

# Transinstitutional partnerships and theological education

By EMILIE M. TOWNES

The Vanderbilt Divinity School dean tells why partnerships with the university's professional schools attracted her to the deanship.

Vanderbilt University Divinity School has a Purposes (mission) statement that sets the tone and direction for our work:

In a global and multi-religious world, the Divinity school seeks to fulfill the following objectives:

- to engage in theological inquiry;
- to help persons prepare for the practice of Christian ministry and public leadership;
- to encourage personal and spiritual formation;
- to prepare agents of social justice; and
- to educate future scholars and teachers, locally and globally.

I was impressed with the school's commitments not only to help clergy and laity prepare for Christian ministry but also to reenvision ministry to meet the needs of our times by combining spiritual and intellectual growth with a sense of social justice and the formation of new generations of scholars. Hence, one of the great attractions for me as I considered the deanship at Vanderbilt Divinity School was the recruiting lure that Vanderbilt had broken down its

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silos among the professional schools, departments, and programs and was invested in transinstitutional partnerships. To my mind, one of the great resources for a university-based divinity school is the rest of the university. As I end my first year in

the job, I've learned that the recruiting lure was not a pale promise but rather a lively possibility. As a divinity school, we have been forging new partnerships and firming up those already in place with an eye toward teaching future leaders who will find their ministries in a wide variety of settings.

It is exciting to think about the ways in which we are now designing curricular and cocurricular offerings that help students better blend theory and practice across professional schools. As the dean of the School of Nursing and I have said to one another several times in planning the collaboration between our two schools—students will now have the opportunity to learn from each other and better understand what each perspective brings to the health care setting. This makes them better prepared doctors, nurses, ministers, and chaplains. Hopefully they will be more aware of ways to treat the whole patient rather than just the



presenting symptoms and of ways the minister can (and at times must) be an advocate for patient care. We are also aware that our respective faculties will need to change and grow in different dimensions as we teach across our comfort zones and areas of expertise.

This example about one of the collaborative efforts we have with the School of Nursing highlights the ways in which I think it is imperative that the Divinity School be integrally involved in the life of the university.

As a school whose nineteenth-century tagline is *Schola*

*Prophetarum* (school of the prophets), we have marked ourselves as a faculty that seeks to be engaged in the world and, in part, to understand our vocation as teachers to blend head and heart in our work. Reaching across disciplinary and institutional boundaries aids this immensely, because we are exposed to new ideas, new perspectives, and new ways of approaching issues, problems, and viewpoints. A clergy friend of mine felt the best thing to do in order to be more faithful as a pastor in the face of the HIV/AIDS

pandemic was to go to nursing school so that she could better understand human bodies and illness and provide both medical *and* spiritual support; stepping outside of our theological school comfort zones where we know the terrain and lingo of our respective fields can make us better at what we do as teachers and scholars.

One key aspect of this is the importance of upper administration support for creating these partner-

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ships. Pretenure faculty are rightly circumspect about delving into transinstitutional partnerships if their hard work in forging these partnerships is discounted or devalued when it comes time to consider tenure and promotion. This is particularly true when schools continue to use the traditional (and perhaps outdated) standards for professional advancement where the number and quality of the books really are the chief criteria for scholarly excellence that merits advancement. Knowledge production should not be so narrowly circumscribed. The ways in which our students learn and know are decidedly different from the ways that I did in the 1970s and 1980s when I was a theological school student. We read a great deal, listened to long lectures, wrote papers that nuanced what we read and heard. We were a print-bound group of learners, and this is how many of us were shaped as teachers. This is not so true for the students we have in the classroom with us today. Images, sound, beat, and multitasking are key features of how our students learn and know. This is not better—it is different—and we as educators who believe in investing in student learning must adapt, not necessarily throwing out all we



know and value, but integrating new pedagogical skills into our classrooms.

One way to achieve this is by building robust transinstitutional partnerships that encourage us to think outside of our disciplinary and theological school boxes. Another program we have that encourages boundary crossing is the Cal Turner Program for Moral Leadership (CTP) in the Professions. This is a university-wide program dedicated to discussing and promoting moral values relevant to the professions and is open to students in the Divinity School, Owen School of Management, Law School, School of Medicine, School of Nursing, and Peabody College of Education. Students engage in retreats, luncheons, dinners, leadership workshops, symposia, and conferences designed to develop their abilities to provide moral leadership within their chosen professions and larger communities. The CTP seeks to foster a deep sense of vocation in students as well as a collaborative spirit across professions to address such vexing problems as poverty, homelessness, and healthcare. Learning to build partnerships while in school gives students a more solid foundation for the ministry and scholarship they will do once they leave the Divinity School.

The Divinity School also has a nascent partnership with the School of Engineering and the School of

Medicine focusing on the ethical implications of biomedical engineering. As the School of Engineering and the School of Medicine are strengthening their (sometimes joint) efforts in regenerative medicine and even synthetic biology, it makes sense for interested Divinity School faculty and students to become involved. It is clear that growing these collaborations takes interest, time, and administrative support. In fact, I believe that all three are the necessary matrix that helps these partnerships not only emerge but also be sustained over time. It is also important that these often cocurricular partnerships become integrated into the curriculum as much as possible through academic credit for students and professional advancement criteria. Both students and faculty need incentives to participate in these partnerships, as often being interested in them is not enough. University-based divinity schools have a marvelous resource close at hand, and as administrators and faculty seek to make use of these resources, it is also important to remember what a value resource we have as theological schools to bring to the partnership as well.



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