

## **Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Faculty Development Grant Report**

Project Director: Heather Hartung Vacek, VP for Academic Affairs / Dean of Faculty  
March 2019

### Abstract

The requested funds were used to hold a faculty retreat in the summer of 2017. The retreat was part of the curriculum revision and implementation work that began in August 2016. The 2017 retreat focused, in part, on the formulation of principles for implementing the new curriculum and was the fourth in a series of events that, when coupled with weekly lunchtime gatherings, illustrated a strong commitment to assisting our faculty in adapting to a changing educational and ecclesial landscape.

A three-year strategic plan approved by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's board of directors in the spring of 2015 called for faculty to "review, reimagine, and reconfigure the curricula." In response, during the 2016-17 academic year the seminary began its first major curriculum revision in decades. Prompted by the board's planning and guided by the faculty's recognition of the changing nature of the church, world, and theological education, PTS revisited the curriculum in all master-level programs. As part of the curriculum reconfiguration, we recognized a need for faculty to adapt not only courses but also pedagogy, academic calendars, delivery methods, engagement with technology, and the shape of our work together. Grant funds were used primarily to hold a faculty retreat in the summer of 2017 at which we finalized program level curricular details and outlined implementation plans for the 2017-18 academic year.

One of the innovative aspects of our curriculum revision has been that all faculty members, not just a sub-committee, have been involved throughout the curricula review and revision process. This extraordinary institutional commitment of time and resources began with a faculty retreat in August 2016 followed by weekly faculty lunch meetings during the 2016-17 academic year that focused on our context and changes in theological education more broadly. Weekly gatherings deepened within the faculty commitment to – and knowledge of – needed changes and fostered a renewed collegiality that supported and strengthened decision-making. We punctuated weekly meetings with offsite, overnight retreats that enabled us to move through the work of curriculum revision with speed and focus.

The summer 2017 retreat supplemented prior two-day retreats in February and May 2017 and forms part of an overall program of faculty development in support of the seminary's aim to "equip women and men in Christian vocations both on campus and beyond" (*PTS Strategic Plan FY 2017-2020 Objective 3.1*). The immediate goal of the summer retreat was to finalize details of the new curricula and to create an implementation and launch plan. The desired benefits of the project included: 1) equipping faculty members with strategies for new course development, 2) providing resources and information for using technology to deliver course materials, and 3) reinforcing a method of faculty development at PTS that involves the entire faculty in an atmosphere of shared teaching and learning. Altogether, our hope was that the summer retreat, as

part of the larger curriculum revision, would pave the way for the next steps in curricular design and implementation and continue to model a process of cooperation and community engagement that best equips our students for service in Christian communities and the world.

Throughout the curriculum revision process, we followed a backwards design model. Five months of engagement in research projects about the theological landscape, curricular innovations at other schools, and the shifting nature of the church and world culminated in the February 2017 retreat where the faculty formulated student learning outcomes (SLOs). We then discerned the calendar, delivery methods, and course of study would help students achieve those SLOs. Those deliberations were informed by insight from alumni/ae, students, and staff, as well as conversations with administrators and faculty at approximately a dozen ATS-affiliated institutions that have undertaken recent curriculum revisions. We defined the overall MDiv course of study at a May 2017 retreat and outlined core commitments for new two-year master's degrees. By the summer 2017 retreat, the formal input process was complete and we had vetted student learning outcomes with key constituents.

The success of each stage of the curriculum revision has been measured rather quickly, including results of the summer 2017 faculty retreat. We left the retreat with specific course design and implementation plans for the 2017-18 academic year. In October 2017 we submitted petitions to ATS for two new master's degrees. In November 2017 the faculty and administration presented to the Board of Directors the curricula for all master's programs, proposed delivery methods, and a process for implementation. By that time, faculty course development teams were at work outlining the details of each of the 27 courses in the new MDiv curriculum and additional coursework for the new 2-year master's degree courses.

