

From Mojadi to Mafikeng: notes on the newfound Department of Theology

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Abstract

In January 2011 an event of church historical significance took place when the new Department of Theology opened its doors on the Mafikeng campus of North-West University. Forming part of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences, this department is delivering theological training to students in and from an African context.

Now operational for a year, this article will document and narrate its founding and historical path, from humble beginnings as a mission project in Mareetsane to its current status as the Department of Theology at a recognised university.

The article also conveys the current narrative for the department by providing biographical information of students and reflecting on the content of curricula.

By means of deduction, the research also identifies some of the opportunities and challenges awaiting this new department, creating a framework for further critical reflection on theological training in an African context.

Aim and method

The aim of this article is threefold. Firstly, it wants to document the founding of the Department of Theology on the Mafikeng campus of North-West University. Secondly, it wants to present the current state of affairs by offering a biographical “snapshot” of the department. Thirdly, some of the challenges and opportunities awaiting this new department will be discussed. The research aims to create a framework for further critical reflection on the issue of theological training in an African context.

In terms of method, the research mainly relies on the historical and current narratives of the institution under discussion. The historical narrative will be conveyed by Professor Sarel van der Merwe, who was a founder member of the College ya Mojadi, which was the theological college from which the current department grew.

The current narrative will be conveyed by Professor Alfred Brunsdon by means of observations on the current situation of the department. Statistical information was collected from the 2012 records of the department. Information regarding curricula was obtained from study material prescribed for students and biographical information of undergraduate students was obtained by means of a questionnaire (see appendix A) which was completed by 26 students. This provided a “snapshot” of the department from which certain information regarding the context of the department was deduced.

In the light of these narratives some of the challenges and opportunities awaiting this new department could be identified. We trust that these observations can contribute to the larger debate on theological training in an African context.

From Mojadi to Mafikeng: the historical narrative of the Department of Theology on the Mafikeng campus (Van der Merwe)

In 1973 the Gereformeerde Gemeenten¹ got involved with mission work among the Tswana-speaking people in the Ditsobotla district situated in Northwest province. Formerly a mission project of the Reformed Church of Sannieshof, the Gereformeerde Gemeenten expanded this work by building an evangelist training school in Batho-Batho Stad (Mareetsane) for the training of evangelists. They followed a comprehensive approach which would also focus on the establishment of agricultural activities in the local community. To accomplish this, Reverend H Huisma was sent as missionary, Mr H Minderhout as agricultural expert and Mr J Commelin as assistant to Reverend Huisma. This training centre became known as the Sekolo sa Mojadi² (Ouweland 1995:15).

¹ “Gereformeerde Gemeenten” refers to a fundamentalistic branch of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands which was established in 1907. Their church headquarters are situated in Woerden. <http://www.gereformeerden.nl/index.php/geschiedenis> (30 January 2013).

² A Tswana expression meaning “School of the Sower”.

The task of Reverend Huisma was twofold. He was responsible for equipping evangelists for congregational work, but also serving local congregations by administering sacraments in the different local congregations and their wards. Reverend Huisma did not become immersed in the local culture, because the evangelist acted as interpreter between the missionary and the local people. As the evangelist's training progressed, they started serving congregations during the weekend.

The establishment of the Sekolo sa Mojadi reaped great rewards as it was instrumental in furthering the church in this area. It placed trained evangelists at strategic places who carried all the responsibilities of an ordained minister, except for having permission to administer the sacraments. As the evangelists were sponsored by the mission organisations from the Netherlands they were to adhere in training and the practice of their ministry to that of the Gereformeerde Gemeenten. At this stage, no proper consideration was given to the local context.

Congregations that came into being from this mission work cooperated with the Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA). They became part of the classis (circuit) of the black congregations of the RCSA which formed the Synod Midlands.³ From the beginning, it was however evident that the Gereformeerde Gemeenten wanted evangelists to retain a conservative character. A perceived fear of "liberal tendencies" in the RCSA created some distance between themselves and the RCSA (see GKSA 1979:187). Although ministers of the RCSA were invited to assist with training at the Sekolo sa Mojadi, they were not allowed to teach Dogmatics or convey any doctrine.

