

**Great Commission Mission Drift:
Discipleship as a Driver for Organizational
Sustainability in a Post-Covid Context**

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Great Commission Mission Drift: Discipleship as a Driver for Organizational Sustainability in a Post Covid Context.

A tragic theme of Christian higher education in the North American continent is that institutions tend to gradually “drift”¹ from an initial mission towards other less noble or even practical efforts, resulting in diffuse, ineffective, or irrelevant outcomes that eventually oppose their initial aspirations.² Concerningly, cultural trends, including unprecedented isolation,³ rapid technological advancement,⁴ and crippling student anxiety,⁵ tempt higher education leaders “to work the symptoms,” falling for familiar distractions from the unchanging Christian Commission

¹ Peter Greer et al., *Mission Drift: The Unspoken Crisis Facing Leaders, Charities, and Churches* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House Publishers, 2014).

² For a classic summary of this perspective, see: James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998); See also: George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University Revisited: From Protestant to Postsecular* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

³ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

⁴ Already the mass exodus of education in 2020 is nearly half a decade behind the writing of this paper and novel challenges from novel use of large language models (LLMs) are redefining education norms. If Moore’s Law can be trusted, such rapid change will increasingly become the norm. Alessandro Gabbiadini, Giulia Paganin, and Silvia Simbula, “Teaching after the Pandemic: The Role of Technostress and Organizational Support on Intentions to Adopt Remote Teaching Technologies,” *Acta Psychologica* 236 (June 1, 2023): 103936, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2023.103936>; Mike Perkins et al., “Detection of GPT-4 Generated Text in Higher Education: Combining Academic Judgement and Software to Identify Generative AI Tool Misuse,” *Journal of Academic Ethics* 22, no. 1 (n.d.): 89–113, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10805-023-09492-6>.

⁵ These are possibly the most acute of a long list that could be mentioned. William “Marty” Martin, “How to Move Forward When Crisis Is Constant,” Harvard Business Publishing, March 13, 2024, <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/how-to-move-forward-when-crisis-is-constant>; Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness* (New York: Penguin Press, 2024); Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

to make disciples.⁶ Providing some much-needed context to our own “unprecedented” challenges, Tim Keller reminds leaders that “cultural moments like the one we are in provide us with an opportunity.”⁷ Namely, a reexamination of discipleship as the essential foundation of ministry leadership. Contrary to popular perceptions, “intellectual training alone will never make a true minister; [...] it behooves us above everything to remember that the ministry is a spiritual office.”⁸ This paper proposes a reinvigorated emphasis on student discipleship in Christian Higher Education as a means to alleviate numerous threats to institutional instability and advance historic organizational aspirations.⁹

Discipleship “Mission Drift”

When it comes to discipleship, “the kids are not alright,”¹⁰ and current Christian higher education models are not drifting toward meeting the needs that aspiring ministers bring with them to campus. Increasingly, students preparing for ministry describe a lack of personal discipleship and eventually find themselves enrolled but unequipped for a “Great Commission” to make disciples of all nations.¹¹ While significant efforts at discipleship have been made by

⁶ Dennis Allen, *The Disciple Dilemma: Rethinking and Reforming How the Church Does Discipleship* (Morgan James Faith, 2022), 261.

⁷ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*, Reprint edition (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), xv.

⁸ Benjamin B. Warfield, “Spiritual Culture in the Theological Seminary,” *The Princeton Theological Review* 2, no. 1 (1904): 65–87.

⁹ The founders of Dallas Theological Seminary (recently celebrating its centennial anniversary) distinctively understood how “A [...] distinguishing feature of the curriculum [will be] the attention given to the development of the spiritual life of the student.” John D. Hannah, “The Social and Intellectual History of the Origins of the Evangelical Theological College” (PhD Dissertation, Dallas, TX, University of Texas at Dallas, 1988), 192.

¹⁰ N, P, and R, “The Kids Are Not Alright,” Consider This from NPR (NPR, May 5, 2023), <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/05/1174385946/the-kids-are-not-alright>.

¹¹ “And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to follow all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of

Christian higher education institutions, the urgency of increasing needs and opportunities has broadly outpaced innovation and warrants recalibration.

Discipleship Defined

Appropriately, many Christians care deeply about discipleship. Yet, when it comes to defining the term, agreement is rare; often, individuals cannot clearly articulate what they themselves mean by the term.¹² Due to the unprecedented number of generational perspectives pursuing discipleship,¹³ potentially in different directions,¹⁴ a brief definition is appropriate here.¹⁵ Recently, Barna Research Group introduced their 2016 findings on discipleship, stating:

Before we can understand the state of discipleship, we must ask, “What is discipleship?” The clearest insight from this study . . . is that it’s unclear! Some terms are more preferred than others, and general themes emerge from the data, but Christians and church leaders of all types use a wide range of vocabulary and definitions.¹⁶

the age.”” *The Holy Bible: Updated New American Standard Bible : Containing the Old Testament and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1999), loc. Matthew 28:18-20.

¹² For the sake of brevity, unless otherwise noted the term “discipleship” in this paper refers specifically to “discipleship of Jesus Christ” or “Christian discipleship” (in contrast to more general uses of the term).

¹³ Nicholas Pearce, “Leading the 6-Generation Workforce,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 4, 2024, <https://hbr.org/2024/04/leading-the-6-generation-workforce>.

¹⁴ Vithya Subramaniam and Norizan Abdul Razak, “Examining Language Usage and Patterns in Online Conversation: Communication Gap among Generation Y and Baby Boomers,” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 118 (March 2014): 468–74, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.02.064>.

¹⁵ As a practical example, in interviewing participants in Dallas Theological Seminary’s 1-1 discipleship initiative, it is not uncommon for “Gen Z” students to request to be “coached or mentored” the very same day a member of the “Boomer” generation will describe those terms as a secularized version of “discipleship.” “One-on-One Discipleship – Student HUB,” accessed July 4, 2024, <https://students.dts.edu/student-life/discipleship/>.

¹⁶ Barna Research Group and Navigators (Religious organization), *The State of Discipleship: A Barna Report Produced in Partnership with The Navigators* (Ventura, CA: Barna Research Group, 2016), 18; Interestingly, this challenge is also found in “mentoring” studies. “Mentoring is a complex, social and psychological activity. The plethora of quite recent research and discussion has often been hindered by the lack of consensus as to what constitutes mentoring. This may be a result of writers attempting to focus upon the definitions of mentoring and not surprisingly finding little consensus.” Andy Roberts, “Mentoring Revisited: A Phenomenological Reading of the Literature,” *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 8, no. 2 (August 2000): 162, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713685524>; “...it appears that mentoring research has made little progress in identifying and implementing a consistent definition and conceptualization of mentoring, is largely a-theoretical, and is lacking in terms of rigorous quantitative research designs that allow for testing the external validity of findings.” Gloria Crisp

Even if terms and definitions are diverse, much unity can be found in the popular literature on what “discipleship” looks like. Common themes of Christian discipleship include Bible study, mature Christ followers encouraging less mature followers of Christ to mature in their relationship with Christ (group sizes might be as small as two persons, but larger is also common), intentional conversations, supportive relationships, a teaching-learning process, etc.¹⁷ Common in each of these themes is the idea of “life transformation” and “becoming more Christ-like.”¹⁸

From a more historical perspective, the term *Μαθητής* (typically glossed as “disciple”) is found as early as 425 B.C, and the initial usage describes a process involving a personal relationship of a pupil and a teacher (or teaching.)¹⁹ A widespread use of the term in the ancient world might be illustrated by the notion that “Socrates is the true *μαθητής* of Homer because he is his *ζηλωτής* [zealot] and imitates him.”²⁰ In this same sense, the New Testament employs the noun 261 times in the Gospels and Acts.²¹

and Irene Cruz, “Mentoring College Students: A Critical Review of the Literature Between 1990 and 2007,” *Research in Higher Education* 50, no. 6 (September 2009): 526, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-009-9130-2>.

