

# SIX CORE COMPONENTS OF SUCCESSFUL DMIN PROGRAMS



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The Doctor of Ministry degree was first approved by The American Association of Theological Schools (now ATS) in 1972, with significant growth occurring in the number and scope of these programs soon after its inception.<sup>1</sup> The degree was never intended to be a super-sized MDiv program, nor was it created to be the equivalent of a theological PhD program. Rather, it was originally created in response to a strong demand for continuing education that would provide advanced skills for clergy.

1. Jackson W. Carroll, and Barbara G. Wheeler, *A Study of Doctor of Ministry Programs* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 1987), 9.

## FORTY YEARS OF DMIN

Four decades later, how is the DMin meeting the needs of today's clergy?

A 2011 Barna Group study of 600 Protestant senior pastors (known publically as the Pastor Poll<sub>SM</sub>) determined that the target market for DMin programs may be shifting to a younger demographic (age 28–46) than that of 40 years ago and from a wider variety of ministry occupations. It may be time for a reevaluation of the curriculum and ancillary components of DMin programs, including more affordable and flexible delivery modes.<sup>2</sup>

A more recent study, conducted by the authors, used an online survey and interview process to gather the

2. Barna Group, *Advanced and Continuing Education: A National Study of Protestant Senior Pastors* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2011).

insights of 55 participants including industry experts as well as DMin directors and students at three institutions. It looked at delivery models, standards, and curriculum to determine whether DMin programs in the United States were meeting the academic and professional needs of their constituents and to identify core components of successful DMin programs.

## HOW DO STUDENTS CHOOSE A DMIN PROGRAM?

Students cited various reasons for their selection of one particular DMin program over another:

- the quality of education
- the opportunity to develop expertise and specialization in a desired area of practice
- the reputation of the faculty and the institution, including the opportunity to learn from and develop personal relationships with specific professors/mentors
- logistics such as location and cost
- a school's denominational affiliation (or lack thereof)

## CORE COMPONENTS OF SUCCESSFUL DMIN PROGRAMS

Across the breadth of data, spanning experts in the field, program directors, current students, and prospective students, there is agreement on several core elements that DMin programs will need to embrace if they wish to flourish amidst the challenges facing institutions of higher theological education.

The newly revised *Degree Program Standards* approved in 2012 by the membership of the Commission on Accrediting describe the primary goals of Doctor of Ministry programs as

an advanced understanding of the nature and purposes of ministry, enhanced competencies in pastoral analysis and ministerial skills, the integration of these dimensions into the theologically reflective practice of ministry, new knowledge about the practice of ministry, continued growth in spiritual maturity, and development and appropriation of a personal and professional ethic with focused study on ethical standards and mature conduct in the profession.

These Standards clearly indicate that three primary components of a DMin program would be

1. learning new knowledge in the field of ministry ethics, purpose, and competency;
2. attaining spiritual growth and development resulting in mature conduct; and
3. acquiring applied, practical ministerial skills.

### 1. *Developing reflective practitioners*

The development of ministry leaders who learn skill sets that can be practically applied in professional ministry settings is clearly a key component of strong DMin programs. This development includes providing significant mentorship from individuals currently possessing these skill sets who can help students understand how to develop the skills to effectively and pragmatically conduct ministry in a way that is well-informed by research, study, and ongoing evaluation.

One suggestion for promoting the reflective practitioner is to leverage the inherent hybrid characteristics of DMin programs. Utilizing preresident reading and content assignments; longer, two-week, in-class residencies focusing on real-life case studies and practical experiences; and a final postresident comprehensive final project maximizes learning by applying it to practical ministry challenges.

*“The target market for Doctor of Ministry programs is pastors who are 55 years of age or younger, are seminary graduates, and have been in ministry more than three years. However, those pastors more likely to be eligible to pursue a Doctor of Ministry degree are younger (age 28–46) and have been in ministry longer (more than a decade).”*

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## **2. Creating learning cohorts**

Learning appears to occur at the highest levels for DMin students when it takes place among a community of learners before, during, and after the on-campus portion of the program, with a “high-touch” approach of one-on-one or face-to-face interactions personalized to the student whenever possible. The cohort community should extend beyond a single course and be the learning community in which the student finds the close relational connection and development that students cite as a primary motivation for pursuing their DMin degrees.

For this to occur, cohorts must also have mentors who can follow the learning community, allowing students to derive great academic and personal benefit from professors with content-area knowledge and real-life wisdom. It should be noted that some tracks, such as chaplaincy, may need to adapt cohort schedules to accommodate required travel and service commitments.

## **3. Offering specialized tracks consistent with institutional ethos**

Successful DMin programs will not try to be all things to all people. Instead, they need to identify their distinctive qualities and offer only those tracks that they are best equipped to offer at the highest level. This is perhaps best thought of as identifying the “soul” of the program—those aspects of the program that define it, that it does best, and that it has the staff to provide.

This requires, of course, that each track offered be led by a faculty member for whom the content of the track is his or her primary area of knowledge and expertise. In turn, this requires that each institution only offer tracks that match the areas of expertise of its current faculty, rather than choosing tracks and trying to find faculty to teach the curriculum.

## **4. Integrating core professors into the soul of the program**

DMin programs that bring in nationally known speakers to teach the curriculum, as well as those that utilize adjunct professors as content-area experts, both fall short in attaining outstanding core components. It does not appear necessary for programs to have faculty who solely teach DMin courses, but it is important for core faculty to have at least a portion of their faculty load dedicated specifically to the DMin program. A consistent theme voiced by current and prospective students is their desire to “study under” core faculty—a condition that is not possible with outside speakers or adjunct faculty with minimal institutional commitment. By having core faculty teach within the DMin program as part of their regular teaching load, the soul of the institution is able to be interwoven throughout the curriculum, and students are able to develop a sense of connectedness to the institution and the faculty. This connection can facilitate the mentoring relationship and the sense of satisfaction students have with the program. To build on that model, pairing a core faculty member content-area expert as the professor of record with nationally known speakers, who can serve as guest lecturers on specific topics, is an excellent strategy.

## **5. Increasing affordability through sending-church partnerships**

Creating a partnership between students and their home churches may help address the financial barriers to seeking a DMin degree. The concept of a sending church provides an excellent model, as the leadership and membership of a local church have access to additional funds that can be used to finance the ministry leader’s educational goals. Sending churches can benefit

from ongoing interaction with students throughout their degree programs as well as from their newly acquired skill sets when they return. Such a partnership arrangement fosters mutual benefit, commitment, and purpose for both the student and the sending ministry.

### **6. Broadening curriculum to address the broad spectrum of ministry fields**

The consensus of participants in this research makes it clear that DMin programs need to develop curricula equipped to meet the needs of students in a widening variety of ministry fields beyond pastoral leadership, including missions, chaplaincy, parachurch ministry, and teaching.

### **What are your DMin constituents telling you?**



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*“The most compelling reasons for eligible pastors to pursue a Doctor of Ministry degree were to gain knowledge, grow personally, and improve their ministry-related skills. In the pastors’ words, they wanted to stay “fresh” by gaining new perspectives, experiencing spiritual growth, and becoming more effective in their ministries.”*

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