

# Scenario planning

## The power of story to rehearse your future

### 2030: Five big questions for seminary leaders

Here are five big questions. The answer to each question can shape where a seminary will be in 10 years. Take a moment, review each question, then choose. Which question does your institution need to answer well if you are to meet the challenges and opportunities you will face between now and 2030?

1. *Vision*. What compelling mission-driven vision will allow the seminary to thrive over the next decade?
2. *Long-range strategic initiatives*. Over the long term, what strategic initiatives will most effectively utilize the seminary's people, programs, and resources?
3. *Key strategic idea*. What degree of certainty can the seminary have regarding its plans to implement a new, key strategic project over the next five years?
4. *Culture of collaborative engagement*. How can seminary leadership foster a culture of collaboration that engages leaders inside and outside the institution to forecast, plan, and perform?
5. *Exploring new paradigms — getting unstuck*. What means can you use to break free from your business-as-usual mindset and examine new paradigms that enable the seminary to serve a changing world?

What have you chosen? Which question is it most important for you to ask and answer?

### The board's responsibility to cast vision and establish plans

It is the role of the board of directors to ask and answer such questions. Resourced by institutional leaders, the board must monitor the mission, cast vision, and establish long-range plans for the seminary. In so doing, board members answer their call to be stewards of the ministry's purpose, its people, its resources, and its programmatic effectiveness.

The board's future focus complements and guides the role of the seminary president and leadership team as they fashion, resource, implement, and execute annual operational plans that achieve the board-adopted strategic goals.

Yet the seminary board's duty to lean forward and look ahead is often sidetracked by systemic tendencies and practices that draw the board's attention from the future. Instead, boards often concentrate on the present and the past. The following conditions and obstacles too often obscure a board's focus on the future.

- **Tendency to become complacent caretakers.** Boards may become complacent caretakers due to long-term success, a strong long-term president, a pass-through board culture, a lack of vision, or a dependence on staff.
- **Tyranny of the present.** Boards may not look to the future because they are tempted to manage the present. Often staff interests and reporting activity keep the board focused on today.
- **Pace of change.** Boards may become overwhelmed with the pace of constant change in today's culture. They scramble to keep up with today and without making time for tomorrow.
- **Culture of reflection and preservation of the canon.** Seminary boards operate within a unique institutional culture thoughtfully devoted to the canon. This cultural commitment to conserve and reflect may inadvertently diminish the institution's capacity to explore new opportunities and paradigms.

Amid these board tendencies and institutional temptations, how may the board of directors take the necessary measures to foster a culture of candid collaboration that yields a healthy cycle of planning and execution? Is there a way to take the deep thinking that permeates the seminary and translate it into disciplined action?

### **A means to encourage and enable future focus**

The primary purpose of scenario planning is to allow an organization's leaders to examine and explore the five questions at the top of this article. Scenario planning emerged in the 1970s. Since then, corporate leaders have found the process and product of scenario planning to be an effective way to suspend disbelief and try on new futures. Peter Schwartz's *The Art of the Long View* has become a standard in the field, and Thomas Chermack's *Scenario Planning in Organizations* provides a practical overview. Though scenario thinking and practice is now prevalent in for-profit corporations, it is underutilized in nonprofit corporations. For a particular focus on nonprofit's see Diana Scearce and Katherine Fulton's *What If? The Art of Scenario Thinking for Nonprofits*.

The Scenario Planning Process may hold the key for institutions that are open to change, welcome dialog, and enjoy leadership that does not blindly defend the status quo.

Organizations change. Yet organizations are naturally resistant to change. Peter Schwartz writes that scenario planning capitalizes on the power of story to lower our defenses, "question our belief in the inevitability of more of the same," and "challenge the official future." And Thomas Chermack reminds us that scenario planning enables us to assess and improve strategy, culture, structure, and resources. Scenario planning helps an organization's leaders break the habit, ingrained in corporate planning, of assuming that the future will look much like the present.

Scenarios are sets of multiple stories that capture a range of future possibilities, good and bad, expected and surprising. They are designed to stretch our thinking about the opportunities and threats the future might hold and to weigh them appropriately when we make both short-term and long-term strategic decisions.