¹⁷ Darryl Taylor, “Developing Adult Church Leaders through Mentoring at Bethel Baptist Church, Clinton, Tennessee” (Louisville, Kentucky, Boyce Digital Library, 2011), <http://hdl.handle.net/10392/3792>; Barna Research Group and Navigators (Religious organization), *The State of Discipleship*, 138; See also: Roberts, “Mentoring Revisited,” 162.

¹⁸ “Both are great news for the future of the Church, as this phrase aligns with the ultimate goal of spiritual growth. It is more specific and evocative than ‘discipleship,’ which is vague and not as easily defined.” Barna Research Group and Navigators (Religious organization), *The State of Discipleship*, 86.

¹⁹ Specifically, Herodotus, of Halicarnassus (484–425 B.C.), recognized as “the first real Greek historian” enjoys the first known usage of the term. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids (Mich.): Eerdmans, 1995), 416.

²⁰ Kittel, Bromiley, and Friedrich, 417.

²¹ *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version*, ESV text ed (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2008).

In keeping with this historical perspective, this paper understands modern English terms such as “mentoring” and “coaching” as practically synonymous with “discipleship,” especially in the sense of persons progressively aligning themselves comprehensively to the person of Jesus.²²

Taylor provides one helpful concession in that:

In other disciplines, such as teaching, nursing, and business, was based on the mentor being a “master” in his area of expertise. That is, he is the final authority until the mentee becomes a master. When the mentee becomes a master, he may begin to mentor someone else. In the Church, the mentee should mentor others, but Jesus is always the Master. The mentor is constantly pointing the mentee to Jesus.²³

This historically congruent and versatile use of the term “discipleship” better serves leaders of Christian organizations seeking to integrate diverse perspectives into an even more equitable and integrated pursuit of “becoming more Christ-like.”²⁴

New Students With New Discipleship Opportunities

A recurring focus for veteran administrators and generational researchers is that the generations entering formal training for Christian ministry have a markedly distinct worldview

²² “What’s the difference between mentoring and discipleship? From one point of view, that’s a pointless question because they are the same basic process of personal transformation and growth as a result of being influenced by someone else. Churches sometimes assume they ‘own’ discipleship because that term has been used by churches for two thousand years. But there’s nothing inherently ‘Christian’ about discipleship. Nor, by the same token, is there anything ‘unchristian’ about mentoring. Discipleship is a perfect example of mentoring, and mentoring is inherent to life-on-life discipleship.” [...] “In my opinion, trying to make hard-and-fast distinctions between terms like these has become somewhat pointless. In the first place, many of these terms are now commonly used so interchangeably that they’ve become synonyms. And even those who are paid to study the mentoring process have not yet settled on exactly what the term means. One paper reports that there are now more than fifty definitions of mentoring to pick from in the academic literature!” Howard Hendricks and William Hendricks, *Men of Influence: The Transformational Impact of Godly Mentors* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019), 245–46, 61; See also Shin, who states: “The term ‘coaching’ here will be used interchangeably with the word ‘mentoring,’ because, in the opinion of this writer, they are essentially the same thing.” Benjamin C. Shin, “Developing Biblical Leaders through the Teaching and Mentoring of a Seminary Professor” (2012), 116; Taylor, “Developing Adult Church Leaders through Mentoring at Bethel Baptist Church, Clinton, Tennessee,” 45.

²³ Taylor, “Developing Adult Church Leaders through Mentoring at Bethel Baptist Church, Clinton, Tennessee,” 47.

²⁴ Barna Research Group and Navigators (Religious organization), *The State of Discipleship*, 86.

and life experience from earlier generations.²⁵ Of specific interest for this study is the increasing percentage of students attending seminaries who report little to no formal or informal discipleship experience.²⁶ Just before the extensive isolation resulting from the 2020 COVID pandemic, one Barna study found that “Just one-third of Christian adults report that their church recommends meeting with a spiritual mentor....”²⁷ Sadly, the lack of direction is not due to overwhelming mentoring already occurring in the pews. “The fact is that neither discipleship nor mentoring are taking place to any significant degree in the vast majority of churches today.”²⁸

Although most Christian adults believe their Church prioritizes “spiritual growth,” only a fifth of adults surveyed participate in some sort of discipleship activity beyond attending a weekend church service.²⁹ Even more concerning, one of the most profound findings of Willow Creek’s three-year “Reveal” study was that “Church activity alone made no direct impact on growing the heart.... It was a flat line.”³⁰ Despite the impressions of weekend participants, “only 1 percent [of church leaders] say ‘today’s churches are doing very well at

²⁵ Tim Elmore and Andrew McPeak, *Generation Z Unfiltered: Facing Nine Hidden Challenges of the Most Anxious Population*, First Edition (Atlanta, GA: Poet Gardner, 2019); Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*; David P. Setran and Chris A. Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: A Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013).

²⁶ “Unfortunately, many seminary graduates or even pastors themselves have not been mentored in any form or manner.” Shin, “Developing Biblical Leaders through the Teaching and Mentoring of a Seminary Professor,” 7.

²⁷ “New Research on the State of Discipleship,” Barna Group, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://www.barna.com/research/new-research-on-the-state-of-discipleship/>.

²⁸ Hendricks and Hendricks, *Men of Influence*, 246.

²⁹ Barna Research Group and Navigators (Religious organization), *The State of Discipleship*, 35.

³⁰ Elsewhere they stated: “Does increased attendance in ministry programs automatically equate to spiritual growth? To be brutally honest, it does not.” Greg L. Hawkins, *Reveal: Where Are You?* (Barrington, Ill.: Willow Creek Resources, 2007), 36, 13, <http://archive.org/details/revealwhereareyo0000hawk>.

discipling new and young believers”³¹ and “something needs to change.”³² The views of academics are even more dire:

Most [educators] express concerns about the state of discipleship in the U.S. The following sentiments are emblematic of a widespread outlook: “The Church in America will die, and the Church in other countries will flourish. . . . I see widespread neglect excused by busy-ness, an emphasis on worship or preaching or multi-site churches where pastors don’t know parishioners or farm out ministry to others.”³³

One scholar describes recent findings as “shocking.” Among Christian adults who are most concerned with their spiritual growth, nearly 40% “prefer methods[.] of discipleship on their own.”³⁴

Incongruence Between Ministry Needs and Popular Ministry Development Pathways

Disconcertingly, substantial concerns exist in both academic and clerical contexts. Church leaders, even graduates of more traditional higher education pathways to ministry, increasingly report a lack of competence when it comes to fulfilling the Great Commission. One study reflects a popular perspective: “There seems to be a disconnection between what these students learn in the classroom and the job requirements needed in the local church.”³⁵ Aside

³¹ Barna Research Group and Navigators (Religious organization), *The State of Discipleship*, 34.

