

“Integrating Columbia Theological Seminary’s Integrative Courses”

Final Report¹

Abstract:

Columbia Theological Seminary has long featured a series of “Integrative Courses” among its requirements for the Master of Divinity degree. Intended to help students make connections between theological disciplines, the global church, and their own faith stories and vocational objectives, these courses comprise the backbone of the MDiv curriculum. The three current courses offer students important opportunities to think and act in increasingly integrative ways, but are not well integrated with each other. Readings, assignments, and discussions in each class, on the whole, function as if the other two courses do not exist. Therefore, we sought this faculty development grant to train faculty to teach the integrative courses. We proposed a series of four one-day faculty workshops during which faculty gather with a consultant to help us connect the courses, grow more comfortable with the contents of each course, gain familiarity with innovative pedagogies, and link the courses to the Atlanta context.

Narrative Summary:

This grant funds part of a larger taskforce-driven project to shape the integrative courses during a time when our curriculum is in transition. We recognize that there are a range of matters having to do with the integrative courses that sit outside the purview of the grant (e.g., how the courses fit into the larger MDiv curriculum and its student learning outcomes, what our surveys of alumni/ae, students, and faculty show about things that do and don’t work in the courses, how the Office of Academic Affairs should staff the courses, etc.). But this grant gives us the opportunity to focus on one of the most important things we do with these courses; namely, *teach* them in such a way that they offer a distinctive shape to the degree and are coherent with each other.

The three courses are:

- **“Imagination and Resilience,”** designed for entering MDiv students, explores “imagination and resilience” by engaging in a variety of Christian practices such as study, listening, prayer, dialogue, and hospitality.
- **“Explorations,”** taken halfway through matriculation, is an academic and experiential exploration of a significantly different cultural context and the church’s mission. Contexts may include inner-city Atlanta, the Appalachian region of the U.S., India, Ghana, Central Europe, and Jamaica.

¹ This report comes late for two reasons: First, our fourth of the four consultations covered by the grant concluded at the end of August, 2019. Providing time for getting feedback on that consultation and writing up the final report meant that we couldn’t have turned this report in before the end of September. Second, the grant leader (Mark Douglas) was on sabbatical during the fall of 2019 and had a number of writing projects that needed to be done during that timeframe.

- **“Cross/Roads,”** the capstone course, begins with the recognition that imaginative and resilient communities need imaginative and resilient leaders. This course explores leadership practices that shape such communities.

We designed the grant to be implemented over two years, recognizing that a wide range of faculty commitments would make four separate day-long consultations within a single year unduly burdensome and could, therein, inhibit faculty participation. We chose, instead, to hold two consultations per year, with one consultation prior to the beginning of the fall semester and another consultation prior to the beginning of the spring semester. Each of the four consultations focuses on one of the four student learning outcomes associated with the three integrative courses. Due to a variety of factors (including prior institutional obligations in August, the short timeframe for finding a consultant between being notified that we had received the grant and August, and the fact that the project director was on a grant-funded leave in the summer and fall of 2017), we held our first consultation in the early spring of 2018 and have therefore reframed our timeline such that the first and third consultations would occur in the spring and the second and fourth consultations would occur during the fall faculty conferences of 2018 and 2019. This final report comes after we received and collated feedback about the fourth consultation, held in late August of 2019, and the four consultations, collectively.

Each consultation begins with Interested faculty and administrators enjoying an evening in informal conversations about how to shape the integrative courses, and then gathering the next day for a day-long consultation shaped by the consultant in conversation with the steering committee. All consultations involve discussions of best practices for teaching the SLO under review, explorations of readings selected by the consultant, and wider conversations about the three integrative courses and the place of the SLO under review in the three integrative courses.