We choose to meet at the Pittsburgh Airport Marriott, which is about 40 minutes from campus. The hope was to be in a convenient location, but far enough away from home for most faculty members that they would spend the night versus returning home at night. This approach had worked well during the prior two retreats and enabled opportunities for both worship and fellowship among faculty both at the end of the first day and over breakfast during the second day. In the morning of the second day, and throughout both meeting days, faculty members took advantage of breaks to walk, run, and be in conversation. The retreat agenda and a summary of retreat decisions appear in the appendices.

A number of resources provided insight for our time together. We distributed copies of Justo González's *The History of Theological Education* to all faculty members. While this shared reading provided some common language as we began the summer 2017 retreat, we would have needed to allocate significantly more time for conversation about the book to enable it to provide more meaningful background from which to draw for this work. The most significant external resource we used was the insight of other theological educators. We spoke with colleagues (both faculty and administrators) at more than a dozen ATS schools to gather insight about the process of curricular redesign and particular curricular innovations. Those conversations helped us define our core commitments by observing where we found affinities and where we learned commitments and/or shape of institutional realities (audiences, approaches, etc.) differed.

#### What did we learn?

1) *Clarity of process enables moving quickly.* We made a conscious decision to move through curricular revision quickly, aware that this would require shared commitment alongside attention

to timelines. Committing to weekly meetings, defining and sharing the research and planning work among the full faculty, and agreeing to checkpoints and delivery timelines helped us move toward a fall 2018 launch of the new curriculum. Having clear goals and objectives for retreats, including the summer 2017 retreat, helped keep us on track.

2) *There is value in being away, together.* Ongoing full-faculty involvement helped fuel and sustain the fast pace of the curriculum revision process and being away from campus created periods of needed intense focus alongside space for collegiality. This time together has helped shift faculty culture (for the good) as we've come to know more about each other's pedagogical and other commitments. This insight will not only deepen our ability to teach the new curriculum well but will also help us function more effectively as a full faculty in a wide variety of curricular, administrative, and other matters. Future faculty development opportunities will have this prior work as a base for growing a deeper, richer set of academic programs and fostering faithful and fulfilling vocations (individually and collectively.)

3) *Even well-functioning systems can only handle so much change.* We anticipated that the summer 2017 retreat would include attention to diversifying course delivery modes. What became clear during time together in August was that the amount of work that lay ahead to redesign every master's level course and move from quarters to semesters would preclude other significant innovations. Though we had hoped to be ready for significantly diversified course delivery options with the 2018-19 launch of the new curriculum, we realized we lacked the capacity (and energy and resources) to change everything at once. Wholesale change in our delivery modes proved unachievable alongside redesign of every course, and we instead turned to a mode of research and experimentation that will inform future planning.

### Summary

Altogether, the work of curriculum revision has been deeply significant for the PTS faculty and the institution as a whole. We've learned to work together in new ways. We've deepened our attentiveness to the variety of contexts in which the seminary engages and we're navigating smoothly and cooperatively in this first year of the [new master's level curriculum](#) (the appendices include a snapshot of the public narrative about the curriculum). Finally, funding from this ATS Faculty Development Grant helped us engage a collaborative approach to curricular revision that has reshaped faculty culture at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. We enjoy one another's company, we've deepened our trust of one another, and we've proved we can accomplish significant work together – these realities will contribute to the faculty's and the institution's flourishing for years to come.