³² Barna Research Group and Navigators (Religious organization), 68.

³³ Barna Research Group and Navigators (Religious organization), 133.

³⁴ Hendricks and Hendricks, *Men of Influence*, 246.

³⁵ Shin, “Developing Biblical Leaders through the Teaching and Mentoring of a Seminary Professor,” 1; An entire market has developed for seminary graduates who “have a sinking feeling that your ministry training didn’t prepare you for the real world?” Rich Birch, “UnSeminary Podcast,” UnSeminary, July 4, 2024, <https://unseminary.com/aboutpodcast/>; “Episode 125 - Mark & Andy on What We Didn’t Learn in Seminary: Marketing the Church,” *Church Leadership Podcast* (blog), accessed July 5, 2024, <https://churchleadershippodcast.com/podcast/episode-125-mark-andy-on-what-we-didnt-learn-in-seminary-marketing-the-church/>; Larry D. Holmes Pastor et al., *Everything They Didn’t Teach You in Seminary* (Independently published, 2020); Henry Loyd Copeland, *Seminary Flaw and Solution: Pastor Deficiency* (Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2018); James Emery White, *What They Didn’t Teach You in Seminary* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2011); John Killinger, *Seven Things They Don’t Teach You in Seminary* (New York: PublishDrive, 2006).

from curricular concerns, increasing trends in online, distance, and multi-site education³⁶ have increased the proximity of students to their teachers, impacting both the student, the teacher, and the formative experience.³⁷ Even if distance education is an unavoidable trend in higher education,³⁸ “theological education [in particular] has to be relational in order to be effective in shaping students.”³⁹ Furthermore, these relationships are better suited to “mentors and lecturers than in the university administration.”⁴⁰ Practically speaking,

...separating the preparation of church leaders from local church ministry and mission, combined with the pressures of academic respectability and professionalism, has damaged Christ’s Church. Local churches have both neglected the training of leaders within the congregation and largely abdicated to professional schools the responsibility of training pastoral leaders.⁴¹

With shifting educational modalities and inter-generational relationships, education and spiritual formation approaches must adjust to realistically accomplish traditional expectations of ministry leader development. Unlike other professional degrees, “ministerial development is to

³⁶ Rania Salama and Tina Hinton, “Online Higher Education: Current Landscape and Future Trends,” *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 47, no. 7 (August 9, 2023): 913–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2200136>; Xin Xie, Keng Siau, and Fiona Fui-Hoon Nah, “COVID-19 Pandemic – Online Education in the New Normal and the next Normal,” *Journal of Information Technology Case and Application Research* 22, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 175–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228053.2020.1824884>.

³⁷ John Dyer, *From the Garden to the City: The Place of Technology in the Story of God*, Revised edition (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2022); “Watermark’s Church Leadership Podcast: Things I Didn’t Learn in Seminary: The Art of Personal Interactions,” Apple Podcasts, accessed July 5, 2024, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/things-i-didnt-learn-in-seminary-the-art-of/id1228898530?i=1000651266668>.

³⁸ Roy Sutton, “Unlearning the Past: New Foundations for Online Student Retention,” *Journal of Educators Online* 11, no. 3 (2014); Alicia C. Dowd and Linda Taing Shieh, “The Implications of State Fiscal Policies for Community Colleges,” *New Directions for Community Colleges*, no. 168 (2014): 53–63.

³⁹ Anita Cloete and Nathan H. Chiroma, “Mentoring as a Supportive Pedagogy in Theological Training: Original Research,” *HTS: Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015): 7, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2695>.

⁴⁰ See Kosch’s helpful study which identifies significant disparity of student trust between these two groups. Lubov Kosch, Ina Friedrich, and Michael H. Breitner, “Evaluating Customer Relationship Management in the Context of Higher Education,” *International Journal of Social and Organizational Dynamics in IT (IJSODIT)* 2, no. 1 (2012): 46, <https://doi.org/10.4018/ijisodit.2012010103>.

⁴¹ Rowland Forman et al., *The Leadership Baton: An Intentional Strategy for Developing Leaders in Your Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009), 48.

be holistic, including the personal, spiritual, academic and social development of students.”⁴²

While most seminaries have included a Field Education track for their Master of Divinity degrees, in practice, a greater emphasis is given on the “time and projects that need to be accomplished rather than on any intentional leadership training or development.”⁴³ For example, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) Standards of Accreditation do not mention “discipleship,” “coaching,” or “mentor” and only mention “Field Education” as a permissible option for schools within specific boundaries.⁴⁴

Contemporary Christian Higher Education Efforts at Student Discipleship

It must be admitted that “seminaries in general have been aware of the deficit of learning among their graduates and have attempted a number of intentional programs in order to better prepare their students.”⁴⁵ For example, Talbot School of Theology and Dallas Theological Seminary have integrated a Spiritual Formation curriculum into each degree program,⁴⁶ and schools such as Denver Seminary and Asbury Theological Seminary have developed mentoring

⁴² “Mentoring and the Ministerial Formation of Seminary Students,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 3 (July 31, 2017): 51, <https://doi.org/10.17570/stj.2017.v3n1.a03>.

⁴³ Shin, “Developing Biblical Leaders through the Teaching and Mentoring of a Seminary Professor,” 123–24.

⁴⁴ “The school may offer individualized instruction, such as independent studies or individualized field education, provided it meets the first two components and is limited to meeting appropriate student needs or particular degree program requirements, but not an entire degree.” “Standards of Accreditation for The Commission on Accrediting of The Association of Theological Schools” (The Association of Theological Schools, 2020), 4, <https://www.ats.edu/Standards-Of-Accreditation>.

⁴⁵ Shin, “Developing Biblical Leaders through the Teaching and Mentoring of a Seminary Professor,” 123.

⁴⁶ “Spiritual Formation – Student HUB,” accessed July 5, 2024, <https://students.dts.edu/student-life/spiritual-formation/>; “Institute for Spiritual Formation - Talbot School of Theology,” Biola University, accessed July 5, 2024, <https://www.biola.edu/talbot/academics/isf>.

programs to “help prepare its graduates for the actual demands of ministry work.”⁴⁷ While these schools are to be commended for their efforts, the remainder of this paper will argue that these efforts at discipleship, while beneficial for their students, are incomplete implementation of discipleship and still have additional opportunities to strengthen the churches and increase sustainability for the seminaries they represent.

Advantages of Discipleship programs (especially one-to-one & multiplicative) for Christian Higher Education

Having introduced the cyclical challenge facing minister development through shared assumptions of discipleship training by both higher education and local church leadership, this section will explore opportunities for both the Church and seminary to increase student thriving and institutional sustainability through fully engaging the Great Commission.