The first consultation was held in March of 2018 and led by Rev. Dr. Ted A. Smith of Emory University, who guided us in a series of conversations about how best to think about and teach toward the first of four student learning outcomes associated with the three integrative courses. That SLO stipulates that each of our MDiv students be able to “[a]ccurately name and critically engage the cultural and theological forces that have shaped his or her personal faith and practices.” Among the texts that Ted chose for us to discuss as related to this SLO were Ignatio Ellacuria’s “Is a Different Kind of University Possible?” in *Toward a Society that Serves its People: The Intellectual Contribution of El Salvador’s Murdered Jesuits*, edited by John Hassett and Hugh Lacey (Washington D.C: Georgetown UP, 1991); selections from Margaret S. Archer’s *Making Our Way through the World: Human Reflexivity and Social Mobility* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2007); and Theodor Adorno’s “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” in Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005).

The consultation was very successful. The feedback we received on the consultation included comments like these:

“I thought that it was great. I really appreciated how Ted treated it like a seminar and had us wrestle with important thinkers who presented different potential solutions to the problems that our institution faces. I’d recommend more of this type of big-picture thinking that resists immediate practical workshopping and creates space for asking questions about the models that undergird our institution, our curriculum, and our pedagogies. Thanks!”

“My comments are entirely positive. I was grateful for the flexibility you and Ted both showed in accommodating our busy schedules. During the Thursday evening dinner and the Friday morning conversation that I was able to attend, I found the discussions lively and thoughtful. It was a rare gift to have time for such generative discussion with my colleagues. Even if the direct outcomes may not lead to specific recommendations for the integrative courses, I think they offered some insights that could guide us forward.”

“I thought that our time with Ted Smith was perfect. He helped us to think outside the box, and the readings he walked us through helped to shape our assumptions in important ways. As predicted, Ted has provided us with a new standard for consultations. In communicating with future consultants, I think it will be helpful to encourage our consultants to do this similar work of challenging not only what is stated in our student learning outcomes but also what is assumed.”

The second consultation occurred in August of 2018 and was led by Dr. Leah Gunning Francis, Dean of Faculty at Christian Theological Seminary, who helped us think through a second SLO, namely, that each of our MDiv students will be able to “[m]ap out courses of action in contexts of change and initiate them.”² As part of our consultation, Leah led us in conversations arising out of her book *Ferguson and Faith: Sparking Leadership and Awakening Community* (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2015). This, too, was a successful consultation, with feedback including comments like these:

I deeply appreciated the emphasis on formation and transformation of the teacher/scholar as a first and essential step in accomplishing the learning outcome(s) we’ve identified for our integrative courses. These sessions felt deeply liturgical to me, requiring a change of embodied orientation in time and space before God and with others in order to think about what how and what it means to become part of God’s work in the world. I found Dr. Gunning Francis’s challenge to our faculty to be both compelling and relevant for the pedagogical work we claim that we want to do: the kinds of understanding of our students and our worlds that are required. I came away from the conference asking myself: how are we teaching our students to see, taste, touch, smell, and hear differently in the world so that they might be the kinds of people who help to transform our world? What kinds of practices and disciplines does this call for in the classroom and from me as a teacher?

I see the real strengths and brilliance of Dr. Gunning Francis to invite the faculty to reflect on the ways in which we are and are not yet equipped to lead in this SLO. It was revealed to me (again) that we have deep work to do as a faculty in order to be leaders in modeling activism, particularly around imagining and initiating change actions. What do we as a faculty see as needing to change? How do we need to wrestle with the internal work (in each faculty and in the collegium) in order to have integrity as teachers of this SLO? These are the questions that our speaker so helpfully raised in the room.

² The consultant for the second SLO is Natalie Wigg Stevenson. Due to her pregnancy and the birth of her child (and parental leave policies in Canada), we were not able to bring her to campus until the spring of 2019. Rather than wait for her (and in order to get Dr. Gunning Francis while she was available), we chose to pursue the SLO’s out of order.