During the mid-1980s, a need for more trained ministers in this area became evident. At the same time the Gereformeerde Gemeenten started to scale down their involvement, leaving the leadership of local churches to the local evangelists. They were, however, unwilling to have future ministers trained at the theological seminary of the RCSA in Hammanskraal. They instead requested permission from the Synod Midlands to train the evangelists further to become ministers as the synod had to legitimise theological candidates in order to be ordained as ministers. Deliberation over more than two years ensued before the Synod granted permission for the further training of evangelists towards receiving a candidate's certificate from the Sekolo sa Mojadi – training which could only proceed under the supervision of curators appointed by the Synod Midlands (Synod Midlands 1987:45). The main gap in this approach was that ministers would still be without a higher education qualification (degree). The general notion at the RCSA Synod at the time was that training any less than seven years, leading to at least a B degree, was insufficient qualification towards ordination as a minister. The derogatory term "*kort broek*"⁴ was used to refer to this category of minister.

Further training for evangelists seeking ordination started in 1987 at the Sekolo sa Mojadi, which meant another four years of study (Sekolo sa Mojadi 1987:5). Only evangelists in good standing were allowed to follow this route. In effect, this replaced the original training of evangelists since no further candidates applied for training as evangelists. It now also became evident that an academic degree would be the only lasting solution to finding recognised ministers to place in the field.

The further training of evangelists was facilitated for two or three days per week so that the ministries of evangelists could continue uninterrupted. This led to a valuable interaction between practice and theory. Further training relied heavily on typical western theology based on the Kuyperian *Encyclopedia*. Much emphasis was also laid on the Old and New Testaments as well as on systematic theology to ensure exegetical and expository skills. Typical African problems were ignored in the official curriculum, but were attended to in the classroom.

The first legitimate ministers at the end of 1990 were PM Lekgetho, MJ Rasenyalo, PD Dlhamini and TG Mahure (Synod Midlands 1991:51).

Owing to the democratic changes as well as funding issues, the seminary at Hammanskraal was integrated with the theological seminary of the RCSA in Potchefstroom in 1995⁵ (GKSA 1994:704). As a result, all the students and lecturers from Hammanskraal migrated to Potchefstroom. Although this move made sense within the current political framework, it also brought new challenges for students wanting to study theology. In fact, many candidates who would qualify for enrolment at the former Hammanskraal seminary were now excluded from university studies because of admission requirement issues. In this regard, the Sekolo sa Mojadi filled a significant void. At the same time, however, the Sekolo sa Mojadi was now seen by some as an alternative form of "apartheid training" within the new dispensation.

This negative perception, along with the historical deficit of the "*kort broek*" legacy, created a stronger motivation for an academic degree at Sekolo sa Mojadi. The material presented as further studies for evangelists was the same as that used at Potchefstroom. At the same time, the Faculty of Theology of Potchefstroom

³ Synod of black congregations of the Reformed Churches in South Africa that combined with the Afrikaans National Synod to form the General Synod of the Reformed Churches in South Africa.

⁴ A term which originated from the notion that the training of evangelists was inadequate.

⁵ During the same period, other separate training facilities for black ministers, like that of the Dutch Reformed Church's Stofberg Seminary, also closed down. These separate training facilities were a typical product of the policy of apartheid and were in general perceived as training of inferior quality.

University was looking at ways to collaborate with colleges in the reformed tradition who were interested in presenting their degree studies on their campuses.

The Faculty of Theology and a few colleges⁶ engaged in discussions on accreditation to enable colleges to deliver the programmes of the faculty on their own premises. This led to Sekolo sa Mojadi personnel becoming accredited in the late 1990s and delivery of the programmes of the faculty. As a result of the agreement the Sekolo sa Mojadi became the College ya Mojadi⁷ and also the first college to present a degree programme of Potchefstroom University. This agreement represented a breakthrough for both parties. At last the College ya Mojadi could be seen as a reputable training facility, able to facilitate an acknowledged degree. At the same time the faculty in Potchefstroom showed an increase in student numbers, as students studying at colleges were still administratively registered on the Potchefstroom campus. The faculty was also able to carry the torch of Reformed Theology outside of Potchefstroom to colleges in the rural areas.

