



Meadville Lombard Theological School ATS Innovation Grant Report May 15, 2018

ABSTRACT

Meadville Lombard Theological School (MLTS) sought an ATS Innovation Grant to help us pioneer a new phase of global theological education by building on the successes of our groundbreaking low-residency contextual model of education. Since innovating this model in 2011, our enrollment has increased, our students have become increasingly diverse racially and culturally, and we have begun to attract increasing numbers of international students. But the interest of international students in our educational model has outgrown the domestic focus of our curriculum, teaching methods, and campus culture. Thus, we sought an Innovation Grant to help us design a global culture of theological learning to provide all our students with the education they need to serve as religious leaders in their diverse contexts. This grant allowed us to innovate a new global phase of low-residency theological education and to serve as a model to other ATS schools following in our footsteps.

INTRODUCTION

U.S. educational institutions are faced with the challenge of preparing students to function and thrive in a globalizing world that is interconnected by a global economy, global politics, and the effects of climate change and the legacies of colonialism. For Meadville Lombard, as a theological school, this mission is not just practical and strategic, but moral and religious. By engaging globally, we have the potential to expand our students' ability to engage in an empathic, compassionate, and interculturally competent way with individuals of all countries, cultures, and traditions. Furthermore, deep and sustained collaboration with partner institutions and communities abroad would allow us to put our core values into practice, even as the act of international collaboration requires a more nuanced and complex understanding of those values.

Meadville Lombard Theological School's [MLTS] mission has been globally oriented from the beginning. Originally founded to train ministers to serve congregations in the "West" (the frontier beyond the east coast US), MLTS is now poised to train religious leaders throughout the world. Our geographical setting in Chicago (a cosmopolitan crossroads in the Midwest, a city where worlds and religions intersect) and our low-residency educational model make our degree programs more accessible to increasing numbers of international students. To support them, as well as to prepare our domestic students for religious leadership in a globalizing world, we have used our ATS grants (Faculty Development and Educational Innovation) to begin to develop a comprehensive internationalization strategy.

For this project, Meadville Lombard had a shared understanding of the internationalization process as something that should be:

- Comprehensive (infused throughout all functions of the institution, including its teaching, research, and student service functions);
- Directly connected to our Anti-racism/Anti-oppression/Multicultural mission (in a way that is not oppositional but enriching, reinforcing, deepening, and enlarging);
- Not an “add-on” but core to the historical mission of the school as well as its current identity (an experientially-focused, low-residency institution based in a cosmopolitan city)
- Transformational (a process that changes not only international partners and students but the institution itself, from its curriculum to its administrative operations).

With the ATS Innovation Grant, we have implemented a systematic approach to our global innovation. To achieve our long-term goal to create a global culture of low-residency contextual education we have conducted an internal assessment of our capabilities and current practices; drafted an initial scope of changes across Meadville Lombard; and delineated a proposal for a global learning vision. Our final report on our learnings follows.

GOALS

What were the primary goals of our Innovation Grant project?

Our long-term goal is to create a global culture of low-residency contextual education to better prepare our international and domestic students to serve as religious leaders in their contexts. To realize this goal, we have:

1. Surveyed the community, congregational, and library resources of select international partners, as well as our own internal international education strengths and weaknesses.
2. Drafted the scope of the curricular, cultural, and administrative changes that we must address to serve our international students and bring a global perspective to the formation of religious leaders.
3. Started to develop an internationalization strategy to guide and assess our ongoing efforts to innovate a globally inclusive form of low-residency contextual theological education.

How well did we meet these goals?

The Innovation Grant helped us to identify the pillars we need to build in order to develop a sustainable Internationalization Strategy. Such a strategy must be rooted in Meadville Lombard’s mission commitment to equity, justice and compassion. Through the activities included in the initial proposal, we have initiated a culture of internal collaboration for global learning in which all departments actively participate. Additionally, using qualitative tools and design thinking techniques, we have highlighted the voices of international partners and students in the process of growing as an institution that forms religious leaders with a global mindset and intercultural skills.