# Faculty Retreat Schedule

August 28 – 29, 2017

Marriott Pittsburgh Airport – Monongahela Room

---

**Monday, August 28, 2017**

---

<b>8:00 a.m.</b>	<b>Breakfast</b>
8:30 a.m.	Morning Prayer
9:00 a.m.	Session 1
<b>10:30 a.m.</b>	<b>Break</b>
10:45 a.m.	Session 2
<b>12:15 p.m.</b>	<b>Lunch</b>
1:45 p.m.	Session 3
<b>3:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Break</b>
3:30 p.m.	Session 4
<b>5:30 p.m.</b>	<b>Break</b>
<b>6:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Reception (Three Rivers Ballroom Foyer)</b>
<b>6:45 p.m.</b>	<b>Dinner (Ohio Room)</b>
8:00 p.m.	Session 5
9:00 p.m.	Evening Prayer

---

**Tuesday, August 28, 2017**

---

<b>8:00 a.m.</b>	<b>Breakfast</b>
8:30 a.m.	Morning Prayer
9:00 a.m.	Session 1
<b>10:15 a.m.</b>	<b>Break</b>
10:30 a.m.	Session 2 – with Registrar
<b>12:15 p.m.</b>	<b>Lunch</b>
1:45 p.m.	Session 3
<b>3:00 p.m.</b>	<b>Break</b>
3:30 p.m.	Session 4
5:30 p.m.	Closing Prayer
5:45 p.m.	<b>Depart</b>

**Retreat Topics**

Monday

- Summer Update
- Review of May decisions
- MDiv Curriculum & Map
  - o Church & Society
  - o Ethics
- Institutional Launch Plans
- The curriculum as a whole
  - o Hopes?
  - o Questions?
  - o Gonzalez
- New MA Programs
  - o MAPS/MTS
- Curriculum Q&A
- 2017-18 Assessment Update
- Faculty Launch Plans / To—do list
- Access
  - o Online/hybrid
  - o Part time program

Tuesday

- Faculty Responsibilities
  - o Teaching load
  - o Sabbatical policy
  - o Service
- 2018-19 Calendar
- Weekly Calendar
- Course Numbering
- Course Proposal and Approval Process
- Course Description Workshop

Parking Lot

- Grades and Grading
- Vocation Director
- Student Advising
- Post-Seminary Promise
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Retreat Decisions

---

### Pittsburgh Theological Seminary August 28-29, 2017 Faculty Retreat

#### Decisions

- Decided that in the new MDiv curriculum, the Pastoral Care course will be in the first semester of the second year and the Preaching class in the second semester. These courses were approved in the opposite order during the May retreat.
- Approved the addition of a Church and Society class in the final term of the third year. This class was discussed at the May 2017 retreat, but not included at that time. We noted that this course (name to be finalized) should include coverage of ethics.
- Approved the Masters of Arts in Pastoral Studies (MAPS) degree definition as outlined, striking the word “specialized” in the second line of the program description.
- Approved the Masters in Theology (MTS) degree definition with:
  - o 3 student learning outcomes,
  - o a specialization comprised of 4 courses,
  - o a 3-credit hour required research methods seminar
  - o a 6-credit hour final project
  - o a list of standard areas of specialization to include: Church History, Theology and Ethics, and Biblical Studies
  - o With this open curriculum, we noted that we would like to offer (in promotional materials) some samples of how students might configure the coursework.
- Conceptual approval of a new, semester-based sabbatical policy that will make faculty eligible for 1 semester of sabbatical after three full years of teaching or 2 semesters after six years of teaching. New language will need to be drafted/approved for the *Faculty Handbook*.
- Recommended a 2018-19 academic calendar that will have the features below. A final version will be reviewed for vote at the September 11<sup>th</sup> faculty meeting.
  - o Fall semester start after Labor Day
  - o Midterm reading week, combined end of semester reading/exam week
  - o Accommodation for AAR/SBL
  - o January term of 4 weeks, starting on a Monday
  - o Minimal break after January term
  - o Two five-week summer sessions and/or flexible summer offerings.
  - o We noted that we’ll need to consider how the date of Holy Week/Easter will shape the spring semester in the future.
- Decided on a template for defining new required courses, with needed elements, below. (See document for outline.)
  - o Course Name for Jenzabar (student information system) (35 characters)
  - o Catalog Description (3 sentences)
  - o Required Content to Cover (in narrative or list form)
  - o Student Learning Outcomes addressed by course (MDiv, MAPS, MTS)
  - o Prerequisites?

