assets.

2. These two visions are undoubtedly linked but we did not hear the clarity that we were hoping for regarding which of these two “targets” to aim for. Both were seen as fundamental needs of the church. The relationship between the two was affirmed. But a way to hold both together in one programmatic model did not emerge. Bethany has traditionally tried to integrate both of these objectives in our educational model but this has potentially diffused our mission and limited our effectiveness.

EDUCATIONAL MODEL

3. We were not expecting “changing views of education” to be the top ranked piece of data in terms of diagnosing our situation. But we heard a clear and strong emphasis on the word “experience” as a contrast to words like “classroom” or “academic.” There was little disagreement that experiential elements of Bethany programming needed to increase.
4. The discussion ranged from exploring experiential education as a *tactical* change (add experiential elements as a “tweak” to the classroom model), to a more *strategic* change (radically reconfigure the current model and downplay the academic).
5. There were big questions asked regarding the place of a college in a world where information has been commodified and is widely and cheaply available.
6. We heard important questions about the relationship between education and job credentials. If education is seen primarily in terms of credentials, where is the place for deeper character formation. Who should pay for this?
7. We heard questions about the value proposition of Bible college given #6 above. Education is seen as worth the investment if it leads to job credentials. So if Bethany is going to be a college, the credential is a key priority. If Bethany is going to do discipleship, experience is a key priority.
8. Young adults needs *as perceived by young adults* are life-on-life mentoring and community living. This speaks *for* the need for a residential context and a community experience. This is more evidence that we are suspended between two targets (see #1 above).
9. The kind of educational model we pursue will affect the kind of student we seek to attract. The “hothouse” model of Bethany is geared toward helping emerging adults mature and hurting/broken students move toward wholeness. The leadership development model would seek students who have already been identified as on a leadership trajectory. We would need to start in different places with each of these groups of students.

CHURCH CONNECTION

10. We heard that the general focus in most churches is much more “local” which makes collaborative enterprises like a denominational college more difficult to sustain.
11. The call for better “church connection” seems to be coming from a perspective of Bethany needing to demonstrate its relevance to the church’s mission, rather than a perspective of Bethany functioning as a strategic initiative of the churches to accomplish their mission.
12. If church connection is a key priority, then our location could be an impediment. Our perceived distance from most of our churches requires that we are much more intentional about our presence in these churches (both students and faculty). This could also speak in favour of delivery models that are more portable than the traditional classroom model.
13. There was a consistent affirmation that the solution to “the Bethany problem” could not come from Bethany alone but required a broader level of participation from churches and partners.

THEOLOGICAL VISION

14. Pastors and denominational leaders did not express significant concern about theological alignment between Bethany and the church. This was a moderate surprise for us given that this is often a flashpoint between denominations and their schools and we had heard some feedback to the effect that Bethany was not as “safe” as other schools in terms of theology.
15. This leads to two possible conclusions:
 - a. There is a basic confidence among church leaders that Bethany is teaching in accordance with our Confession of Faith (i.e. Bethany is sufficiently “safe” in terms of entrusting young adults to their care);
 - b. Theological formation may not be seen as an urgent priority in our current context because denominational theological identity is something of a moving target (i.e. people don’t look to Bethany for the reproduction of a particular theology identity).

PRIORITIES

1. Going forward we would need to **be much more overt about our view of education** – this frames how we do everything. There are already strong experiential components to our program, but they are harder for people to see since “college” tends to communicate an academic approach. This would require a major communications initiative – a “re-branding” of Bethany in order to re-capture the attention of young adults, parents and churches.
2. We would need to **develop a plan to merge experience/classroom models** across the span of the Bethany program (with the first year tilted toward experience-based education with a strong emphasis on integration with the classroom model).
3. We would need to **locate our place on the discipleship/leadership trajectory** and develop clear pathways based on that location (e.g. if we minimize our role in the area of leadership training, we need to have clear pathways to formal leadership credentials). This would involve extensive conversation with other colleges and partners.
4. We would need to **identify key partners** and come up with a clear plan as to how to strengthen and maintain these partnerships as well as to demonstrate the value they add for our students.

SCENARIOS

REVIEW OF CURRENT SITUATION

This past spring we announced that we were facing significant challenges that threatened our viability as a college. The following is a snapshot of our current situation as November of 2014.

- We enrolled 72 students in the 2014-2015 year of which 11 were fourth year interns (with reduced fees). This number includes an alarmingly low first year class of only 24 students. This total student body number is down from 107 in 2013-2014 and 119 in 2012-2013. Ten years ago, in 2004-2005, we enrolled 150 students.
- As a result of our financial situation we laid off three full-time faculty and a number of staff over the summer of 2014. The majority of remaining faculty are on part-time contracts for 2014-2015. All contracts end as of May 2015.
- We reduced our overall budget from around \$2.25 million to \$1.42 million in order to resume operations in 2014-2015.
- We suspended two majors, one concentration and the TESOL program while reducing our overall instructional hours from 163 to 117.

Given our current situation, the following two scenarios seem to be the only live options for us. Some of the most significant implications of each scenario are noted.

SCENARIO 1

To construct and describe the 2015-2016 year as a transitional year where the key priorities are to undergo a significant adjustment in Bethany's educational model. This adjustment would include tilting toward experience-based learning, rearticulating the values of life-on-life mentoring, and emphasizing the integration of service learning and local church interactions.

Implications:

- This option requires leadership that can offer a consistent and compelling vision of Bethany that is both faithful to our historic mission and responsive to the aspirations of our various constituencies.
- This option would require a significant marketing initiative since Bethany would need to be re-branded in order to gain momentum for this direction.
- The Board would need to have confidence that the college is able to find the financial resources to support this transitional change.
- This scenario contains a strong element of risk since questions would remain as to whether these changes would generate the enrollment necessary to provide a sustainable revenue stream going forward.

SCENARIO 2

That at the end of the 2014-2015 academic year, the ministry of Bethany College in its current iteration be brought to a close.

Implications:

- The board would still hold the charter which could be picked up or transferred to another entity should there be a new ministry initiative that sought to utilize the college model.
- The board would need to own the Bethany mission and empower any interested parties to continue to investigate future possibilities for this ministry.
- Bethany would need to facilitate the future educational options for all current students in conversation with our sister schools and partners.
- Particular attention would need to be given to the status of students entering their fourth year and pursuing degrees.
- Bethany would need to have monies to complete all tasks required for closing a college.