The first step in this project was to create a baseline assessment of institutional capabilities and expectations. Faculty, staff, and our Internationalization Consultant met in August 2017 to create a common understanding of key concepts and learn about people's ideas regarding the needs of international students. As a group, we completed an Internationalization Assessment Check List to identify practices that were already in place and map tactics and strategies that people considered were required to develop a global learning culture.

Then in November 2017, a group of five international leaders and directors of four U/U global organizations joined Meadville Lombard for a two-day Scoping Symposium. By using storytelling methods, we learned about the congregational, social justice, and leadership opportunities and challenges faced by diverse U/U communities around the world. Most importantly, we heard what our international partners needed to say. They highlighted the importance of building relationships, respecting people's right to tell their own story, making room for multiple concepts and styles of leadership, the need to go beyond listening into active learning, and the importance of staying grounded in the spiritual value of global relationships.

Our global encounter came with its own challenges. Due to logistical mishaps, two of the guests from Asia were not present in the meeting. This situation helped us to identify issues in the way we handle international travel and inspired the development of new tools and processes. As part of our focus on relationship building, we took the necessary steps to stay in conversation with these communities and to continue to learn from them.

The third part of this project was what we refer to as "ethnographic visits" or the "mapping project." This part of the project served as a continuation of intentional connection with international partners that started with the Scoping Symposium. Each member of the faculty was assigned to visit at least one international community and was charged with conducting interviews and building relationships with members of their host community. The mapping process had three major accomplishments:

- Through participant observation faculty learned about the everyday dynamics, assets and problems faced by their host community (faculty members were learners rather than teachers).
- As a school, the "mapping project" gave us the opportunity to build relationships with international partners/communities.
- The visits were included as part of the Faculty Development Grant.

The Faculty Development Grant helped us to bring closure to the Innovation Grant. During the Integrative Retreat in April, the faculty processed together the learnings for these experiences and started drafting how it will impact curricular changes. They also continued with the collaborative spirit that Meadville Lombard is looking to infuse in its international endeavors.

ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

What are the most crucial issues and questions engaged by the project?



Scope:

Although effective internationalization must be comprehensive in scope, human and financial resources remind us that it is important to identify the place that global learning has within our mission. Building sustainable partnerships and an effective internationalization strategy requires that we identify, prioritize, and sequence the steps we need to take to address the different elements of internationalization (academic, research, governance, structure and service, and external relations and co-curriculum). The Innovation Grant helped us to create an accurate vision of our resources and the needs of the international communities that we serve. With the benefit of this work and vision, the Global Learning Team is currently preparing an Internationalization Strategy proposal to the institutional Leadership Team.

International Education Requires Institutional Commitment:

The absence of intentional global learning structures, curricular and co-curricular activities, is a disservice to our international and domestic students. By listening and engaging in conversation with our international partners, we have been able to identify this need and start addressing it. However, to form religious leaders who can effectively address the spiritual needs of today's globalizing world, Meadville Lombard must take a comprehensive approach to transforming our institutional culture. Therefore, an internationalization strategy needs to be integrated in the academic, administrative, student life, and leadership spheres of the institution.

The collaborative approach that we used in this project reflects our institutional commitment to this cultural transformation. During our initial meeting in August, staff and faculty had the opportunity to shape future conversations on global learning. Prior to receiving the grant, the institutional Leadership Team (President and Vice Presidents) were already interested and invested in developing a global learning community. But as the project evolved they decided to get more involved in designing and approving the Internationalization Strategy. Their participation signals an increasing commitment to forming leaders with the skills to serve in a globalized world and ensures the alignment of the internationalization strategy with the school's mission.

Awareness and Reflection on US and Liberal Exceptionalism:

Through our internal assessment and conversations with international partners, we have become aware of our ethnocentric inclinations. Our challenge now is to decenter the school's predisposition towards US and liberal exceptionalism. As we do this, we recognize that internationalization complicates the idea of social relevance. There is a need to engage in a permanent reflection that balances our role as educators and the commitment to serve people where they are.

The practice of active listening to the international community combined with the school's eagerness to learn from our partners is creating the foundation for a long-term plan for institutional intercultural development. To move towards an ethno-relative or intercultural mindset, Meadville Lombard is using the IDI (Intercultural Development Inventory) as a tool to identify our baseline (i.e. our "intercultural"



group portrait), build a strategy to guide our work as an institution, and to hold staff and faculty accountable for moving forward in their intercultural development.