Soon after this historical development practical issues came to prevail, which brought the contextual needs of the colleges to the fore. The programme the faculty offered at the time did not fully comply with the needs of students enrolled at the college. The faculty's programme was a seven-year programme aimed mainly at preparing students for ministry within the RCSA. The college focused more in the direction of a three-year bachelor's degree, providing an overview of the content of theology with a working knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. As a result the faculty and colleges collaborated to develop a BA Theology degree. The aim of this degree was to assist colleges from different church traditions within a reformed framework to obtain an academic degree in such a way that students were still trained in each college's own church tradition. This resulted in a degree which provided an overview of the Old and New Testament, Practical Theology, Missiology and Ecclesiology. As such this qualification was still built on the Kuyperian *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* (see GKSA, 1988:416). It unfortunately represented a voluminous curriculum which at best gave students a very broad overview of the necessary content.

The colleges presenting the Potchefstroom degree now also fell under the supervision of the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA), which required the same academic standards for universities aligning their degrees with the National Qualification Framework. This eventually led to the phasing out of the BA Theology degree and the introduction of a BTh degree. This BTh was an improvement on the BA Theology degree as it provided a wide variety of elective modules to better suit the context of different colleges.

From 1999, the Gereformeerde Gemeenten further rationalised its financial aid to the college. This led the College ya Mojadi to open its doors for candidates from all denominations in order to attract more students. Students who did not qualify for university studies started to apply for admission to the college. The college awarded these students a conditional exemption which enabled them to eventually obtain a degree (Minutes of the Board of the College ya Mojadi 2000). A few students who enrolled for the diploma⁸ of the college, which was given BA status by the Faculty of Theology, eventually completed a BA Honours in Theology at North-West University.

Offering a service to a broader denominational audience led to the idea of moving the college to Mafikeng, making the services of the college accessible to more students. This idea was strengthened by the perception that the College ya Mojadi in Mareetsane represented a "boer church". A move to Mafikeng would be a strategic move to make the geographical location of the learning facility more accessible.

After a merger⁹ which resulted in the current North-West University, the Dean of the Faculty of Theology, Professor A le R du Plooy, started negotiations to introduce a department of theology at the Mafikeng campus. As the College ya Mojadi was strategically placed and already teaching the programmes of the faculty, it became a logical partner in this process. In 2006, Professor SJ van der Merwe was appointed at the Potchefstroom campus with the task of starting a department of theology at the Mafikeng campus.

After discussions with the management team of the Mafikeng campus, and the fact that the Rector, Professor D Kgwadi, was keen to assist in this project, an agreement was reached which accommodated the teaching of theology on the campus (Agreement 2006). The year 2007 was a bridging year in which most of the previous students of the college started attending classes on the Mafikeng campus. The programme was also advertised and marketed that year and in 2008 the first students from Mafikeng and surrounding areas enrolled for the programme. At this time, students were still (administratively) registering on the Potchefstroom campus. In these early stages of presenting the programmes in theology, Professor SJ van der Merwe was the only full-time academic.

From 2010 serious consideration was given to establish a department of theology under the auspices of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences (HSS minutes of the Faculty Board, 2010). Also from 2010 several

⁶ These included Mukhanyo Christian Academy, The Bible Institute of Cape Town, The Baptist Bible College and so on.

⁷ A Tswana expression meaning "College of the Sower".

⁸ Although the content of the diploma and the degree was the same, the diploma was not accredited.

⁹ The current North-West University is the result of a merger between the former University of North-West and Potchefstroom University of Christian Higher Education in 2004. Part of this merger was the Vista University in Sebokeng. North-West University refers to three campuses, namely Mafikeng, Potchefstroom, and Vaal Triangle in Vanderbijlpark (Gauteng).

part-time lecturers (Dr AR Brunson, Prof W Vergeer and Dr J Wessels) started to assist Professor Van der Merwe with the facilitation of different modules.

A highlight of 2010 was that the first students¹⁰ that received theological training on the Mafikeng campus obtained their BTh degree and BA Honours degree.

In January 2011 the new Department of Theology finally came into being on the Mafikeng campus to be fully functional within the structures and management of the campus. Professor SJ van der Merwe was transferred from the Potchefstroom campus to the Mafikeng campus to act as coordinator of this department. The positions of associate professor and senior lecturer were made available and from January 2012 Professor AR Brunson and Dr JJ Knoetze were appointed as full-time staff members. Dr J Wessels continued his services as a part-time lecturer.

