

## United Lutheran Seminary

[Formerly Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg & Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia]

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### **New MDiv. Curriculum: Delivery Modes, Discipline Integration & Cross-Campus Partnerships**

#### **Abstract:**

- The application is for funds to support the implementation of the new M.Div. curriculum at United Lutheran Seminary. This curriculum, particularly in its integrative disciplinary nature, the multiple pathways in which it will be delivered (including bi-campus hybrids), the use of backward course design in syllabus construction, and the focus on student learning competencies fits the description of a model of theological education that “break[s] new ground and [has] the possibility of producing models and practices that could be effective and of benefit to the participating schools and the broader community of schools.”

#### **Questions to address:**

##### **1. What were the primary goals of your innovation grant project?**

- There are three overarching goals of the innovation grant; design a curriculum that is *integrative*, *experiential*, and *empowering*. Each of these is described more fully in what follows.
- By **integrative**, we mean two things. First, we have as a hallmark of the new curriculum strong integration between contextual formation and coursework. This includes not only specifically designated courses where this kind of integration will occur, but also – and more importantly – this integration will be built into the curriculum at every level, such that students will have opportunities in all their courses to bring their practical and academic experiences together. Second, we are committed to integrating the various traditional disciplines into every course so that normally each course will have a Bible, History/Theology, and Practical Theology component. There will be a lead teacher from one discipline who will structure and have final responsibility for the course, but other professors from other disciplines will have a role in the course as well. This will require a good deal of work; not only in redesigning all of our current syllabi, but also from each professor as each of us designs specific “modules” (that will take anywhere from one week to three weeks) that would complement and enhance a colleague’s course. This is the first aspect of our proposal that we think might be an excellent, fruitful model for other seminaries. This type of integrative education seeks to do two things simultaneously. First, it supports a move away from a model in which seminary education emphasizes content-delivery, which often occurs siloed disciplines. Second, it aims toward a model in which

seminary education is focused on student competencies, in order to create nimble, creative thinkers who fruitfully bring together diverse aspects of their seminary education in service of developing (and redeveloping) vibrant ministry settings.

- Not only is our M.Div. curriculum integrative, but it is also **experiential**. Experiential points to our commitment to have students actively engaged in the learning, rather than passively receiving knowledge. This relates specifically to the kind of assignments that will be used in each course, and also is one way to directly relate to student learning competencies, a driving force of the new curriculum. The goal is to create assignments where the students are not simply asked to demonstrate mastery of content, but show how they are able to constructively use what they have learned in a real-world setting.
- This relates to the last main characteristic of the M.Div. curriculum: **empowering**. Here, we indicate that it is our goal that the students come away from their time at seminary not only feeling like, “Yeah, I can do that,” but even more, “I can inspire/invite/create the possibility of others doing that.” Our catch-phrase here is “empowering to empower, not empowering to perform.”
- In addition to the three over-arching commitments, another important aspect of the new curriculum are the **multiple pathways** by which students will be able to engage it. Thus, a variety of courses every semester (and during J-term and the summer) will be offered on both campuses residentially, online, in intensives, and in a variety of hybrid formats. This is the second aspect of our proposal that we think might be a model for other seminaries. Given that the trend is for a wider-variety of curriculum-delivery modalities, the experimentation we are doing, particularly with bi-campus hybrids, might be very helpful as other schools also seek to design courses that can serve a wider variety of student needs across a variety of academic and congregational settings.
- A key hallmark of all of these commitments is identifying and developing in students particular competencies we believe are essential for professional leaders in the church. In our curriculum development process, we began by crafting competencies for the M.Div. degree. (See attachment.) We have articulated six major competencies, and then four to five specific skills under each category. Together, these reflect a comprehensive picture of the aptitudes and abilities we desire our students to have achieved by the time they finish the degree. From these competencies, we redesigned the M.Div. curriculum, again moving away from purely content-driven courses (“Old Testament 101,” “Introduction to Preaching,” “Early Church History”) to courses that would be structured around capabilities—courses that were less about “nouns” and more about “verbs.” We then mapped these courses back onto the competency list, looking for gaps that needed to be filled—competencies that were not receiving adequate attention. This is the work that is ongoing at this time.