Additionally, the school is moving from a transactional approach to global relations to transformational partnerships. A transformational model prioritizes sustainable relations, knowledge exchange, and mutual learning. Some tactics have already been put into place. For instance, one of our faculty members collaborated with the International Council of Unitarian/Universalist to develop the academic content for their biannual international meeting; Meadville Lombard and the Hungarian Unitarian Church are running a pilot for a Dual Degree Program; and our library and archive staff is developing a model for collaboration as they respond to the call of a community in India looking to preserve their historical documents.

International Communities instead of an International Community:

The diversity of the world and U/U theologies around the globe give a new layer of complexity to the work of global learning. This has two main ramifications in our internationalization strategy: 1. As we build a community that is inclusive of students from outside the United States, we need to identify when it is relevant to address them as a cohort and when, given the variety of national and cultural contexts, it is more appropriate to integrate them into the larger student body; 2. Forming religious leaders who can serve in a globalizing world requires that they move beyond global awareness to learn how to become more interculturally adaptive—or, to learn how to consciously shift and translate between multiple cultural perspectives.

Since intercultural skills are learned through experience, we are looking to create cultural and academic exchanges for students, staff, and faculty. Also, as we transform our curriculum, the faculty is intentionally adapting their pedagogy for a global audience and looking to integrate the development of intercultural competences into their classes.

Integration with Our Contextual Leadership Model:

Our low-residency contextual educational model makes Meadville Lombard accessible to international communities and allows us to bring different voices to the classroom. Now, we are adapting our student life and curriculum to integrate the diversity of experiences that our international students bring.

With a predominantly U.S learning community, we are identifying innovative ways to guide our students to learn how their context is influenced and influence the global conversation. We are planning to identify key intercultural competences, create opportunities for global engagement, integrate global dynamics in classroom learning, and diversify the voices heard in the school.

The use of U.S English as our main learning language is a barrier to accessing the full experiences of other cultures. As one of our initial steps to move towards a global learning culture, we are inviting and encouraging students to read texts in their first language when available, and domestic students who know languages besides English will be encouraged to do the same. This practice will add intercultural context to our learning. In the same vein, our co-curricular activities will become more diverse. We are looking to diversify the languages and forms of worship that we practice in spiritual and social spaces.

The reflection on our learning model also opens the questions about global vs local discussions. Finding a balance between these topics is a challenge that will be addressed through curricular changes, relationship with institutional partners, and student activity groups.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

What are the most significant opportunities/benefits engaged by the project? How did you engage them?

Meadville Lombard has a long-term relationship with communities outside the US. This project allowed us to learn from them. By inviting international partners and international students to participate in the Scoping Symposium, we discovered blind points, successes, best practices, and future opportunities. This project gave us the opportunity to take a relevant step into building an Internationalization Strategy based on the needs expressed by those who benefit from our education and to build a network that will allow us to adapt to the constant changes of today's globalizing world.

Our international students and alumni believe in us. They see our educational model and quality of education as a resource that can help them grow their communities, serve their congregants, and build a larger network of Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists. Through this project, they felt heard. New channels of communications were opened and now we are in the process of identifying new ways of serving those who are already part of our learning community.

There is support for the endeavor of global learning across the leadership, academic, and administrative areas. They all recognize the need of taking the next step toward global learning and they are all committed to navigating the changes that this endeavor entails. For instance, the library has included in its regular check-ins for improvement the question of global education. They have already begun to create resources for pre-travel preparation, engage in archival projects with international communities, build Library resources and support for international work, and to identify a list of library resources for Spanish speakers. Additionally, having a full time Director of International Formation and Recruitment facilitates the exchange of knowledge, grows the partnership focus of our global relations, creates a common language around global learning that works across the school, opens opportunities for innovation and deep reflection on international education, and supports a sustainable internationalization strategy.