Scenarios are not intended to be predictive. They are intended to be provocative, plausible stories about the diverse ways our organizations might evolve in light of external forces and internal decisions.

## Scenario planning process and product

Scenario planning is as much about the process as it is about the product. The process affects organizational culture, the product shapes organizational planning. Here is an overview and a brief, practical description of its four stages.



Figure 1: The Four Stages of Scenario Planning Process

### First stage: ORGANIZE & FOCUS

The first stage of the scenario planning process is essential for overall success. It is critical that the president and key board and institutional leaders support the project and be engaged in it.

- Appoint scenario planning facilitator (inside or third party)
- Conduct preliminary interviews with key leaders to determine need and purpose
- Establish team membership (including external voices)
- Set timeline
- Choose and communicate purpose and process (see the five questions at the top of this article)

### Second stage: EXAMINE & PRIORITIZE

The second stage focuses on the strategic purpose of the process and the identification and prioritization of an array internal and external driving forces that may impact a chosen purpose.

- Conduct workshop/retreat focused on internal and external analyses
- Identify driving forces — predetermined elements and critical uncertainties
- Examine internal environment
  - SWOT. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats.
  - CCCCPR. Constituencies, clientele, communities, competitors, partners, regulators
- Examine external macro-environment
  - **STEEPR.** Social/demographic, technological, economic, educational, political, religious
  - **Driving forces.**
    - ◆ Disruptive technologies
    - ◆ Rise of the nones
    - ◆ Deferred maintenance
    - ◆ Political turmoil
    - ◆ Post-Christian culture
    - ◆ Accreditation intrusion
    - ◆ Modest reserves
    - ◆ Student debt
    - ◆ Economic recession
    - ◆ Online competitors
    - ◆ Rise of urban centers
    - ◆ Cost to scale
    - ◆ Government regulation
    - ◆ Economic disparity
    - ◆ Globalization
    - ◆ Individualism
    - ◆ Invitation to merge
    - ◆ Syncretism
- Select key two driving forces
  - Rank forces by importance and impact
  - Rank forces by critical uncertainty
  - Create XY axis of uncertainty and importance (See Figure 2)

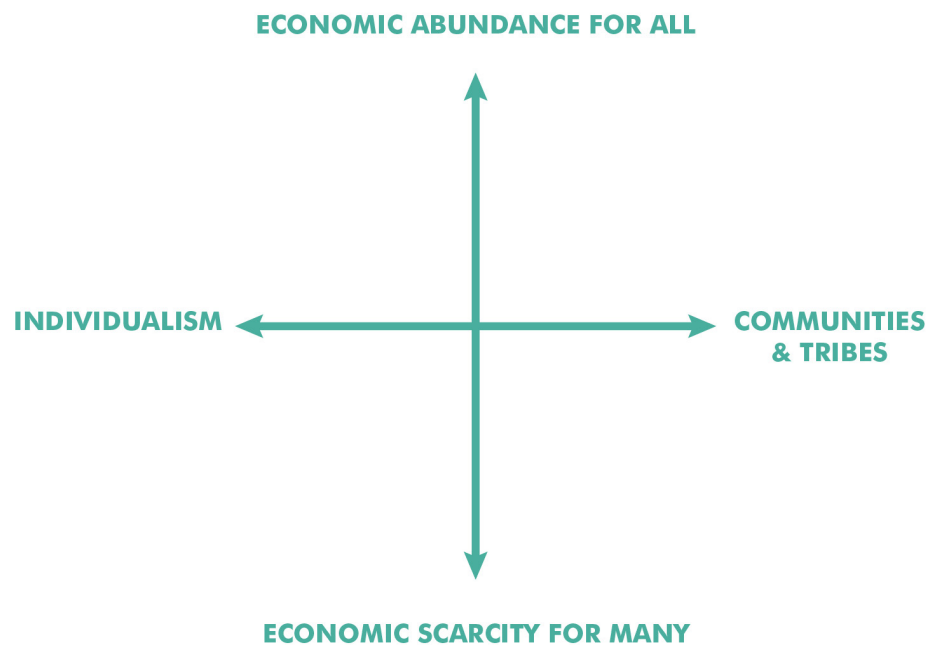


Figure 2: Driving Forces Matrix

### Third stage: PLOT & CREATE

Choose writers, develop plot lines, and write four scenario narratives

Design the stage four scenario experience

- Craft scenario plots
  - Select four compelling titles (See Figure 3)
- Write four scenarios, including plausible wild-card developments
- Create the scenario experience to engage leaders in four futures in which they must test the scenario purpose.