It has already been proposed that discipleship to Jesus, to “become more Christ-like,” is distinct from other types of mentoring or coaching in that “the mentor is constantly pointing the mentee to Jesus”⁴⁸ and his ways rather than those of the mentor. In recent years, a distinct element of discipleship has enjoyed significant attention, specifically multiplication.⁴⁹ Building

⁴⁷ campus, “Training and Mentoring | The Mentor Experience,” April 15, 2021, <https://denverseminary.edu/academics/training-and-mentoring/>; Shin, “Developing Biblical Leaders through the Teaching and Mentoring of a Seminary Professor,” 124; “Student Handbook 23-24” (Asbury Theological Seminary, n.d.), 56, <https://asburyseminary.edu/students/student-services/student-handbook/>.

⁴⁸ Taylor, “Developing Adult Church Leaders through Mentoring at Bethel Baptist Church, Clinton, Tennessee,” 47.

⁴⁹ “The aim is that a disciple will- in time, and with encouragement- go and make new disciples while inviting others, ministering to others, and being authentic and transparent for others. And then it’s rinse and repeat for the rest of their lives as disciples. Disciples are learners under other disciples, then becoming discipling mentors to others.” Allen, *The Disciple Dilemma*, 187; See Tolson’s “three critical components of discipleship: learning, following, and reproducing.” Dr John Tolson and Larry Kreider, *The Four Priorities*, 3rd edition (High Impact Life, 2013), xi; So also Horton: “Be faithful to the multitudes while remaining focused on multipliers.” “Encouragement for Fruitful Multipliers | Ministry Catalyst,” accessed July 6, 2024, <https://ministrycatalysts.com/resources/encouragement-for-fruitful-multipliers/>; Jim Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship: Building Churches That Make Disciples*, Illustrated edition (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010), 20;

on the Great Commission, Jim Putman convincingly argues that the command is a call “to make disciples and not converts, and there is a big difference.”⁵⁰ Putman’s proposal, however, is not novel; over 60 years ago, Robert Coleman concluded his classic evangelical text on discipleship (in a chapter titled “Reproduction”) by saying:

[Jesus’s] whole evangelistic strategy—indeed, the fulfillment of his very purpose in coming into the world, dying on the cross, and rising from the grave—depended on the faithfulness of his chosen disciples to this task. It did not matter how small the group was to start with so long as they reproduced and taught their disciples to reproduce.... Are those who have followed us to Christ now leading others to him and teaching them to make disciples like ourselves? ... What really counts in the ultimate perpetuation of our work is the faithfulness with which our converts go out and make leaders out of their converts, not simply more followers. Surely we want to win our generation for Christ and to do it now, but this is not enough.... Is it not time that we all looked again at our lives and ministries from this perspective? As Dawson Trotman would say, “Where are our men?”⁵¹

A cursory examination of curriculum and student service offerings from the most prominent American seminaries betrays a perspective that either undervalues or assumes multiplicative discipleship as a normative student experience. Most mentoring/coaching opportunities available to students correlate to student health (such as counseling or gifting studies) or job opportunities (such as executive coaching workshops); only rarely is multiplication explicitly mentioned as an essential value in student discipleship.⁵² Rather than propose an additional initiative for these

“Becoming A Disciple Maker: Billie Hanks Jr., Randy Craig: 9781891572005: Amazon.Com: Books,” accessed July 5, 2024, <https://www.amazon.com/Becoming-Disciple-Maker-Billie-Hanks/dp/1891572008>; Francis Chan, David Platt, and Mark Beuving, *Multiply: Disciples Making Disciples*, First Edition (Colorado Springs, Colorado: David C Cook, 2012); Neil Cole and Francis Chan, *Church 3.0: Upgrades for the Future of the Church*, 1st edition (Wiley, 2010).

⁵⁰ Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship*, 20.

⁵¹ Robert E. Coleman and Billy Graham, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 2nd edition (Revell, 2010), 97–103.

⁵² Two notable, if recent, examples are the Center for Church Multiplication at Asbury Theological Seminary and the Presidential Initiative for Global Discipleship at Dallas Theological Seminary. “Student Care,” Inside SBTS, accessed July 6, 2024, <https://inside.sbts.edu/student-life/student-care/>; “Executive Mentor Program Overview,” *Regent University* (blog), accessed July 6, 2024, <https://www.regent.edu/school-of-business-and-leadership/executive-mentor-program/executive-mentor-program-overview/>; “Mentorship | Dean of Students |

schools, the remainder of this paper will argue that integrating a multiplicative perspective as an essential part of discipleship will reinforce these other valuable mentoring/coaching aims.

Student Success

Broadly speaking, higher education administrators have increasingly been concerned with issues related to “student success.”⁵³ Perhaps most acutely, this term incorporates concepts of mental or psychological health.⁵⁴ While perspectives vary significantly regarding the integration of psychology and spirituality and their application to mental health,⁵⁵ each position enjoys a shared view that discipleship to Christ can be broadly considered a reinforcing mental asset.⁵⁶

Liberty University,” Dean of Students, accessed July 6, 2024, <https://www.liberty.edu/students/dean/community-life/mentorship/>; “Center for Church Multiplication – Asbury Seminary,” accessed July 5, 2024, <https://asburychurchplanting.com/>; “One-on-One Discipleship – Student HUB.”

⁵³ “Success by Design,” Deloitte Insights, accessed July 6, 2024, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/improving-student-success-in-higher-education.html>; Tia Brown McNair et al., *Becoming a Student-Ready College: A New Culture of Leadership for Student Success* (John Wiley & Sons, 2022); Malcolm Tight, “Student Retention and Engagement in Higher Education,” *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1576860>.

⁵⁴ Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*; Paul Barreira and Valentin Bolotnyy, “A Blueprint for Measuring and Improving Graduate Student Mental Health,” *Journal of American College Health* 72, no. 3 (March 23, 2024): 812–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2022.2057804>; Parinaz Mahdavi et al., “Relationship Between Achievement Motivation, Mental Health and Academic Success in University Students,” *Community Health Equity Research & Policy* 43, no. 3 (April 1, 2023): 311–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272684X211025932>; Jason Bantjes, Xanthe Hunt, and Dan J. Stein, “Anxious, Depressed, and Suicidal: Crisis Narratives in University Student Mental Health and the Need for a Balanced Approach to Student Wellness,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 6 (January 2023): 4859, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20064859>.

⁵⁵ For a cursory introduction, see: Gary R. Collins et al., *Psychology & Christianity: Four Views*, ed. Stanton L. Jones and Eric L. Johnson (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2000); Stephen P. Greggo, Timothy A. Sisemore, and Eric L. Johnson, eds., *Counseling and Christianity: Five Approaches*, Illustrated edition (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012).

⁵⁶ “The need for ministries to embrace discipleship, which provides Christians with personal connections and authentic relationships, has never been greater in a culture plagued with loneliness, depression, and family issues.” Clay Carter, “The Relationship Between Mentoring and Spiritual Formation of Adolescents” (Ph.D., United States -- Louisiana, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021), 130.