While our low-residency program allows people to live in their home countries, our contextual learning helps people to simultaneously engage with the academic content in a theoretical and practical level. The deep connection between praxis and theory constantly brings to the front of the conversation our opportunity for improvement as well as the positive impact that our educational model is already having in different communities around the world.

What are the most significant challenges/obstacles you confronted in the project? How did you overcome them?



One of the biggest challenges we faced, as with many other institutions seeking to internationalize, is the tendency to see international programs as separate from the basic goals and structure of the institution. As we work toward an internationalization strategy, we have intentionally avoided the temptation to create a disjointed blanket of tactics that are reactive and transactional or that simply mirrors the models used by other institutions. Instead, we are creating a mission-based, context-specific, transformational internationalization strategy.

Organizing the Scoping Symposium helped us to identify gaps in properly setting up the logistics for international travels. Two of our guests from Asia were not able to join us because of a lack of proper procedures and logistical support. Again, our US exceptionalism didn't allow us to identify the different practices around traveling that exist around the world. As a result, we have created a comprehensive check list for international traveling as well as a set of procedures that ensures the success of future global engagements.

Additionally, personnel changes in the academic area of the school impacted the workload of the faculty and the President. There was a negotiation of traveling schedules to properly fit the regular activities in the school and our commitment with the international partners. The school allowed the Director of International Formation to rearrange work priorities for the current academic year and the faculty made this project a key component of their work.

LEARNING

What did we learn that benefits us?

Global learning is not an option anymore. It is intrinsic to effectively forming religious leaders who are called to serve in our globalizing world. It is a commitment that every day becomes more complex. Therefore, a sustainable engagement with global education requires a staff and faculty culture of permanent learning. As an institution we are called to model the competencies that we are looking to develop in our students.

One of our most valuable learnings was that our first step to deepen our work with international students is to be more intentional about what we're already doing. A deeper formation experience for our international students will require us to be more deliberate about every phase of their educational experience—for example, by making our pedagogy more explicit (explaining the theories that support our approaches to teaching and learning), by lifting up and enabling co-curricular and extra-curricular learning opportunities, by more intentionally advising international students with respect to pre-entry, adjustment, and re-entry issues.

We learned that intentionally-designed interaction between US and international students has a significant positive impact on students' (US and international) ability to communicate effectively across cultural differences. It also leads to increased cultural self-awareness which is a key step in developing intercultural competence. Therefore, we need to develop co-curricular, curricular, and field experiences



that respond to the needs of a global learning mindset and strengthen students' skills to shift between cultural contexts.

Global learning only happens in the context of global relationships. As a school embedded in US educational practices, we need to be aware of our inclination towards US exceptionalism. We are committed to engaging our international partners in ways that lead to mutual learning. Our aim is to learn from them, give them the space to share their stories and to make their contributions to theological education, and to listen and respond when they express their formational needs. We were faced with the fact that being good in racial discussions, or committed to US multiculturalism, doesn't make us good at international intercultural conversations.

Additional learning included a rethinking of our US approach to technology, development of ethnographic protocols for interviews that moved us towards a more relational framework, use of storytelling and one-on-one models for international encounters, the need to rethink our Master of Arts in Leadership Studies in terms of the needs of international students interested in the program, and the opportunity to create new models of formation that better respond to the reality of global communities.

What did we learn that might benefit other schools in the Association?

As theological schools we need to develop our own models for international education. Attempting to replicate what works for larger universities is inappropriate. As theological schools, we are committed to the importance of the social, emotional, and spiritual formation of religious leaders. We understand that learning in our schools does not happen only in the classroom. It happens within cultural and emotional contexts.

The commitment to global learning needs to permeate the whole of the organization and be aligned with its mission. It entails culture change led by the leadership and embraced by faculty and administration. It is important to remember that a global mindset requires the inclusion of international voices. A purely US community (faculty, staff students) that doesn't include international participation across the different levels of the organization becomes a theoretical endeavor without the inclusion that is required for a global conversation.

We used storytelling, collaborative methodologies, one-on-one conversations and auto-ethnography as decentering methodologies that created deep reflections on experiences, helped us to take the first step toward transformational partnerships with international communities, and included more internal and external voices in the success of the endeavor of global learning.