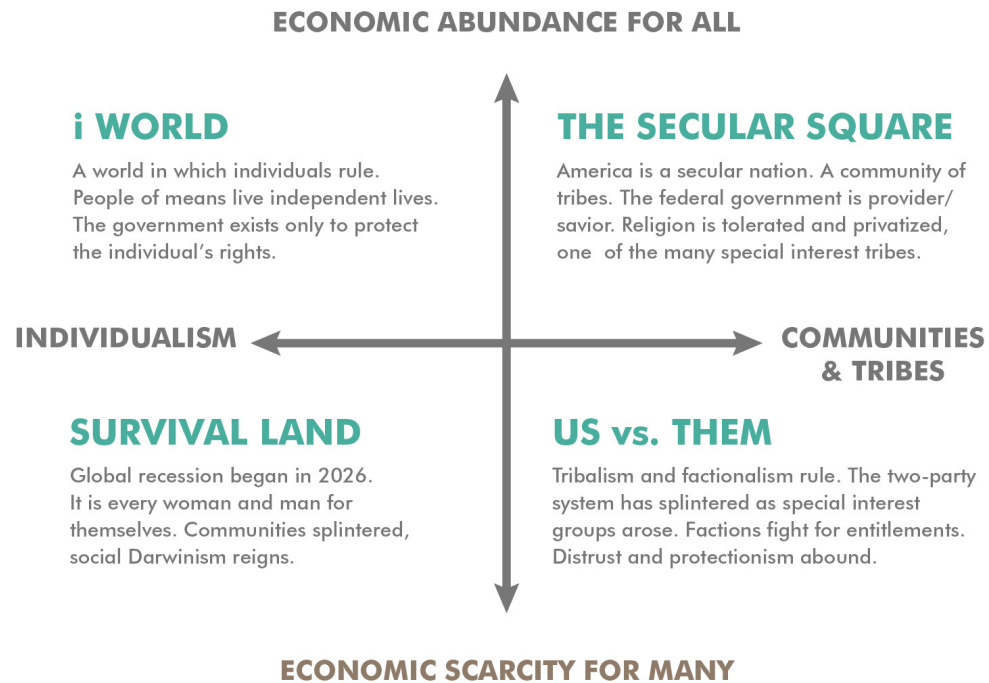


Figure 3: Driving Forces Matrix with Scenario Titles & Plot Synopses

### Fourth stage: ASSESS & MONITOR

Assemble key leaders, create presentation experiences that utilize the power of story to examine imagined futures. Test their impact on the strategic purpose. Determine if you need to amend strategy, what actions should you take, and what will trigger that action.

- Conduct second workshop/retreat
  - Expanded leadership circle in attendance
  - Unveil the four scenario narratives
- Examine purpose, test strategies within the context of the four imagined futures
  - Engage participants to assess options in imagined futures, not the "official future"
- Identify leading indicators that may affect strategic purpose
  - Create trigger points
  - Monitor metrics & maxims
  - Take action when appropriate

## Scenario planning: The power of story to rehearse your future

Seminaries face multiple challenges:

- How to revision programs to attract a new generation of seminarians
- How to balance the worlds of on-campus and online
- How to streamline operations and reduce spending

Seminary boards must stand alongside their president and focus on the future. Scenario planning is a means by which seminary leaders can engage administrators, faculty leaders and key constituents in scenario-based conversations to explore viable options for tomorrow.

*“Scenarios enable new ideas about the future to take root and spread across an organization, helping to overcome the inertia and denial that can so easily make the future a dangerous place.”*

— Eamonn Kelly, CEO, Global Business Network

Remember the five big questions for seminary leaders? Which question must you address? When you are ready, consider using the scenario planning process to create and test your answer.

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