Similarly, spiritual formation has already been identified as a vital responsibility of the seminary,⁵⁷ and increasingly, for “a culture of isolation, discipleship relationships are an open door for spiritual transformation.”⁵⁸ Recent research has established that mentoring relationships positively correlate with desirable spiritual formation and recommends that the modality be strongly encouraged by administrators.⁵⁹ Surprisingly, in at least one study, most students did not take advantage of voluntary opportunities for spiritual formation through Christian mentorship,⁶⁰ further validating the role of strong institutional leadership in establishing culture.

Interestingly, learning communities that have intentionally elevated a culture of relational mentoring have seen a marked increase in transformational learning.⁶¹ Even within relationships where mentors may not be subject experts, regular conversations requiring students to perform higher-order thinking, such as synthesis or evaluation, have been shown to improve retention and comprehension.⁶²

⁵⁷ “There is a clear obligation on the seminary, by the very nature of its theological stance, to assist in this growth process by providing mentors.” Cloete and Chiroma, “Mentoring as a Supportive Pedagogy in Theological Training,” 4.

⁵⁸ Barna Research Group and Navigators (Religious organization), *The State of Discipleship*, 84.

⁵⁹ “The first implication produced from the research is how spiritual mentoring significantly impacts spiritual formation. ...The research also supported that having a strong mentoring relationship is positively correlated with the potential for spiritual formation practices.” Carter, “The Relationship Between Mentoring and Spiritual Formation of Adolescents,” 124; “Mentoring while in seminary has the potential to provide a critical component of students’ spiritual development, ministry formation, and character formation.” Jeannette Entz Shubert et al., “‘A Family Within a Community’: Perspectives About Relational Mentoring at an Asian Theological School” (2021), 54.

⁶⁰ Jacob Dunlow, “Perceptions of Spiritual Formation Among Nontraditional Seminary Students,” n.d., 28.

⁶¹ Shubert et al., “A Family Within a Community,” 336.

⁶² Marcos Daou, Keith R. Lohse, and Matthew W. Miller, “Expecting to Teach Enhances Motor Learning and Information Processing during Practice,” *Human Movement Science* 49 (October 1, 2016): 336–45, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.humov.2016.08.009>; Krista R. Muis et al., “Learning by Preparing to Teach: Fostering Self-Regulatory Processes and Achievement during Complex Mathematics Problem Solving,” *Journal of Educational Psychology* 108, no. 4 (2016): 474–92, <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000071>; John F. Nestojko et al., “Expecting to Teach Enhances Learning and Organization of Knowledge in Free Recall of Text Passages,” *Memory & Cognition* 42, no. 7 (October 1, 2014): 1038–48, <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13421-014-0416-z>; Carl A. Benware and Edward L.

Even more than students studying Greek or Church history, the positive influence of a multiplying culture can be seen in students being disciplined in Christ-likeness; an expectation of future explanation increases application.⁶³ This perspective prepares future ministry leaders to more intuitively enrich their upcoming ministry contexts by fostering leader development and delegation,⁶⁴ mentoring others almost immediately, even prior to concluding their time as students.⁶⁵

Strengthened Institutional Brand

As challenges and competition increase for higher education,⁶⁶ institutional brand strength increasingly influences organizational capacity.⁶⁷ For Christian higher education institutions focused on developing graduates competent to effective ministry, perhaps no greater brand exists than that of the student. Leadership and giftedness authors such as Bill Hendricks are optimistic about young adults' interest in mentoring opportunities: "If anything, the question

Deci, "Quality of Learning with an Active versus Passive Motivational Set," *American Educational Research Journal* 21, no. 4 (1984): 755–65, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1162999>.

⁶³ Josh Broome et al., "Unmentionable," A Pornstar Walks into a Church, accessed July 6, 2024, <https://open.spotify.com/show/6J3qUMPFQg6HPb0SZLjZtn>.

⁶⁴ Shin, "Developing Biblical Leaders through the Teaching and Mentoring of a Seminary Professor," 107.

⁶⁵ Alvin Kerry Chadwick, "Electronic Discipleship: A Mentoring Method Unbound by Walls or Distance" (DMin. Dissertation, Sitka, AK, Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013), 16–17.

⁶⁶ Francesca Pucciarelli and Andreas Kaplan, "Competition and Strategy in Higher Education: Managing Complexity and Uncertainty," *Business Horizons* 59, no. 3 (May 1, 2016): 311–20, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2016.01.003>; Christine Musselin, "New Forms of Competition in Higher Education1," *Socio-Economic Review* 16, no. 3 (July 1, 2018): 657–83, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mwy033>; Pucciarelli and Kaplan, "Competition and Strategy in Higher Education."

⁶⁷ Muhammad Waqas, "The Role of Brand Experience and Student Engagement in the Creation of Brand Equity in a Higher Education Context," *Journal of Nonprofit & Public Sector Marketing* 34, no. 4 (August 8, 2022): 451–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10495142.2021.1902905>; Beneke Justin, "Marketing the Institution to Prospective Students – A Review of Brand (Reputation) Management in Higher Education," *International Journal of Business and Management* 6 (December 20, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v6n1p29>.

is: Where are we going to find enough mentors for the demand?”⁶⁸ Other studies have shown how even purely academic or professional mentoring positively “strengthens the bond between students and the university.”⁶⁹

Regarding prospective students, as many as “1 in 3 Christians are looking for one-on-one discipleship,”⁷⁰ and generational trends suggest that personal discipleship is increasingly attractive for those considering vocational ministry.⁷¹ In a climate where most church contexts are not communicating “the communal, relational nature of spiritual growth,”⁷² articulating the organizational value of not only a season but a lifetime of multiplicative discipleship in Christ-likeness is a distinguishing brand asset.

The largest of the student groups, the Alumni, are often the least considered in the discipleship process. Inviting Alumni as mentors for students provides another opportunity to “preserve or even enhance their identification with their alma mater. In return, alumni are prospective graduate students that need to be informed about available courses.”⁷³ Speaking from

⁶⁸ Hendricks and Hendricks, *Men of Influence*, 14.

⁶⁹ Kosch, Friedrich, and Breitner, “Evaluating Customer Relationship Management in the Context of Higher Education,” 38.

⁷⁰ Barna Research Group and Navigators (Religious organization), *The State of Discipleship*, 43.

⁷¹ “Millennials are more likely than other generations to prefer one-on-one or solitary discipleship structures. Forty percent of Millennials who consider spiritual growth very or somewhat important prefer on-their-own discipleship, compared with 36 percent among Gen-Xers and 32 percent of Elders (and 39 percent of Boomers, who are more like Millennials in this respect). Twenty-one percent of Millennials who consider spiritual growth important prefer one-on-one mentoring models, compared with 14 percent among Gen-Xers and 16 percent of Boomers and Elders. Slightly more Millennials than other generations are currently in a one-on-one discipleship relationship.” Barna Research Group and Navigators (Religious organization), 80.

⁷² “Just one-third of Christian adults report that their church recommends meeting with a spiritual mentor; half of their churches publicly endorse studying the Bible with a group; and half recommend studying the Bible independently.” “New Research on the State of Discipleship.”