Giving space and time for people to tell their own stories is a key component of dismantling US and liberal exceptionalism. At the core of our internationalization strategy, we are including activities that invite permanent reflection on our own blind spots, maintain a collaborative relation with global partners, welcome the expertise of non-US voices, and highlight intercultural experiences that are enhanced by reflective processes.

Were there any unexpected insights, innovative ideas, or possibilities that emerged through the project?



When we started this project, our focus was on creating a better learning community for our international students. Through the project, we identified that we aim to educate religious leaders, domestic and international, with the skills to think from a global perspective and to create transformative partnerships.

Seeing international education from the perspective of those who benefit from it has changed our vision for global learning. Conversation with international partners reminded us of the importance of being rooted in our mission and values. It was also an opportunity to identify the assumptions we were making regarding their needs and the relevance of our educational model and programs.

Our faculty and leadership have identified the value of relationships as we create and move forward with our internationalization strategy. Now they are connected to communities around the world. Conversations are being maintained and there are already conversations about future collaborations. These relationships are already shaping how we teach and how we see ourselves as institution.

Our commitment to forming religious leaders who can serve in today's globalizing world is not about transferring knowledge and skills to international students. It is about creating an environment in which global conversations take place, supporting domestic and international students as they learn how to shift between cultural contexts, and giving voice to international communities. Our current approach to anti-oppression work is US centered. Now, we have the commitment to include a global perspective to power dynamics and social justice issues.

Being fluent in interracial conversations doesn't necessarily translate into capable intercultural individuals. New efforts need to be made to include global competencies into the current curriculum and co-curricular activities. As a school, we also need to be more intentional in approaching experience outside the classroom as learning opportunities.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES

List key recommended practices that you learned in pursuing this project.

Meadville Lombard Theological School is committed to approaching global learning as a key component of the formation of religious leaders who transform communities in today's globalizing world. We integrate intercultural experience in the classroom, field, and student life experiences aiming to develop competences to adapt to differences and shift between cultural perspectives. As an institution, we build transformational international partnerships and our leadership, faculty, and staff model a culture of global learning.

Two of the most relevant learning of the last year are: 1.) the role of Leadership Team to successfully integrate global learning into the school culture; 2) the importance of fostering a spirit of collaboration in the development of a project that implies a cultural change. Therefore, the Meadville Lombard Global Learning Team is currently building a proposal to be presented to the Leadership team. The following recommendations are part of the draft that we are working on:

- Identify global competences for religious leadership to be included in the curriculum;
- Strengthen institutional commitment to global learning;
- Create a professional development plan for faculty, staff and leadership with a focus on intercultural development;
- Ensure financial sustainability for international programs and exchanges;
- Identify global partners and incorporate global experiences in the curriculum.

As we build tactics for the strategy, we will address the following categories:

- Educational mission
- Research mission
- U/U and liberal religions mission
- Social justice/service mission
- Institutional mission

IMPACT ON THE STANDARDS OF ACCREDITATION

Are there implications from your project for the possible process of redevelopment of the Standards of Accreditation?

Religious leaders around the world are already immersed in social, political, spiritual, and economic contexts that are global by nature. Therefore, a global mindset is a requirement to properly understand and act on social issues affecting communities. As theological schools working from a US mindset, we need to be aware of our tendency to exceptionalist thinking and the history of colonialism that has shaped our relationship with the world. Reflections around global bias need to happen in institutions looking to serve from a global perspective.

Additionally, as partnerships between global institutions grow, there is a greater need for guidelines regarding credit transfer, memoranda of understanding, and joint degree programs.

SUSTAINABILITY

How might the project or its learning be sustained through a culture of faculty development in your school

The Innovation Grant is an initial step for Meadville Lombard's vision of becoming a theological school that forms religious leaders who have the skills to lead across national borders and with a global perspective. The last year allowed us to identify our resources and weakness, start partnerships to ensure a sustainable global conversation, and begin to create a culture of global learning in which leadership, faculty, staff, and students are fully involved.

The reflections shared in this report highlight our commitment to long-term strategy to transform the school's culture to a global mindset. The leadership of the school is committed and involved in this process.