Since then the department has been offering comprehensive theological training from undergraduate to postgraduate (doctoral) level.

The current narrative of the Department of Theology on the Mafikeng campus (Brunson)

In order to construct a current narrative of the department, closer consideration was given to the location, statistical records, students, as well as some of the study material currently being presented. All of 26 undergraduate students participated in this part of the research by providing some autobiographical information through the completion of a simple questionnaire. There are also some observations on postgraduate students to further enhance the current narrative.

Contextual aspects

- General information

The Mafikeng campus is located in the capital city of North-West province bearing the same name. Geographically the campus is strategically situated for students from the rural areas of North-West and Northern Cape provinces as well as the adjacent Botswana. Being close to Botswana, an off-campus learning centre for students registered on the Mafikeng campus, but residing in Botswana, forms part of the department's target market. The programme in Gaborone (Kgolagano College) is facilitated by lecturers financially supported by churches and missionary organisations. As the students at Kgolagano are registered on the Mafikeng campus, they form part of the statistics for the Mafikeng campus.

Although most registered students are Tswana speakers, lectures are in English, as are the study guides provided. Students share in the same infrastructure and facilities as the other students on campus, which include a library, computer laboratory and a host of student development services.

- Statistics

During 2012 a total of 91 students were enrolled. This number can be broken down into 51 students who enrolled for the BTh programme, 24 who were registered for the honours programme, 14 for the master's degree and 2 for a PhD.

In terms of gender, 63 (54 on the Mafikeng campus and 9 at Kgolagano) students are male and 28 students are female (19 on the Mafikeng campus and 9 at Kgolagano).

In terms of race, only 3 of these students are white and Afrikaans-speaking (making the cultural context of the department a predominantly indigenous African one).

From the questionnaires completed by students from the undergraduate group, the following important contextual information came to the fore.

- Age

The average age of respondents is 48 years. The youngest respondent is 19 and the oldest 62.

- Church affiliation

The respondents do not represent a homogeneous group in terms of church affiliation. The following denominations are represented (with the number belonging to each in brackets): Methodist Church (5), Zion Christian Church (1), Independent Churches/groups/ministries (5), Baptist Church (4), Dutch Reformed Church

¹⁰ TE Makhetha and PO Marumo obtained the BTh. PM Konzane, KJ Mekoa, TH Morubane and SS Nongwane obtained BA Honours in Theology.

in Africa (5), Anglican Church (1), Apostolic Faith Mission (1), Assemblies of God (1), Seventh Day Adventist (1), Dutch Reformed Church (1), Reformed Church of South Africa (1).

- Socioeconomic factors

Of the 26 respondents 6 are unemployed, 3 are pensioners, 4 are part-time employees at their church denominations and 13 are employed (mostly at governmental institutions).

Some of the students have to travel as far as 70 kilometres (140 km return journey) to attend the evening classes, relying on public transport or hitchhiking. The majority of students, however, indicated that they had their own transport and lived within a reasonable distance from the campus.

Financing of studies seems to be done from a student's own funds (9), and bursaries and loans (5), while nearly half of the respondents rely solely on family members (parents, spouses and children) to pay for their tuition. Two respondents indicated that they try to meet their financial obligations by keeping part-time jobs ("piece jobs").

Fifty percent of the respondents either own or have access to personal computers, but not to the internet, while the remaining half have access to neither.

A noteworthy aspect of the department's student core is the fact that the majority of the students are part of the province's workforce, resulting in classes facilitated after hours (i.e. from 17:00 to 20:00 during week nights).

- Involvement in local churches

While 18 of the respondents indicated that they are actively serving their local congregation, some as full-time pastors, 8 indicated no involvement whatsoever.

- Motivation for studying theology/sense of calling

Most respondents seem to have the clear goal of becoming full-time pastors in their respective denominations (21) even though the great majority of churches, of which the female students are members, do not yet ordain women. Three of the respondents indicated that they see their studies as equipment for becoming counsellors and 2 for personal reasons (i.e. "love of God" and getting an "in-depth knowledge of the Word of God").

Contents of learning material

The following observations regarding some of the policies steering the teaching process and learning material create a clearer picture of the current narrative.