⁷³ Kosch, Friedrich, and Breitner, “Evaluating Customer Relationship Management in the Context of Higher Education,” 38.

a secular perspective, Kosch, Friedrich, and Breitner have demonstrated how mentor relationships can increase former students' trust and satisfaction.⁷⁴

Increasing Partnerships

Especially in the North American context, the Christian higher education endeavor has always enjoyed robust relationships with sister institutions pursuing similar aims.⁷⁵ Those Christian institutions that have persevered despite an increasingly secularizing society are those with administrators who have welcomed partnerships and collaborative efforts of other organizations.⁷⁶ Challenging students to identify someone to disciple them who best meets their contextual needs enables them to develop “relational attachments with mentors who model that integration for students personally. These mentors may be professors, but they don't have to be.... Whoever they are, what counts is that the mentor is effectively and personally present for the student.”⁷⁷ These mentoring relationships have the potential to develop beyond personal coaching relationships and transition into organizational partnerships, far more diverse and extensive than those originating in an executive office.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Kosch, Friedrich, and Breitner, 49.

⁷⁵ William Ringenberg, *Christian College, The: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2006); Marsden, *The Soul of the American University Revisited*.

⁷⁶ David S. Dockery, “Toward a Future for Christian Higher Education: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future,” in *Re-Imagining Christian Higher Education* (Routledge, 2018); Morgan Lewing, “Conceptualizing Service-Learning in Christian Higher Education,” *Christian Higher Education* 17, no. 4 (August 8, 2018): 240–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2018.1462742>; Gregory T. Bish and John Lommel, “Enhancing Global Service-Learning with Partnerships as an Engagement Strategy for Christian Higher Education,” *Christian Higher Education* 15, no. 5 (October 19, 2016): 287–306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2016.1211970>; Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light*.

⁷⁷ Rodger K. Bufford et al., “National Collaborative Research on How Students Learn Integration: Final Report,” n.d., 10.

⁷⁸ “The way participants maintained informal connections with their mentors over the years also indicated the long-term impact of relational mentoring.” Shubert et al., “A Family Within a Community,” 337.

Naturally, the primary entity Christian higher education institutions will partner with will be the local Church.⁷⁹ Cloete argues that “in order to facilitate the use of mentoring as a supportive pedagogy in theological education, there must be an ongoing partnership between the church (denominations) and the (their) seminary of seminaries in all areas.”⁸⁰ This partnership provides an excellent opportunity for Christian Higher Education institutions to perform the essential university function of public service to their local churches.⁸¹

[Administrators must make] sure that quality mentoring is taking place in the first place. A major function of professional field educators at seminaries is to equip their on-site field education mentors with the fundamentals of how to mentor those preparing for ministry roles. We constantly hear statements from our on-site field education mentors concerning the ineffectiveness of their own field education experience when they were seminary students. While the art of mentoring is most often “caught” rather than “taught,” it is unfortunate that so many of the on-site field education mentors have never been on the receiving end of a healthy mentoring relationship. Now that these on-site field education mentors have the opportunity to create a positive internship experience for the next generation of leaders, the question needs to be asked if these mentors have a tangible knowledge of what a healthy mentoring relationship for ministerial formation looks like.⁸²

Institutions such as the Center for Church Multiplication at Asbury Theological Seminary are uniquely positioned to meet not only the needs of current students by providing excellent student field experiences, but also future students—by strengthening the discipleship culture of the church contexts from which many of them will originate. To paraphrase Proverbs 11:25—the

⁷⁹ “Seminaries must enter into partnership with churches regarding mentoring for the ministerial formation of seminary students. Seminaries should stimulate churches by supporting them wherever necessary. Churches should assist seminaries to move further in their theological endeavor by indicating to the seminaries what needs exist regarding ministerial formation.” Chiroma, “Mentoring and the Ministerial Formation of Seminary Students,” 64.

⁸⁰ Cloete and Chiroma, “Mentoring as a Supportive Pedagogy in Theological Training,” 6.

⁸¹ “The three missions of the modern university--teaching, research, and public service.” Philip G. Altbach, Liz Reisberg, and Laura E. Rumbley, *Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution* (BRILL, 2019), 131.

⁸² George M. Hillman et al., “Partnering for Formation in Ministry: A Descriptive Survey of On-Site Field Education Mentoring,” *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 29 (2009): 224, <https://journals.sfu.ca/rpfs/index.php/rpfs/article/view/238>.

generous administrator will prosper, and institutions that refresh others will themselves be refreshed.

Low “Cost” to Institutions

Despite the advantages of student success, increased brand strength, strengthened institutional partnerships, increasingly prohibitive costs, and organizational “bloat” are strong deterrents against new initiatives.⁸³ For this reason, it bears repeating that what is being proposed here is not a replacement but an adjustment to what already exists at many institutions. Specifically, one-on-one mentoring, coaching, counseling, discipleship, and spiritual formation efforts that are already available for students can be adjusted so as to be a mandatory student experience. Additionally, the expectation that discipleship is not merely a consumer experience but an expectant participation in the discipleship of others has the potential to significantly impact the participation of organization stakeholders in the Great Commission.⁸⁴

Challenges and Opportunities from Increasing Digital Pathways to Ministry Preparation

Higher education has recently seen significant changes resulting from developing technologies and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, leading to increased distance and online education. Still, “to one degree or another, the debate over using new technologies in learning has been raging since the time oral communication dominated learning. The skill of writing was

⁸³ “Trends College Pricing – College Board Research,” accessed July 6, 2024, <https://research.collegeboard.org/trends/college-pricing>; Barbara R. Bergmann, “Bloated Administration, Blighted Campuses,” *Academe* 77, no. 6 (1991): 12–16; J. David Johnson, *Administrative Bloat in Higher Education* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020).

⁸⁴ “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth; You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide...; So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?’ They went out of the town and were coming to him.” *ESV Study Bible*, 3 John 4; John 15:16; John 4:28-30.

once a new technology that many believed would be the death of true learning.”⁸⁵ This section will briefly introduce novel challenges and opportunities multiplicative discipleship presents to these increasingly digital pathways to ministry preparation.

Challenges

It must be admitted that the idea of purely online “discipleship” is anathema to some, and not without cause.⁸⁶ God himself models discipleship “in the flesh,” providing an example of taking great sacrifice to prioritize face-to-face interactions.⁸⁷ It must be admitted that several recognized challenges exist, including information overload, equivalence of expertise, democratization of information, and limited intimacy.⁸⁸ As significant as these challenges may be, the more subtle threats are personal and potentially life-threatening. Again, Barna’s study is helpful here: “Millennials’ technology habits have an impact on their social and emotional well-being. One example is that 49 percent of adults 18 to 30 years old acknowledge that their personal electronics separate them from other people, compared with 35 percent of all adults.”⁸⁹ This distance is compounded by the manipulative self-perception and distorted view of reality

⁸⁵ Chris Shirley, “Overcoming Digital Distance: The Challenge of Developing Relational Disciples in the Internet Age,” *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 14, no. 2 (November 2017): 384, <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131701400210>.

⁸⁶ Jeffrey Bilbro, “Online Content Runs from Good to Bad. The Bigger Danger Is Online Habits.,” ChristianityToday.com, November 21, 2023, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/november-web-only/digital-liturgies-samuel-james-online-social-media.html>.