In this instance, we also identified an issue we had not paid attention to: our consultations are strongest where our consultants know us best. Ted lives just a few miles from CTS and knows most of our faculty. Leah, though, knows only a few of us and lives in Indiana. The faculty did note in their assessment that this lack of knowledge showed through at times when, for example, she had to rely on rather generic connections between context and activism. In order to reduce the significance of this problem, not only will Mark meet with each of the consultants ahead of time, but we will arrange a Zoom meeting for the consultants with the steering committee.

In March of 2019, Dr. Natalie Wigg Stevenson of Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto, led us in our third consultation, on the topic of the second of our four SLOs: that each of our MDiv students will be able to “[c]ompetently analyze social contexts by using a range of methods (e.g., ethnography, social psychology, sociology of religion) and tools (e.g., power grids, sector analysis, theologies of culture).” Natalie provided a range of readings (*Qualitative Research in Theological Education: Pedagogy in Practice*, edited by Mary Clark Moschella and Susan Willhauck (London: SCM Pub., 2019) and an essay by Willie James Jennings, “Disfigurations of Christian Identity: Performing Identity as Theological Method” in *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, edited by Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky (New York: Oxford UP, 2017)) which served as the basis for our conversations. This was, perhaps, our most ambitious day of work. Among the pieces of feedback we received were:

This is the best one yet! Build upon what has been learned in each of the consultations.

Guidance from the presenter not only on what to read, but on how to read in preparation for the consultation. The reading guide also provided helpful synopsis if you didn't have time to read one or more of the chapters. The presenter helped participants to experience some of the challenges of a variety of types of integration in her teaching. Creating a space to bring artifacts to work on with the consultant and peers was a real strength. The consultant was transparent about her challenges as a teacher as well as her insights from teaching.

I especially appreciated the distinction between teaching ethnography and thinking ethnographically; that's an important difference for us. Also, I appreciated the concern about linking the this SLO to the larger vision of the integrative courses. That work was done creatively and with good attention to and time for us to workshop our own project(s).

Our final consultation occurred in August of 2019 during our annual fall faculty conference and was led by Shanta Premawardhana, the President of OMNIA Institute of Contextual Leadership. He helped us think through best practices in teaching toward our third SLO: that students gain the ability to “work comfortably and appreciatively in unfamiliar contexts and with persons of other cultures.” Shanta had us read two texts: Jeanine Hill-Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism and Religious Diversity in America* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2017) and his own essay, “Public Ministry in a World of Many Faiths.” Comments coming from the feedback on our time with Shanta included:

Opportunities to connect with colleagues over substantive issues is always valuable. It was helpful to consider the intersection of white supremacy and Christian supremacy (though I did

not think our discussion was very nuanced). I especially enjoyed the table conversations about our experiences of othering and being othered.

Conversation about the concept of "Christian supremacy"; regardless of whether it spawned or was spawned by "white supremacy" the question about how we teach about religious difference in light of this concept was helpful.

Could we as a collegium think about drafting agreed upon signature assignments for these learning outcomes in each of the integrative courses? It may be that these courses are hard to teach because of the difficulty in imagining pedagogical tools that get at these outcomes. Maybe these would all be easier to teach if we could standardize the assignments, while lectures, and other learning activities could vary by instructor, given their disciplinary backgrounds.

Upon the conclusion of the fourth consultation, we sent a survey to the faculty, inviting them to reflect on the benefits of the four consultations, collectively, for our work in shaping the integrative courses. The results of this survey will be included in the next section, as they are one part of the data we are using from these consultations as we shape the integrative courses. However, a few comments here might be valuable. Asked about the benefits of the consultations to the three integrative courses, comments included:

Across the speakers, the importance of integration was affirmed. It was also abundantly clear that we can and should improve our teaching and learning in our integrative courses.

I believe it is helpful to hear and learn more a wide and deep breadth of scholars and theological educators on their analyses of what/how they are seeing patterns and developments in the academy, the church, and the world.