- Required text(s)?
  - How assignments connect to SLOs
  - Any guidance for syllabus or detailed course development?
- Agreed on a division of labor for the majority of new curriculum related details. (See separate to-do list.) Each required course will be defined by a team, using degree program curriculum maps.
  - Agreed to hold Wednesday lunchtimes open throughout the fall (and perhaps the year) for curriculum related work (in a full group or as smaller teams.) Lunch provided.

#### Discussions

- Retention: Expressed desire for clarity in processes for student retention, particularly with new director of enrollment and retention. Who should faculty advisors contact with concerns about students? For now, continue to send concerns to the Dean.
- Managing independent studies: Named that faculty and students would benefit from more coordination in the execution of independent studies.
- Hopes for the future of the curriculum / If what we hope has take place, what will students/graduates and the institution look like in 5+ years?
  - The core of the educational program may not be in standard degree programs. We will prepare students to ask and answer questions. Every student will think of themselves as a church planter. All will have an awareness of the world church. Mission/intercultural focus.
  - We will talk about vocation even at the application stage. Vocation will mean things beyond call to ordained ministry. Individuals who are models in ministry will be invited into classes and into the life of the Seminary.
  - There will be more groups/organizations located on campus, using our resource of space, sharing in campus life.
  - Faculty will operate as a learning community. We will engage in substantive deliberation together. We will continue to engage in shared work (as we have done of the last year or two with assessment and curriculum revision.)
- Access: We reflected on how to provide access of our course offerings to student, particularly students for whom a traditional residential seminary model does not work. Noted that we don't anticipate PTS offering fully online programs. Discussed tradeoffs between launching access "experiments" in 2018-19 (that would themselves expand access) vs. a set part-time curriculum. Discussed a variety of access options (that have a variety of appeal for different faculty members): intensive courses (with or without hybrid/online components), weekend courses, fully synchronous offerings, options based on recording lectures with discussion boards, classes offered in "outlying" areas. Throughout, noted the appeal of classes with a regular rhythm of embodied gatherings and engagement in community life and context as a learning partner / learning by being with others who are different. We will need to return to this conversation in the early fall. Named the possibility of funding trips (travel + stipend) to observe other theological educations who teach in a variety of modes.

- Teaching Load: Looked at examples of teaching loads in semester systems at other ATS schools. Decided that we need more information to make a decision, including: insight from other PCUSA schools, expected administrative loads, DMin and ConEd teaching requirements, impact of (and expectations for) experimentation with delivery modes. Overall, we discussed that teaching load needs to factor into full range of expectations for faculty, and we likely need more clarity about how we assess/count various elements of contribution (teaching, scholarship, service) for promotion and tenure. We will need to return to this conversation by late fall or early winter. As part of this discussion we discussed the possibility of not scheduling committee meetings in January.
- Course numbering: In a conversation with registrar Anne Malone, we discussed the logic of course numbers for the new curriculum. Master's level course will have 2 letters and three numbers. The 2 letters will designate field. The numbers will designate whether required courses fall in the first third (100s), second third (200s), or final third (300s) of the MDiv program. 400s-900s will be designated for electives. Some fields will need further discussion (by September 15<sup>th</sup>) to decide on lettering schemes – dean will prompt conversation via email.
- Weekly schedule: With (registrar) Anne Malone, we discussed the many variables that go into configuring weekly schedules for the fall and spring semesters and looked at approaches at three different seminaries. Variables include: feasibility of teaching courses once or twice a week, intensive offerings, hybrid offerings, Friday or Friday/Saturday courses, time of day classes are offered. We looked at samples from Memphis, Columbia, and Hartford. We noted that we likely don't know enough about which options will attract which students. We noted the connection between weekly course offerings and part-time/fulltime student progression. We decided to look at two options in a later gathering to help us move toward decisions: 1) a schedule in which all classes meet only once a week (except languages), and 2) a schedule in which all required courses meet twice a week, and electives meet once a week. We likely need to make a decision about the weekly schedule before the end of the fall term.
- Course proposal template: We reviewed a modified version of the current Course Proposal Template. We decided that we don't need information quite this extensive of a description as we document the content of each new required course this year. We will return to the more detailed course proposal template later in the year.
- New Course Design: We'll need to think about whether there are any guidelines and standards we'd like to name across courses (e.g., reading and writing expectations, diversity of voices to include in course materials).