- In light of these other commitments, we realized that all syllabi would need to be redesigned, using the process of “backward course design” (also called “outcomes-based design”). This style of course design starts with what we want the students to be able to do once the course is completed (even more aspirationally, what they are able to do five years after the course is finished), then determines what sort of evidence would be needed in order to assess the student’s ability to demonstrate the desired competency, and then shapes assignments, class time, etc. accordingly, in order to facilitate the desired learning outcomes.

## ***2. How well did the project attain those goals?***

- Well, the best I can say here is that we got off to a very good start. A bit of our history from the past year. The school officially opened in July 1<sup>st</sup>, and we had called a new president. We had our courses in place for the fall, but we knew this first year would be complicated, curriculum-wise, as we were trying to do three things simultaneously: graduate seniors in the old LTSG curriculum; graduate seniors in the old LTSP curriculum and launch a new ULS curriculum! In addition, we were trying to balance the needs of DL students, commuting students, and residential students on both campuses. Plus, there was also the issue of merging two different institutional identities and ethos [“ethe,” to the Greek scholars in the audience!]. We were learning about each other as colleagues, and learning how best to work together.
- To that end, we got off to a great start. Last July, we had our first overnight retreat. Frankly, it was wonderful just having the dedicated time to be together, to get to know each other better, and to talk and dream together about the future. We were able to meet in area groups and talk about our goals for the curriculum, and also we met across disciplines and talked about how we could each guest lecture in others’ classes and better integrate the curriculum as a whole.
- So, as far as laying the foundation, and getting the work started, we did very well, I think.
- Then, things went a bit off the rails. We had challenges early on with some of the key administrative personnel, and then we had a crisis with our president, which first surfaced in the fall, but really exploded in February. This resulted in her being fired by the board, and really took over the entire narrative of the spring semester. I have been on sabbatical [sort of], but it is clear that it has been extraordinarily challenging to get any work done—either by faculty or by students.
- We are hoping that the board will approve an interim president at its May meeting, and that we can move on from all this; we need a great deal of healing, but also just hard work, particularly on the curriculum!
- So, having said all that, I also need to say that we did not finish the project—perhaps that is not a surprise.

- We plan to go forward and have another full faculty retreat this summer, most likely in August. These are the specific issues we plan to address, now that we are one year into the life of ULS and this new curriculum:
  - a. First, we need a clearer sense of how each field is accomplishing desired outcomes and how/whether what we have now is working. This relates to the focus on **competencies** we are striving for in the new curriculum.
  - b. Second, we all need a better sense of what’s going on in the other fields, and how the curriculum is working together overall, and not just piecemeal. (This has become clear to us particularly in the process of student advising.) This relates to the **integrative** aspect of the curriculum.
  - c. Third, we need a better process for figuring out what/when/where/how courses are offered. Trying to get residential courses, hybrids, intensives, synchronous courses, and online courses properly distributed so that students (especially residential ones) can get a full course load has been challenging. This is a particular concern, and one where we really need to give much more dedicated attention. This past year, we ended up having to be so reactive, and frankly, ad hoc—we added courses at the last minute both semesters at the request of different populations of students who simply did not have the courses they needed to progress through the curriculum. [We also had a larger incoming class than we had expected, which necessitated some shifts as well.] We ended up needing more adjuncts than I think we really should have, if we had been able to do better planning. This relates to tending to the **multiple pathways** of delivery better.
  - d. Fourth, we need to look again at our syllabus design, and evaluate it and tweak it now that we are a year into the new design. This relates to the emphasis on **backwards course design**.

### **3. *What are the most crucial issues and questions engaged by the project?***

- There are two things I would identify here. The first is how we focus more on actual “performance” than “information.” I think we would all say that our courses aren’t simply meant to deliver information, but at the same time, the reality is that content is needed [you need the raw materials with which to do something after all]. Too often, however, the assessment tools end up being focused more on mastery of content than on practical use of that content. Our hope was that by focusing more explicitly on integration of the curriculum as a whole, we could get at this “performance” issue more directly.
- The second thing I would identify is how to create some unification and overarching standards, as well as build academic community between different populations—both on different campuses but also in different

tracks. To be honest, I think we underestimated the difficulty of that at the beginning.