- Policy matters

At the outset we are reminded that North-West University is an amalgamated institution conducting its core business of teaching and learning and research on three campuses. While each of these campuses takes pride in its own identity, they also have some things in common, especially concerning the same programmes being presented on different campuses. These programmes form part of the "aligned programmes", meaning that they are meant to be the same in content and outcome. Simply stated, the degree certificates awarded in each of these aligned programmes should all carry the same weight for all the graduates who received them, irrespective of the campus where the programme was completed and the degree awarded. This makes quality assurance more effective, among other things. The BTh degree offered by the department forms part of this alignment. The programme was designed primarily to equip students for ministry in the RCSA. By implication it is structured Biblically and strictly according to Reformed Theology, relying heavily on western tradition.

- Study material

Here reference is made to a first- and a third-year module from the BTh programme, namely Pastoral Care 121 and 311. Pastoral Care 121 is a first-year module aimed at creating a foundational framework for developing pastoral abilities, while the 311 module (a third-year module) covers specific situations ministers would typically face in pastoral activity within their congregations.

The Pastoral Care 121 module reveals that the aim of its 13 study units is to introduce students to the subject field of practical theology, Biblical counselling and its relationship to psychology as well as providing a Biblical/theological framework for the pastoral process. The last five study units are dedicated to personal areas for the pastor in the conduct of pastoral care.

The Pastoral Care 311 module is all about the specifics of pastoral care, covering stimulating and interesting topics like marriage and family counselling, counselling of the ill and the depressed. The reading material supporting the topics mentioned is mainly from writings of American authors like Jay E Adams, Leonard Bowman and Howard Stone.¹¹

Keeping in mind that many students will only have completed the BTh degree upon entering the ministry, this frame of reference is supposed to support all of their pastoral endeavours.

Postgraduate studies at the department

The current narrative would be incomplete without a few observations on the postgraduate programmes. As can be seen from the breakdown of the numbers of enrolled students, the department maintains a good balance between undergraduate and postgraduate students, with the honours programme attracting positive engagement. To a large extent, the issue of an incomplete frame of reference, raised when evaluating undergraduate curricula, is addressed at postgraduate level. Here students are introduced to a broader frame of reference within the respective disciplines. It seems, at this early stage, that the department has the potential to retain a good number of students who completed their honours degree as most of the current masters and doctoral students are products of previous engagements with the College ya Mojadi.

Undoubtedly the most positive thing about the postgraduate programme is the research projects embarked on by students, who are entering exciting fields of research in the African context. Investigating typical African contextual¹² issues, we are positive that over time the department will contribute extensively to the building of a “theology for Africa” – which is currently lacking in substance (see Msomi 2008).

Opportunities and challenges (Brunsdon)

In the light of the historical and current narratives of the Department of Theology on the Mafikeng campus, a number of opportunities and challenges can be identified.

Opportunities

- Theological training for the outposts

Being located in Mafikeng, the department is strategically placed to provide theological training to people in this remote corner of South Africa. For the first time in local history, students in this gateway to Africa gained access to theological training at university level, opening up opportunities for those without the means to study in other parts of the country. This also means entering a previously untapped market for people wanting to serve the church.

- Partnerships for theological training in other areas

The department also has the opportunity to seek partnerships for the facilitation of theological training outside Mafikeng. The partnership with Kgolagano in Botswana serves as an example of a developing partnership from which much is learnt in terms of partnerships for training. As an institution which grew from partnership between the Netherlands and South Africa, we are constantly reminded of the value of exploring partnerships. The exploration of delivery points for theological training outside of Mafikeng is therefore high on the agenda of this department.

- Interdisciplinary partnerships

Partnerships are also contemplated in terms of interdisciplinary ventures with other departments at the Mafikeng campus. Good possibilities exist for joint ventures with the Department of Social Work and Population Studies as there is definable mutual ground between ourselves and them.

- Reformed Theology for all

¹¹ Taken from the index of the study guide used in Pastoral Care 311, a third-year module.

¹² Some of the studies recently completed by honours students included topics like a pastoral approach to recidivism in a local jail (Choabi 2011), the responses of African women of a local Roman Catholic Church on being excluded from church office (Mojaki 2012) and the influence of the “midlife crisis” on marriage from an African perspective (Nchoe 2012). All these studies had in common that they investigated certain phenomena within an African setting, providing valuable leads for further exploration and the possible development of an African theology.