Topics named for future group conversations: Tenure and promotions standards and practices, Post Seminary Promise, Grades and grading, International students.

## **Appendix D: Fall 2018 Faculty Retreat Agenda**

---

**Pittsburgh Theological Seminary**  
**Fall 2018 Faculty Retreat**  
Oglebay Resort and Conference Center

### **Retreat Goals**

- Reconnect after the summer
- Name our hopes for the year ahead for the institution and for the faculty
- Plan and prioritize the collective work for the year ahead
- Consider faculty development/formation

### **Monday August 27, 2018**

- 10:00 a.m.    Opening Devotion  
10:15 a.m.    Session 1 – Checking In and Getting Started  
12:00 p.m.    Lunch  
1:30 p.m.    Session 2 – Curriculum  
3:30 p.m.    Break  
4:30 p.m.    Session 3 – Planning and Prioritizing our Collective Work  
5:30 p.m.    Reception  
6:30 p.m.    Dinner  
8:00 p.m.    Session 4 – Planning and Prioritizing our Collective Work  
9:15 p.m.    Evening Prayer

### **Tuesday August 28, 2018**

- 7:30 a.m.    Breakfast  
8:45 a.m.    Morning Prayer  
9:00 a.m.    Session 5 – Students and Student Formation  
11:00 a.m.    Break  
12:00 p.m.    Lunch  
1:30 p.m.    Session 6 – Faculty Development and Faculty Formation  
3:00 p.m.    Return to Pittsburgh

## Appendix E: August 2018 Faculty Retreat Notes (excerpt of curriculum related items)

---

### Discussions / Action Items

- Identified need to have clarity about purpose and execution of the new reading week. Dean will solicit input from full faculty via email in order to craft talking points by the first day of classes.
- Noted that we need to find a time to talk to new students about the vision of the new curriculum. This will not be part of orientation. Dean to determine when/how/who to share this information, perhaps as part of the monthly lunch/dinner with the deans.
- What faculty (size, composition) is needed to teach the new curriculum?

### Outstanding work related to the new curriculum, includes

- Course proposals are still needed for the following classes:
  - o Ecclesial formation
  - o Intercultural learning experience
  - o MAPS Seminar
  - o Preaching and Communications
- Church Planting Concentration (re)definition
- Graduate Certificate in Urban Ministry (re)definition

### Hopes / markers of success with the rollout of the new curriculum:

- The new schedule (semesters, reading week) will lead to better student papers
- Assessment results (in 3 years or so) show our goals met (better)
- The emphases of the new curriculum show in the GSQ
- Students can articulate a narrative of the logic of their degree program
- We talk about curriculum with students and among faculty/staff
- Courses offered/taught match the intentions named in initial course proposals
- We've succeeded in providing a breadth of exposure for students
- Theory/practice divide eliminated/reduced
- The integration we hoped for is taking place
- Sense of faculty ownership of full curriculum
  - o Continued transparency about our classrooms
  - o No unproductive territoriality (not to diminish expertise)
- We can narrate value of curriculum externally
- We can fail well . . . we learn from failure (models this = our ethos)
- We produce high impact religious leaders
- Other schools want to talk with us (because we've done well what we set out to do)
- We produce lifelong learners
- Faculty operate as a teaching team
- Faculty model interdisciplinarity in action
- We share our teaching experiences with one another
- Implementation continues to build trust – not just within the faculty but also across the institution
- We find a balance between assessing curriculum and making needed changes (so that we adjust as needed over time, rather than needing eventual giant overhaul again)