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

- Certainly, one of the most significant opportunities was our use of Zoom webinar technology and audio- and video-equipped Zoom rooms on both campuses to create a synchronous learning environment. In our model, the professor would be physically in one campus classroom with one group of students one week, while the other campus classroom Zoom-ed in. The next week, she would travel to the other campus, while the other campus Zoom-ed in. We had some initial glitches with technology, but overall, this delivery model worked well, and enabled two different groups of students to learn together, and enabled the professor to be a physical presence on both campuses. This expanded the number of residential courses we were able to offer on both campuses as well. We hope to continue to develop both the technology and the pedagogy required to do this well.
- We also leaned into re-designing the syllabi, which was a great opportunity for many of us who have been teaching the same course for years. It was a chance to really rethink what we wanted to accomplish with a specific course, and what assignments would be most helpful in that regard.

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

- We were not all of one mind regarding portfolios, and we had some staff challenges in particular in this regard; not everyone was supportive, and we actually ended up dropping Chalk and Wire in the fall. I can't really say we overcame this; we aren't really using portfolios now, and I'm not sure we will go back to them. I had made assumptions about what I thought were shared commitments that turned out to be false.
- Another significant challenge was dealing with the history of each previous institution, and not letting assumptions about "how we have always done things" prevent us from doing things different going forward. I think we dealt with this very well, actually, through good communication and trust among faculty colleagues. We still have some work to do here, but all the effort we put into faculty collegiality paid off, I think.

**6. What did you learn of benefit for your school?**

- There is a limit to what one person can do; it is really important to have multiple people invested in change, who share a vision, in order to implement new ideas.
- Students are more flexible and open than we sometimes assume; they were very patient with us over the course of last year, and stayed invested in their education. They were excited for new opportunities and more chances to take different kinds of courses.

- There are good students out there who are eager to engage in theological education, but need more options for study. Our curriculum is designed to reach more kinds of students particularly non-traditional students.

**7. *What did you learn that might be of benefit for other schools in the Association?***

- It is so important to have this work broadly owned by a wide variety of constituents. Even as institutions shrink, and there is less capacity to take on new projects, if only one or two people are responsible for a project, it is going to be difficult to implement it broadly.
- Don't overestimate what you think you can do in the midst of big transitions. In retrospect, I'm not sure this was the best time to apply for an innovation grant, if I am truthful; we had transition in almost every aspect of the institutions, and all of the emotions that such transition brings. So, to be honest, I can't say all of us were at our best in being nimble, open and flexible. Even when transition is good, it generates feelings of loss—we don't usually do our best work when we are in the midst of loss and grief. Certainly, we are still moving forward, and we did get much from the grant—and hope to get more in the summer—but I think it is important for other institutions to learn from

**8. *Are there unexpected insights, innovative ideas, or possibilities that have emerged through the project?***

- In the course of the whole process with the president issues of institutional racism surfaced that we need to deal with immediately. I think we have some real opportunities to better engage diversity in the curriculum through the process, as we include it more intentionally in our planning.

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

- Good and frequent communication across all aspects of seminary life—faculty, students and administration. We needed to be nimble and flexible as we were implementing this new curriculum, and we needed to be able to respond quickly when problems arose.
- Openness to new ideas and a willingness to see things differently. This is obvious, I suppose, but it was not always easy for any of us; and it was important that we were able to see strengths in differences, rather than challenges.
- A recommitment to our history and heritage. Sometimes there is the temptation to through everything out and start from scratch, which actually weakens the position on which we stand, I think. So, for us, for example, we realized it is important to be able to articulate that we are a Lutheran institution and it is from that history and commitment that we engage well in ecumenical and interfaith partnerships, and seek to promote diversity and inclusion.
- Training for faculty and students in the use of the technology

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

- There are two things I would like to say here. First, having now experienced a much larger population of DL and commuting students, I think ATS needs to tend more closely to student formation and how this is happening. It is very difficult to both design and implement standards for this—let alone assessable standards, but it seems to me to be of critical importance. More guidance from ATS here would be very helpful.
- The second point is more focused: with the synchronous Zoom technology we used, it felt to us like those classes should count as residential for both campus populations, without us having to do the extra work of making sure that each campus had 51% residential [we did that in a variety of ways—sometimes having a class session co-taught with a professor in each classroom]. I think more study by ATS about what is required for a residential class would be beneficial.

***11. How might the project or its learning be sustained by a culture of innovation in your school?***

- I do think faculty have made huge steps forward in the use of technology, both the use of Zoom and the learning management system (Moodlerooms). Increasing comfort and experience with these tools will result in further innovation.
- More time will tell overall!