⁸⁷ So Shirley: “Authentic community demands face-to-face interaction. Therefore, we must challenge ourselves to be in proximity with one another and make intentional choices to walk away from the electronic community and spend more time building relationships inside and outside the church.” Shirley, “Overcoming Digital Distance,” 388; Philippians 2:5-8 *ESV Study Bible*.

⁸⁸ Shirley, “Overcoming Digital Distance,” 385–87; Mark A. Maddix and James R. Estep, “Spiritual Formation in Online Higher Education Communities: Nurturing Spirituality in Christian Higher Education Online Degree Programs,” *Christian Education Journal* 7, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 433, <https://doi.org/10.1177/073989131000700212>.

⁸⁹ Barna Research Group and Navigators (Religious organization), *The State of Discipleship*, 82.

that technology challenges its consumers with; all too frequently to the point of despair and depression.⁹⁰ One technology writer provides a helpful contextualization when he states:

Technology distances us from others and can distance us from God too. But it shouldn't be this way.... Christ's supremacy over all things means that Christian flourishing does not hinge on my adoption or rejection of certain technologies. It hinges on my heart's focus on the Savior.... In the greatest challenges of our age, where will we turn? In life's greatest challenges, some will trust in chariots, some in horses, and some in search engines.⁹¹

Elsewhere, Reinke states, "In the tech age, we are still called to communion with God."⁹² While the challenges introduced by technology impact discipleship, their impact upon us is tangential to discipleship because their influence is internal and less explicit. However, as serious as the threats may be, claiming that purely "virtual" discipleship is illegitimate because it can be better in person might serve as a model example for an "appeal to purity" logical fallacy.⁹³ As a defeater of this position, the idea that very isolated persons are unable to participate in Christian discipleship, even if only achieving a fraction of the full potential of discipleship—for example, those in prison, such as a person in solitary confinement or even the Apostle Paul—is simply not accurate.⁹⁴ In fact,

⁹⁰ Haidt, *The Anxious Generation*.

⁹¹ Tony Reinke, *God, Technology, and the Christian Life* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2022), 109, 114, 110.

⁹² Reinke, 109.

⁹³ Often called a "No True Scotsman" fallacy. See: Robert Ian Anderson, "Is Flew's No True Scotsman Fallacy a True Fallacy? A Contextual Analysis," in *Modeling and Using Context*, ed. Patrick Brézillon, Roy Turner, and Carlo Penco, vol. 10257, Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 243–53, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-57837-8_19.

⁹⁴ Maddix and Estep typify this position. After proposing "online spiritual formation as a participatory endeavor in an online format that is supplemental, not a substitute, to a holistic approach to spiritual formation," he goes on to state that "while some may question the validity of online communities, they provide a context of untapped potential for Christian nurture wherein we may gather around the virtual table, with a common faith in Christ, and share with one another, creating a community that nurtures spiritual formation, and facilitates our growth in Christ and with one another." Maddix and Estep, "Spiritual Formation in Online Higher Education Communities," 433.

There are several instances of mentoring from a distance in the Bible. Paul accomplished most of them, but Luke also mentored Theophilus from a distance, sending him the story of Christ and the history of the Church. ... Circumstances in Paul's life were such that he could not always be present with those whom he mentored. Paul found a way around such limitations through his ability to influence his mentees through writing.⁹⁵

These biblical examples should cause administrators to hesitate to dismiss remote discipleship methods altogether.

It must be admitted that technology certainly has the potential to complicate the assessment of goals.⁹⁶ In addition to the subtle influences that technology and distance learning have the potential to exert upon participants,⁹⁷ the addition of additional modalities to an already complicated milieu of metrics can be impossibly frustrating to an administrator. One student attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of only one school with scientific precision and was obligated to confess that “while we have hope that there is a kind of implicit spiritual direction taking place in this heterogeneous cultural liturgy leading toward spiritual formation, it is difficult to quantify.”⁹⁸

Opportunities

Increasingly, student trends are less and less residential, and distance learning has provided additional hardships for students learning both in extension sites and through remote

⁹⁵ Chadwick, “Electronic Discipleship: A Mentoring Method Unbound by Walls or Distance,” 38.

⁹⁶ Still, there are reasons to be optimistic about leadership's ability to meaningfully assess progress toward discipleship goals. “As varied traditions enter this venture with care for the leadership their communities need, the differences among the traditions and their schools will appear in their definitions of what the graduates will be expected to have learned concerning (1) their knowledge of the Christian story; (2) their understanding of how this faith will be persuasively communicated or proclaimed in various contexts; (3) their competence to lead these communities with deep respect for their local knowledge; and (4) their identity as Christian disciples who are called to make disciples. Each of these kinds of ‘learning’ is subject to distinct measures.” Douglass Lewis and Lovett H. Weems, eds., *A Handbook for Seminary Presidents* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 2006), 68.

⁹⁷ For an excellent introduction to this topic, see: Dyer, *From the Garden to the City*.

⁹⁸ Brad D. and Hammer Strawn Miyong Yoon, “Spiritual Formation through Direction at Fuller Theological Seminary School of Psychology,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 32, no. 4 (2013): 5.

learning.⁹⁹ “As nontraditional education becomes more prevalent in the future, seminaries must strive to aid in connecting their off-campus students to mentoring opportunities. The best place to find these opportunities is in and through the local Church.”¹⁰⁰

The means by which higher education institutions might partner with the local Church are diverse, and studies indicate that the form of student discipleship has much less of an impact than the function. Consequentially, administrators have the freedom to deploy creative programs that are customized to the administration’s interests.¹⁰¹ One survey of the literature found that while

“more than sixty years of research [has] attempt[ed] to demonstrate that the latest media [is] better, the outcomes fail to support the superiority of any single delivery medium over another.... we have learned that it’s not the delivery medium, but rather the instructional methods that cause learning.”¹⁰²

Rather than devoting most of their efforts to crafting the “perfect” contextual discipleship program, studies have found that administrator’s time is better spent advocating for any mentoring process with students.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ “With the changing demographics of students who are working, married with children, engaged in a career, and live and work away from campus, the reality is that most students are not ‘residential.’ The campus is no longer the central place where students fill their lives with activities; thus their situation complicates the task of creating supportive campus-based, student communities.” Maddix and Estep, “Spiritual Formation in Online Higher Education Communities,” 424.

¹⁰⁰ Additionally, Dunlow goes on to suggest that: “Nontraditional education may help to further connect and strengthen the relationships between seminaries and local churches, as there will be greater dependence as some students move away from the brick and mortar choice for their seminary training.” Dunlow, “Perceptions of Spiritual Formation Among Nontraditional Seminary Students,” 28.

¹⁰¹ See for example, the myriad of options employed by Asbury Theological Seminary. “Discipleship Application – Small Groups, Banded, or Mentoring,” Asbury University, accessed July 7, 2024, <https://www.asbury.edu/life/spiritual-life/discipleship/>.