As we roll out the new curriculum, we'd like to pay attention to:

- Are there moments for student reflection in journey through the curriculum? What are they? Who runs them?
- Credibility - name goals, hold ourselves accountable to them
- Note the situations/places/students that don't match what we have in mind e.g., transfer credits are more involved to match to a prescriptive curriculum.
- Remember the ways that this first year of the new curriculum is not yet the new normal. How long to "normal"?
- Reading week - will students use as intended?
- Where will we find non-expected sources of insight about how curriculum is going?
- How we assess our common decisions (e.g., no required language)?
- Does the new curriculum form students as we'd hoped?
- Finally, pay attention to whether we've paid attention

What are we curious about as the new curriculum launches?

- Will graduates say different things regarding their education? (ala GSQ)
- How are students being introduced to curriculum?
- Full time/Part time students and this curriculum – how are experiences similar/different?
- What is effect of schedule on community life?
  - o More participation?
  - o What measures should we be tracking? Chapel attendance? Lunch attendance?
- Enough electives? Elective enrollment? (given prescriptive curriculum with few electives)
- Impact of all of this on teaching load/staffing?
- How will this affect Independent Study/Directed Study requests?
- 6-week break (J-Term) and impact on Greek and Hebrew students?
- Will reading week need to move to a new time? (e.g., before exams instead of mid-semester)
- Is load of 4 ½ courses for first year students too much?

How will we pay attention to the curriculum rollout?

- Continued weekly Wednesday faculty lunches?
- Through the ongoing work of the Academic Affairs Committee
- Routine work of assessment
- Collect/share experiences
  - o Faculty & students in conversation
  - o Focus groups? (Here, perhaps model the feedback loop used with Church Planting and Revitalization certificate students)
- Post reading week "survey"?
- Syllabi buddies (faculty sharing of syllabi with partners to review fit between plans and execution of courses)?
- End of semester survey(s)?
- Dinner/Lunch with Deans
  - o Consider including "know" your curriculum conversations
- Coordinate with new Director of Vocation
- In advising meetings?
- In faculty meetings?

## Appendix F: Website Description of Revised Curriculum

<https://www.pts.edu/reimagined-curriculum>

### PITTSBURGH SEMINARY LAUNCHES REIMAGINED MASTER'S CURRICULUM, INTRODUCES NEW DEGREES AND CERTIFICATES

To continue our centuries-long history of preparing women and men for a wide variety of Christian vocations, in the fall of 2018 Pittsburgh Theological Seminary will begin offering a retooled curriculum for theologically reflective and contextually engaged ministry in the way of Jesus. The new, semester-based curriculum, plus January and summer terms, offers students greater access and flexibility to explore electives, deepen their writing skills, and learn more about their own faith tradition and those of others through three master's programs, five credit-bearing certificates, and the Doctor of Ministry degree.

.....

“One of the most important gifts we can foster in our students is a sense of discernment: the ability to recognize God when God shows up, to see how God is at work even in our rapidly changing culture, and to invite people to get in on what God already is doing.”

.....

“Given the intentional integration between disciplines built into the new curriculum, the longer, 13-week semesters provide temporal space for this important integrative work to be done in each course,” comments the Rev. Dr. Heather Hartung Vacek, vice president for academic affairs and dean of faculty and associate professor of church history.



The significantly revised M.Div. curriculum has four major characteristics: deep integration between the classical theological disciplines and the missional context of the church; context as a partner for learning; vocational discernment; and ecclesial formation. The M.Div. will continue to offer two popular options for focusing one's program—the Emphasis in Church



Throughout the Seminary's reimagined master's curriculum, we've made four commitments. These include, deep integration between the classical theological disciplines and the missional context of the church; context as a partner for learning; vocational discernment; and ecclesial formation. Here Directors' Bicentennial Associate Professor of Theology Edwin Chr. van Driel discusses each in more depth.



Academic Dean Heather Vacek, associate