The benefit was in hearing from diverse personalities presenting diverse perspectives. Unfortunately, these diverse foci were not integrated. They remain too topical, issues-centered, and disconnected from each other in my recollection.

And asked about the benefits of the consultations to their individual classes, faculty responded with comments such as:

[The chance] to foreground and value integration even more, to think integratively both across the curriculum and in relation to community partners and (inter)cultural realities such as white supremacy, Christian nationalism, and intersectionality

I wish the consultations were more directed in their foci to more tangibly help me/us consider and implement changes, revisions, and additions in my/our courses.

I did not find much applicable to my courses.

Finally, asked about how we might use the four consultations in shaping the whole curriculum during an impending curriculum review, we heard the following:

I'd like us to think more about the ways we integrate experiential learning into these courses. We do this well but there's still room for improvement.

Assign integrative teaching teams first rather than last, equip integrative teaching teams with planning time/training, prioritize integrative professors as members of the teaching teams, audit the curriculum for latent supremacies (our recently edited teaching and learning commitment statement should be used), rethink Explorations by changing the title asap and assessing the pedagogy, advocate for a faculty immersion experience as part of the assessment.

Unsure.

Going forward, the Task Force overseeing review of the integrative courses, will take the insights and questions coming from these four consultations into account as it reframes the courses in anticipation of an impending curriculum review.

Insights Coming from the Four Consultations:³

- Successfully teaching the integrative courses involves many of the same pedagogical skills as teaching other courses. Good teaching practices are transferrable; as such, the courses are strongest when taught by strong teachers and, correlatively, the skills and insights we're addressing in the consultations are valuable to faculty in their own courses. One of the strengths of running two of the consultations during the annual fall faculty conference is that these conferences, unlike our spring consultations, are "command performances" for the whole faculty and so even faculty who have little interest in teaching in the integrative courses are gaining teaching wisdom for their own courses and greater understandings of the role that the integrative courses play in the MDiv. One obvious benefit of these command performances is that the whole faculty also gets to know each other *as teachers* better and so feels more willing to call on colleagues to come into their classes where the topic under discussion is an area of expertise for those colleagues. The fall, 2018 version of "Imagination and Resilience" included more guest lectures/presentations/panels on topics pertinent to the class than any previous version has.
- Faculty are aching to spend time thinking with each other about the changing landscape of theological education in which we teach as well as how to teach in that landscape. Provocative consultants who can address both of those concerns add a richness to our time together that focusing on practices alone, would not provide. There are, moreover, natural overlaps between conversations about the changing landscape and our project goals having to do with the integration of theory and practice, the shift from discipline-specific toward more holistic/integrative curricula, and changing student demographics in which students have less

³ For interests of space and focus, this list excludes some insights already named in our "interim" final report, provided in the spring of 2019.

familiarity with church practices and a wider range of vocational interests than previously. At the same time, it is important for us not to let this interest swamp the more narrowly-defined goals of the project. We are trying to find an appropriate balance in this. Especially during a time of a great theological resorting within theological education, the time to talk about and interpret these changes is both more pressing and harder to find. For the immediate future, we may well need to continue to pursue further grants that “buy” time for us to have these conversations.