Another opportunity emanating from the current narrative is the non-denominational status of the department. This department therefore needs to be distinguished from other theological training facilities which exist for the training of ministers for specific denominations (see Wepener 2011). It must also be distinguished from a department of religious studies which busies itself with the studies of religions as a phenomenon. The department is not in the service of a specific denomination. It can rather be regarded as an open institution, which offers theological degree studies from undergraduate to postgraduate level. Owing to alignment with the departments of theology of Potchefstroom and the Vaal campus, the department is firmly rooted in Reformed Theology. This puts the department in a position to reach students from a variety of denominations and church affiliations with a Reformed Theology, creating the opportunity to introduce a grounded Biblical theology to churches not yet exposed to sound theology.

- Community engagement

The department is also positioned for positive community engagement and is already working towards moral regeneration of the society with local participants. Part of the ethos of North-West University is active service to the community. The department is therefore actively engaged with local churches in the facilitation of the theological enrichment of the *pastors loci*. The development of short courses to equip pastors and church leaders is therefore also a priority.

- Contextualisation

Arguably the biggest opportunity for this newfound department of theology, however, is to adapt its training to the African context. We deliberately choose to see this as an opportunity instead of a challenge as we deem it unique among all the other opportunities mentioned.

From the historical narrative, it is clear that the current department grew from a venture which was intended to serve the church in Africa. The current narrative also confirmed that this department is indeed serving the African context, because nearly all students registered are African and want to equip themselves for service in the African church. It also became clear that as yet no attention has been given to the development of a curriculum that would better suit the needs of the African context. As the current narrative showed, the programmes on offer are of purely western origin.

While it is true that all the energy available thus far was needed to establish a theological training facility in this area, it is also fair to say that the time has now come to start directing energy towards a process of contextualisation in order to serve the context better. We cannot uncritically accept that curricula of western origin are suited to Africa (see De Jongh van Arkel 1995:1). In fact, more and more concerns are raised that, as far as theological training goes, serious attention must be given to a contextualised training in order to meet the needs of the African context (see Yemba 1997; Buffel 2006).

To our minds, contextualisation in this framework refers to the process through which the content is critically evaluated in the light of the context and that we embark on a process of aligning the two. As such we believe that contextualisation encompasses more than a mere process of **Africanisation**, which is also used in this regard (see Louw 2010) but which carries in itself a sense of African exclusivity.

Contextualisation, as we view it, needs to result in training towards making the department's students effective in Africa and beyond.

Challenges

- Students' socioeconomic circumstances

From the current narrative, it was evident that the socioeconomic backgrounds of some of the students were less than favourable. Although lack of means is a common problem among students, it is particularly real for students of this department. It is especially disturbing to observe when promising students cannot return for a second or third year, due to lack of funds.

Not having access to, or owning, a personal computer also denies many of the students the privileges of the academic development programmes available on campus, and in fact seriously hampers their academic development.

In many cases, it is only through the gestures of ubuntu from family and friends that they are able to pursue their studies. We are subsequently faced with the challenge of making theological studies financially more accessible to those wanting to heed the call.

- Accommodating schooling deficits

Another real challenge facing training at this department is to accommodate candidates suffering academic deficits due to poor schooling. Of great concern is the number of applicants who want to study theology but do not meet the admission requirements (admission to the BTh programme currently requires an APS score of 24). As this seems a general problem, North-West University introduced **Uniprep**, which denotes a university preparation programme to make admission possible. Although theology students in this programme earn credits for completing some of the modules, this programme still lengthens the duration of their studies, which is discouraging some from entering the programme.

Various other challenges, like reading and writing abilities, seem to arise from previous learning experiences. This makes adapting to the higher education system an ongoing challenge.

Conclusion

The journey from the Sekolo sa Mojadi to the College Ya Mojadi to the Department of Theology on the Mafikeng campus of North-West University is a significant one, a journey which this article tried to note.

Apart from the historical narrative, the current narrative also provided a conceptual framework for the identification of the opportunities and challenges which await this institution.

A definite field for further research seems to be the issue of contextualisation, which most probably will play an important role in the development of the future narrative for this institution.

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