Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education
DMin Identity Peer Group Final Report

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The **DMin Identity peer group** examined the Standards of Accreditation as they pertain to the nature and purpose of the DMin degree and to the culture of teaching and learning offered in DMin programs. The peer group also identified educational principles pertaining to the DMin degree and, bearing these educational principles in mind, the peer group considered the most common challenge faced by DMin students: completing the doctoral project.

What is the DMin degree?

The Doctor of Ministry (DMin) is a degree designed for practitioners in the field of ministry. The DMin degree is addressed by the Standards of Accreditation in Degree Program E, which commends the following goals of a DMin programs to ATS-member schools in Degree Program E, section E.1.2.1: "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."

Nature of the DMin as a professional doctoral degree

The DMin is a professional degree at the doctoral level. DMin students who are experienced practitioners come to a DMin program to reflect with faculty and ministerial peers about the practice of ministry. DMin students play a substantial role in shaping the teaching and learning culture of a DMin program. DMin applicants are typically in ministry leadership roles recognized by their judicatories, religious organizations, or other accountability bodies. DMin programs assume that admitted students have demonstrated a theological foundation at the master's level sufficient to engage in the doctoral study of practical theology (Degree Program E, section E.1.1). DMin programs are integrative in that they are focused on spiritual, personal, moral, and ministerial formation. They are designed to serve the unique needs of clergy and persons in ministry (E.2.1.5). Studying in the context of a cohort of student peers is advantageous to DMin students and encourages students with substantial ministry experience to work together to reflect on practical issues of ministry (E.3.1.1). The adult-education pedagogy of a DMin program involves a collegial learning community, self-directed learning, and practical research in ministry. The DMin degree is located in the field of practical theology.

Nature of the DMin student

DMin students commonly are midcareer practitioners who are highly competent in their professions and who are motivated by a need for professional and personal development. The average age of an entering DMin student, according to ATS data, is 45**.** Students choose a DMin program for several reasons, including: the desire for an advanced degree, further development of ministerial competence in a specific subject area, and refreshing of skills after a long period away from formal education. Students often enter DMin programs after 20 or more years of ministry, sometimes with the realization that they have not made the cultural transitions necessary for ministerial effectiveness in contemporary culture and that current methods are no longer working or are less effective than they have been in the past. As a result, the DMin program by its nature often supports students in vocational clarification or reassessment.

Nature of the DMin program director

The DMin program is formational in nature and requires students to confront challenging issues in ministry. Given the distinctive nature and purpose of the DMin degree program, the program director often exercises a pastoral function and may be directly involved in the lives of DMin students. The DMin program director also balances the complex roles of administering admissions, interfacing with institutional departments, and assisting students to develop in vocational identity and integration (E.1.3.1). In addition, because most faculty possess PhDs, rather than DMins, and may not be ministerial practitioners themselves, the DMin program director often must provide these faculty with substantial orientation in offering a combination of academic and pastoral support to DMin students. Often, DMin administrative practices necessarily diverge from those of other degree programs, and so the DMin director needs to communicate, and advocate for, these differences within an institution.

Nature of the DMin project and research

The contextual ministry project is essential to the DMin program. Degree Program E, section E.2.4 provides criteria for the DMin project: "The program shall include the design and completion of a written doctoral-level project that addresses both the nature and the practice of ministry. This final summative

project should be of sufficient quality that it contributes to the practice of ministry as judged by professional standards and has the potential for application in other contexts of ministry or presentation in professional forums." The DMin project differs in nature from the PhD thesis, and the term "thesis" does not appear in Degree Program E. DMin projects emphasize the application of established theory in context, rather than the development of new theory. Schools offering DMin degree programs have embraced the identity of the DMin as a professional practitioner's degree and, as more DMin graduates have become DMin program directors, an increased level of agreement on the professional emphasis of the DMin project has developed. DMin programs now employ a wide range of terms for the summative written project, including project, dissertation, thesis, capstone, demonstration, and portfolio.

The DMin project involves approaching a ministry problem, designing a project, and conducting research. The DMin project should "reflect the candidate's depth of theological insight in relation to ministry" (E.2.4.2). DMin research usually employs methods from the social sciences and field research. In the course of DMin research, new knowledge is gained that is intended to contribute to the understanding and practice of ministry. DMin projects usually involve practice-based research, in which the validity of a practice derives from its outcome, providing an objective means to evaluate whether an approach has produced desired results. DMin projects usually involve participatory-action and/or community-based research focused on producing positive social change. Because DMin project research often is community-based, involving artifacts demonstrating DMin program outcomes, schools offering DMin programs must be astute regarding human participants and must practice appropriate ethical protocols.