- One component of this changing landscape in theological education that is named above is the shift away from disciplinary foci in our teaching. One complicating feature of this component is that few of us are trained to think in multidisciplinary ways. We tend to approach integration with discipline-specific lenses on: Bible scholars want to show how good exegesis can inform a wide variety of issues; historians want to ground practices in longer histories; ministry professors want to link integration to the daily life of the church, etc. Part of our challenge is to recognize, honor, and yet also overcome our tendencies to use disciplinary lenses to make sense of inter- and non-disciplinary matters.
- Staffing the integrative courses continues to be a matter in need of attention in multiple ways. First, staffing has, in the past, been organized around two questions: who is interested in teaching them? and who has a course schedule that will allow them to participate in the teaching team? The former question creates a self-selecting pool of possible teaching faculty, therein undermining the degree to which these courses need to be “owned” by the entire faculty. The latter eliminates some excellent teachers (and disciplinary perspectives) from that pool. One of the hopes that motivated our pursuit of this grant is that we could increase the pool of interested, available, and competent teachers. We have, therefore, advertised the advantages that participation in the consultations offers for everyone on the faculty (opportunities to gather with colleagues over meals and in important conversation, to learn transferrable skills, to get to know leading scholars who consult with us, etc.). Whether these opportunities are equally enticing to all CTS faculty, though, is an open question.
- Future versions of the integrative courses are already being reshaped—though less in light of the *topics* of the consultations than the *conversations* that the consultations are generating. The first-year course is being simplified (fewer topics, fewer texts, and clearer connections between its assignments and those assignments that arise in the second- and third-year courses). The second-year course is being reshaped to integrate with the first-year course (and is undergoing an independent review through the work of the Office of Contextual Education in conversation with the Office of Academic Affairs and the Director of the MDiv degree). The third-year course has been rescheduled to better accommodate the complex schedules that 2nd semester seniors carry.

- The integrative courses carry a disproportionate weight in creating artifacts for assessment of the MDiv degree. Focusing on the SLOs associated with the integrative courses should mean that less energy is spent trying to shape assignments in those courses that satisfy SLOs associated with the degree as a whole. Correlatively, we are asking the faculty to attend more closely to the MDiv degree SLOs as part of the way they form each of their courses. This shift will, we think, be of benefit to the degree and the institution as a whole.

This narrative summary and these insights answer several of the questions ATS asks of us. Let me proceed toward either filling in details on questions partially answered or answering those that have, to this point, gone unanswered.

Responses to ATS Questions

ATS invited us to respond to a list of eleven questions when shaping our final reports. These questions are:

1. What were the **primary goals** of your faculty development grant project?
2. How well did the project attain those goals?
3. What are the **most crucial issues and questions** engaged by the project?
4. What are the most significant **opportunities/benefits** engaged by the project? How did you engage them?
5. What are the most significant **challenges/obstacles** you confronted in the project? How did you overcome them?
6. What did you learn of benefit for your school?
7. What did you learn that might be of benefit for other schools in the Association?
8. Are there unexpected **insights, innovative ideas, or possibilities** that have emerged through the project?
9. List key **recommended practices** that you learned in pursuing this project.
10. Are there implications from your project for the redevelopment of the **Standards of Accreditation**?
11. How might the project or its learning be sustained through a culture of faculty development in your school?

Many of these questions are answered--at least in part--in the narrative above. What follows attempts to fill in details on answers to these questions where they are not addressed above. For ease, we have grouped the questions.

On Questions (1) and (2): The primary goal (of better integrating the integrative courses with each other and within the curriculum by attending to best pedagogical practices associated with the four learning outcomes associated with the three courses) was, largely, fulfilled. Even the four extended opportunities for the faculty to reflect with each other on the courses, on integrative teaching, and on the setting of the courses within the wider curriculum and in our wider social setting was deeply appreciated by the faculty. And each of the three courses has, over the last year and a half, undergone

revisions based on these conversations. Perhaps just as importantly, the task force charged with shaping the integrative courses now has much more data to use in its work. That said, there are some results that will only be discovered after further work (most notably, the work of the task force charged with assessing the integrative courses and the work of the faculty in reviewing and revising the curriculum) is completed. There are still other matters that need to be addressed that the consultations helped to surface. Among them are:

