

**ATS INNOVATION GRANT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FOR PEER GROUP**
Project Title: Cultivating Practice-Led Research for Theological Education

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FOCUS OF THE GRANT:

The development of practice-led research doctorates has been taking place in other fields of professional work: nursing, business, education, etc. The aims of this grant implementation are to strengthen our institutional capacity to innovate along the lines of practice-led research in theological education. The development of a new professional doctoral has been the root innovation of McMaster Divinity College. We now seek to strengthen and deepen our capacity to deliver this educational model and to share what we learn with other institutions. The aims of our grant implementation are threefold:

- a. To heighten the intellectual and theoretical conception of practice-led research in theological education.
- b. To deepen and expand innovation in our delivery model so that this specialized focus of practice-led research can be made available nationally and internationally.
- c. To consult with various sectors of our larger constituencies nationally and to engage them in serious dialogue about the needs for integrated theological education in their sphere of work and ministry.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT:

In the Fall of 2016 McMaster Divinity College launched a new professional doctoral program (Doctor of Practical Theology, DPT). This program is accredited by ATS as an ATS Program Standard G degree. Fundamental to this DPT degree is practice-led research. Practice-led research is not simply study that is based upon practice, but uses practice to lead to new theoretical understanding. Practice-led research originates in practice and interfaces with interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary intellectual domains to produce new pathways for knowledge and effective practice. This approach has been pioneered in other fields such as the arts, professional nursing, and other areas of advanced professional study. This project seeks to advance the innovation for North American theological education.

GOALS FOR THE GRANT FUNDING and QUESTIONS FOR PEER GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. To deepen and expand faculty appreciation for and understanding of practice-led research. In particular, how to guide a dissertation project that utilizes practice-led research. As practice-led research is a comprehensive characteristic of each stage of the student experience in the DPT program, this research orientation demands increased facility by the faculty, not only in giving direction on methodological aspects of the dissertation, but in ensuring a practice-led implementation throughout the DPT program.

Questions for Discussion:

- A. What recommendations would you have to assist with cultivating faculty buy-in for this specialized training?
 - B. How can this be used to enhance faculty strengths and build on faculty competencies rather than feeling like another weight in the enterprise of theological education?
2. The second goal is to equip faculty with strategic tools necessary to implement innovative delivery models that involve expanded use of technology and the cultivation of sound pedagogical practices linked to practice-led research. This goal seeks to strengthen the capacity of MDC to offer this innovative approach to advanced doctoral education at a distance without losing the crystalized vision of a unique practice-led design.

Questions for Discussion:

- A. How can the grant funding assist to incentivize and deepen faculty commitment to learning new delivery models?
 - B. What strategies have you successfully employed to strengthen your own delivery models in doctoral education?
3. The third goal is to expand our capacity to reach non-traditional professional students who have a need for integrated theological education and practice-led research. Many leaders seek grounded theological approaches to complex problems that they and their organizations are facing. There are many denominational leaders, not-for-profit ministries, and Christian leaders in various sectors of non-traditional ministries who need to expand their capacity to learn in context and to solve problems that are unique to their own situation. The theological ingenuity and creative investigation of these situations requires new models. We propose that the practice-led professional doctorate will meet such a need in the larger constituency. However, we desire to consult and reflect on the experiences, input, and wider wisdom of the constituencies that we serve through direct consultation in a conference for such a purpose.

Questions for Discussion:

- A. What inroads have you made into non-traditional leadership education and what recommendations would you have for us as we expand our reach?
- B. We expect this degree program and its innovations to be attractive to international students. What are the experiences that you have had in your school that may help to guide our planning in this regard?

KEY PHASES OF THE GRANT IMPLEMENTATION:

The grant funding will support three phases of the project.

Phase 1:

In phase 1, the focus is on faculty development and intellectual preparation. This will involve resourcing the faculty with a planning retreat facilitated by a world-leading expert in practice-led research.

Questions for the Peer Group:

- a. While this means extra work/time for the faculty, the payoff is quite high. What advice do you have about implementing a working retreat using the grant funds to support these aims?

Phase 2:

In phase 2, the priority is on innovation in the delivery model. The capacity to offer this degree program in a distance learning model has been developed. We expect to become a leading school in the theoretical implementation of practice-led research design at the doctoral level and cultivate a 'learning institutional posture' as we reframe new approaches and build on the knowledge gained through these activities.

Questions for the Peer Group:

- a. How do you create expectations for innovation and expansion that sustain an institutional learning posture?
- b. Strategies for early and late adapters? What experience does your school have in sustaining a new direction for educational initiatives?

Phase 3:

In phase 3, the focus is external – engaging the wider constituencies who might be interested in professional doctoral training. We have targeted NGO's, non-profit Christian ministries, denominational executives, etc.

Questions for the Peer Group:

- a. What advice do you have on engaging external constituencies with respect to theological education?
- b. Can you help us to identify the best strategies for using the funding we have to engage these constituencies?

Conclusion:

I am very much looking forward to our dialogue and the input you can provide to help us achieve the goals for our grant implementation. We are convinced that this will be an innovation in theological education that has great potential for other schools and constituencies. We want to make the most of this opportunity and welcome your input and guidance.

Sincerely,

Phil