Nature of the DMin project presentation and evaluation

The requirements of presenting the research of a DMin project are described in Degree Program E: "Upon completion of the doctoral project, there shall be an oral presentation and evaluation" (E.2.4.2). The DMin project also involves providing a written record of the research completed, as explained in Degree Program E: "The completed written project, with any supplemental material, should be accessioned in the institution's library" (E.2.4.2). These writing requirements are intended to allow for a wide range of DMin research projects while supporting the integrity of the accredited DMin degree.

1. **Why** did the schools engage this educational model or practice?

DMin programs have the potential to positively influence the midcareer development of ministerial practitioners. Within ATS member schools, DMin programs and students may benefit from changes leading to the improvement of DMin program standards and of DMin progress and completion.

2. What are the **most crucial issues and questions** engaged by the group?

Based on Degree Program E, DMin programs expect students to apply "an advanced understanding and integration of ministry in relation to various theological and other related disciplines" (E.2.1.1) and to "make a contribution to the understanding and practice of ministry through the completion of a doctoral-level project that contributes new knowledge and understanding of the practice of ministry" (E.2.1.4).

However, many of the students for which the DMin is intended possess weak preparation at the

baccalaureate and post-baccalaureate levels for doctoral-level research and writing, particularly in the social sciences, interdisciplinarity, and integration between ministry and related disciplines. DMin students are expected to complete doctoral-level research and writing (1) for which their education may not have prepared them, (2) within a brief period of time, (3) while remaining in ministry, (4) as taught by faculty unlikely to have been trained in or prepared to teach what is expected in such areas of interdisciplinarity. DMin programs expect competencies which faculty often lack resources to teach and students often lack preparation to engage.

DMin directors report that students frequently experience difficulties in completing the required written summative project due to the realities of pastoral ministry and the challenges of doctoral research and writing. DMin students often are educated and experienced in writing sermons rather than developing scholarly publications or conducting research and, consequently, some students struggle with designing and writing the summative project.

3. What are the most significant potential **opportunities/benefits** for this model or practice? For the school, for students, for faculty, for the church and/or for other stakeholders?
DMin projects are intended to contribute to the understanding and practice of ministry, as well as to increase the ministerial capacities of the student. It has also been observed that students who complete a DMin program often assume leadership roles in their dioceses, synods, conventions, conferences, and seminaries, potentially making valuable contributions to the church. Completion rates also impact the reputation and effectiveness of theological institutions offering DMin programs. DMin degrees offer faculty the opportunity to teach advanced courses in practical theology and to engage students in smaller and more personal settings. A DMin degree can also be a setting for pedagogical innovation (e.g., hybrid courses, retreat-style settings, prominent speaker focus).

4. What are the most significant **challenges/obstacles** that could keep this model or practice from flourishing?
Limited institutional resources to assist DMin students with project completion present a challenge. DMin programs are not always represented on institutional committees, and while there is institutionalized delegation for other degree programs, a DMin program often must interface with departments of admissions, communications, and student services independently. The DMin curriculum may be customized for a DMin cohort and may not overlap with the curricula of other degree programs. International DMin student applications are time consuming for admissions and may drain institutional resources. Faculty asked to teach in a DMin program often are unfamiliar with the program's values and the characteristics of DMin students. Methods used by institutions to market and administer a DMin degree may not be effective in meeting the needs of a DMin program. Supervision of DMin projects is labor intensive, and theological faculties often are not appropriately sized or structured to sustain the demands of supervision inherent in a DMin program.

Limited congregational or denominational resources and support can also make it difficult for clergy or persons in ministry to complete a DMin project. The demands of ministry present a challenge to

successful project completion, and congregations may have concerns that their clergy will be promoted and/or will leave the congregation after successfully completing a DMin program.