- The question of staffing the integrative courses such that they are well-designed and led by teachers with a passion for them that fits within the larger faculty's vision of the purpose(s) and foci of the curriculum. Asking, "Now that we know how faculty are staffing their own courses, who is available to teach in the integrative courses?" is inadequate in shaping them. Likewise, giving faculty teaching the integrative courses the time necessary to talk with each other and shape both their particular integrative course and the three courses in relation to each other will take the support of the Office of Academic Affairs.
- Even after the consultations and their focus on the courses' learning outcomes, the faculty's wide agreement on the importance of teaching in integrative ways does not necessarily translate into coherent courses, depending on what faculty individuals and teams think the most important components of the courses are. This is, perhaps, simply the shadow side of giving faculty the freedom to shape the courses to be responsive to the time and context in which they are being taught. It would be ironic to emphasize context in the classes without recognizing the need to attend to context in shaping them.
- In the face of busy schedules, creating time for the faculty to talk with each other about its common teaching task is difficult. The ATS grant helped make such times possible but the consultations didn't reach everyone and now that the grant is completed, finding such times may be more difficult.

On Questions (3), (4), and (5): Beyond those described above, the consultation surfaced a number of complex issues, opportunities, and obstacles that pertain not only to the integrative courses, but to the curricula at CTS more generally (each of which the consultations helped us name). Among them are:

- The task of onboarding new faculty to standing curricula. Almost half of CTS's regular faculty, as well as its President, Dean of Faculty, and Dean of Students, have joined CTS since the last MDiv curriculum revision, only six years ago. They ask important and complicated questions like, "Why are these our learning outcomes?" "Where do I and my particular areas of expertise/interest fit into the integrative courses?" and "What is the process for changing the curriculum, the integrative courses, or the learning outcomes associated with each?"
- Integrating the courses to each other and to the larger MDiv curriculum only begins to address integrative questions. Particularly pertinent to these integrative questions are those having to do with making the curriculum relevant to the rapidly and dramatically changing ecclesial and social landscape. Here, though, there is little agreement about which parts of those changes need greatest attention: matters of race/ethnicity and white supremacy? Climate change and environmental degradation? The internationalization of theological education as the global

center of the church moves to the majority world? The need to attend to the growing power of social media? The increasingly toxic partisan shape of politics?

- How do we find time for the faculty to engage in extended conversations when faculty are overextended in their regular work? And what draws them together/excites their imaginations in the face of their busy schedules?
- How will revisions to the integrative courses impact and be impacted by the larger project of curriculum review and revision to begin next year?

On Questions (6), (7), and (8): Again: these questions have, in part, been answered above (and also addressed in the workshop we led at the Spring, 2019 meeting of ATS in California). Beyond those matters, however, we would include at least the following:

- Consultations have their limits. The in-and-out format of consultants coming from other places hinders their efficacy, especially when they do not necessarily know much about the school they are coming to. At several points in the feedback we sought after the consultations, faculty voiced frustrations that the consultants did not know us well enough to understand that we were further along in addressing some issue than they assumed we were, with the result being that faculty felt like they knew as much about/more than the consultant did about the topic under discussion.
- Eating together matters. Even though many faculty members were not able to come to the pre-consultation dinners we had with the consultants, those times were among the richer times for discussion on the topics at hand and for getting to know each other better.
- New faculty orientation should include considerable time for helping those faculty members understand not only the structure of the curriculum, but how it came to exist, where it might be going, and their various roles in it. This is especially the case with regard to any type of integrative courses, since those typically fall outside the purview of new faculty's experiences or areas of study/expertise. Likewise, the capacity to teach in integrative courses may be an important part of position descriptions used in hiring faculty members.
- During a time of churn in theological education and rapid change in the church and society, processes for revising curricula need to change. Concentrated (and, sometimes, expensive) time spent every six to eight years may be inadequate in keeping curricula relevant. This is especially so with regard to integrative courses.

On Questions (9), (10), and (11): Again: these questions--especially (9) and (11)--are substantially answered above. We are not sure about how our consultations help us answer (10).

Sincerely (and on behalf of the taskforce overseeing both the grant and the larger review of the Integrative Courses),

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