¹⁰² Chadwick, “Electronic Discipleship: A Mentoring Method Unbound by Walls or Distance,” 53–54; Another study finds minimal difference in the formality of the mentoring culture: “The results were similar for informal and formal categories of mentoring. These results indicate that positive Christian mentoring relationships have a similar impact to any mentoring program or curriculum.” Carter, “The Relationship Between Mentoring and Spiritual Formation of Adolescents,” 124.

¹⁰³ “Traditionally, it has been thought that the best mentoring comes about spontaneously, and thus the resistance to the forced mentoring process is understandable. However, based on the high percent (81%) that found the mentoring relationship helpful, it follows that some structure requiring the mentoring relationship to occur is

Practically speaking, completely online or remote education is a reality for at least a portion of students,¹⁰⁴ and discipleship experiences, even if less than ideal, are a vital part of the Christian formation process.¹⁰⁵ “Although there certainly are many different means by which mentorship can be accomplished, especially with the advancement of technology, it probably is best done in a face-to-face manner where the individuals are actually physically meeting together.”¹⁰⁶ Still, digital discipleship does have the potential to provide “meaningful and frequent” contact enabling “mentoring relationships to flourish despite great distances—both temporal and cultural.”¹⁰⁷

important. Under normal circumstances, 81% of students would not find themselves in mentoring relationships unless there is some help or promotion of the concept.” Elisabeth H. Selzer, “Effectiveness of a Seminary’s Training and Mentoring Program and Subsequent Job Satisfaction of Its Graduates,” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 17, no. 1 (May 13, 2008): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10656210801967309>; So also Taylor who observes that “spontaneous mentoring does not seem to happen frequently nor does it work very well. It must be planned and executed with intentionality. That is not to say that there will not be spontaneity involved. There most certainly will be surprises in the mentoring relationship and these will require flexibility. However, the spontaneity will happen in the context of an intentional planned process for mentoring.” Taylor, “Developing Adult Church Leaders through Mentoring at Bethel Baptist Church, Clinton, Tennessee,” 95–96; As an example of students engaging in counterintuitive ways, Kosch and others found in their study of four Ivy League universities that “the overall preferred communication channel is e-mail, directly followed by personal communication.” Kosch, Friedrich, and Breitner, “Evaluating Customer Relationship Management in the Context of Higher Education,” 48.

¹⁰⁴ For example, one community in Sitka, Alaska, required distance discipleship and found the purely digital experience quite beneficial for their community. Chadwick, “Electronic Discipleship: A Mentoring Method Unbound by Walls or Distance.”

¹⁰⁵ “Rather than a second choice or a substitute for face to face mentoring, distance mentoring today is a real choice: a broad and generic descriptor for mentoring relationships in which the partners are geographically separated.” Lois J. Zachary, *The Mentor’s Guide: Facilitating Effective Learning Relationships* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2013), 74.

¹⁰⁶ Shin, “Developing Biblical Leaders through the Teaching and Mentoring of a Seminary Professor,” 104; “Face-to-face conversations and body-to-body hospitality will remain virtues of the Christian life in the technological age. But technologies can also bridge spatial gaps and join us together in profound ways.” Reinke, *God, Technology, and the Christian Life*, 110.

¹⁰⁷ “One of the more recent opportunities to create meaningful and frequent contact occurs through the many technological advances available in the twenty-first century. This has shown itself all throughout education in areas such as online learning programs, which have been sweeping most major educational institutions across America. While there are some challenges, and even drawbacks, to online learning, this has been compensated for by the utilization of hybrid models where there is some time spent with the professor in person, as well as online. The strength of the online form is mainly in communication ease and accessibility. It goes beyond taking yet another class, but involves everything from offering more material online, to providing an opportunity to interact with fellow students in a cohort or group setup for peer mentoring and encouragement. This could literally occur with all parties

Conclusion

In conclusion, an understanding of discipleship that expects healthy disciples to engage in the discipleship of others—often described as “multiplicative”—will challenge and enrich aspiring Christian ministers, churches, and higher education institutions at very low financial cost. Despite contemporary changes in higher education modalities, challenges for administration leadership and oversight do not diminish the responsibility of leadership to pursue the most significant possible opportunity for constituent and stakeholder flourishing. “Theological educators must become aware of the power of mentoring and use it more effectively if seminaries are to be involved in truly transformative education which equips their students for leadership in the Church and in God’s mission.”¹⁰⁸

One significant 2016 Barna study on discipleship observed that “overall, there are no major structural barriers hindering participation in discipleship in the Church today. Rather, a lack of priority—on the part of Christians and of churches—has produced weak investment in

being spread out all around the world.” Shin, “Developing Biblical Leaders through the Teaching and Mentoring of a Seminary Professor,” 115; Zachary, *The Mentor’s Guide*, 38; As an aside, this conversation around the effectiveness of digital discipleship is largely removed from debates around digital vs localized information transferal, which has been largely settled. For a recent demonstration of this fact, see Lang: “Results from the study indicated no significant difference in the mission-related SAS scores between the online students and the students who took the general education courses F2F. This result is consistent with the conclusions of numerous studies that have found no significant differences in student learning outcomes in comparisons between F2F and courses offered at a distance.” Charlotte S. Lang et al., “Online or Face-to-Face: Do Mission-Related Student Learning Outcomes Differ?,” *Christian Higher Education* 18, no. 3 (May 27, 2019): 183, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2018.1460882>.

¹⁰⁸ Payne goes on to say that “‘It cannot be considered simply ‘an optional extra’ in the seminary curriculum.” Ian Payne, “Reproducing Leaders through Mentoring,” *Journal of Christian Education* 52, no. 2 (September 2009): 189, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002196570905200206>; So also, Cloete and Chiroma: “there is a clear obligation on the seminary, by the very nature of its theological stance, to assist in this growth process by providing mentors.” Cloete and Chiroma, “Mentoring as a Supportive Pedagogy in Theological Training,” 4; “It is imperative that theological seminaries reshape their ministerial training in order to accommodate the use of mentoring and its relational nature for the ministerial formation of seminary students.” Chiroma, “Mentoring and the Ministerial Formation of Seminary Students,” 66.

spiritual growth.”¹⁰⁹ These adjustments are largely low-cost, financially speaking, yet have the potential to challenge student values and alter lifestyles forever—a concise description of what was once the classic aim of higher education.

Transformational learning changes people for a lifetime. The goal of the transformative learning process in college is that students emerge with a powerful combination of knowledge, skills, and commitment; that they see the work that needs to be done, the contributions that need to be made, the things in the world that need to be changed; that they have the capacities and the confidence needed to contribute to those changes; and that they have a sense of both agency and urgency.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Elsewhere, the report observes: “All audiences interviewed—Christian adults, church leaders, exemplars and educators—agree on the most significant barrier to spiritual growth: the general ‘busyness’ of life. However, church leaders and Christian adults disagree substantially on the magnitude of this barrier. Specifically, 85 percent of church leaders say busyness is a major obstacle to discipleship, while only 22 percent of practicing Christians say the same.” Barna Research Group and Navigators (Religious organization), *The State of Discipleship*, 59, 56.

¹¹⁰ Charity Johansson, *Transforming Students: Fulfilling the Promise of Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 6.

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