DMin students, who are ministers in a range of contexts, often arrive with gaps in their preparation for field research and scholarly writing, and these students need additional support and education to prepare them to design and complete a DMin project that contributes to the understanding and practice of ministry. The ways individual schools choose to address gaps in the preparedness of DMin students varies based on both the individual student and on the institution offering a DMin program. Recent increases in the cultural and language diversity of applicants have challenged DMin programs to develop support systems that serve a wider range of students effectively.

5. How is the **educational effectiveness** of the model or practice demonstrated?
Addressing the challenges involved in completing the written summative project could result in increased DMin completion rates for ATS member schools. However, the primary demonstration of DMin effectiveness is the development of personal and professional ministry practice. Successful completion of a DMin degree should lead to improvements in personal formation and competency and in greater awareness of how to conduct effective ministry.

6. How is the **financial viability** of the educational model or practice demonstrated?
A variety of institutional characteristics and student demographics may affect the financial viability of a DMin program. Denominational affiliation, endowments, public funding, and students with tuition-paying capacity can increase access to financial resources, whereas lack of affiliation, highly tuition-dependent budgets, and students with financial need can lead to financial challenges.

7. Are there unexpected **insights, innovative ideas, or possibilities** that have emerged through the group's work?
DMin programs in ATS member schools could benefit, in terms of opportunities for pedagogical innovation, from collaboration between proximate schools, collaboration among schools that address the needs of underserved communities (e.g., Latinos/as, Africans), and DMin programs in non-English languages.

8. List of key **recommended practices** for this educational model or practice
The DMin Identity Peer Group recommends the following practices:

- The written summative project requirement (E.2.4) may be fulfilled, in some cases, by a combination of oral public presentation and written project defense (academic hearing). The oral public presentation may be given to ministerial peers, and the written defense (academic hearing) may be given to a project supervisor, project readers, and institutional faculty. The oral and written defenses may be held in equal balance, presenting the data in a manner most useful to those it is intended to benefit.

- DMin programs may benefit from considering the readiness of applicants for DMin research,

identifying lacunae, and developing educational resources to prepare DMin students to engage effectively in field research that can contribute to the understanding and practice of ministry. Some type of pre-DMin preparation program may make the degree accessible to more populations and lead to higher-quality students.

- ATS member schools may benefit from considering how to effectively prepare theological faculty to supervise DMin projects.

- Improved institutional and faculty awareness of the nature of the DMin degree would reduce friction in the implementation of the degree and may lead to increased institutional support.

- DMin degree programs would benefit from improved institutional support in doctoral-level writing-center assistance and services for many students—including those whose first language is not the language of instruction—to meet the unique challenges of the DMin degree (e.g., need for high-level language competency, pressures of writing at a doctoral level).

9. What are the **educational principles** that are served by the model or practice?
Schools offering DMin degree programs have embraced the identity of the DMin as a professional practitioner's degree. As more DMin graduates have become DMin program directors, an increased level of agreement on the professional emphasis of the DMin project has developed. Adult educational principles are embraced and practiced in most DMin programs.

10. Are there implications from the group's work for the possible process of redevelopment of the **Standards of Accreditation?**
In these changing educational times, the DMin Identity Peer Group is proposing that redeveloped Standards more formally acknowledge the diverse ways by which successful ministry professionals approach the DMin project.

The peer group considered the definition of ministry, as it provides the context for the required written summative project. The peer group considered how the definition of ministry might be updated to reflect a broader range of contexts while preserving the identity of the DMin degree as a doctoral degree designed for practitioners in ministry. Expanding the definition of ministry beyond that of congregational leadership may provide guidance for ATS-member schools responding to a broader pool of applicants and students.

The peer group considered the nature of the written summative project, which is described in Degree Program E, section E.2.4 as a written project that is "accessioned in the library." DMin programs employ a wide range of doctoral projects. The peer group considered whether all projects are suitable for an academic library. Clarification of the nature of the written summative project in Degree Program E may provide guidance for ATS member schools conducting a wide range of DMin research.

The peer group considered that entering DMin students, while possessing a theological education, often do not possess a background in conducting field research in the social sciences or writing at a doctoral level. Degree Program E may provide clarification of the competencies considered necessary for preparation to conduct a DMin project.

11. What are the possible implications of the group's work for the **broader work of theological education?**

Theological educators may reconsider approaches to provide additional education for DMin students in methods of field research and support for academic writing. These approaches may be applied to increase DMin completion rates and to enhance the ministerial effectiveness of DMin graduates.