

Lexington Seminar Project Report

The Part-Time Student in a Full-Time Educational Culture

Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary
Columbia, SC

I. Issue and Context

Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary (LTSS) is a seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), founded in 1830 and located since 1911 in Columbia, SC. Traditionally quite small, it has grown in recent years to just under 200 students, with a full time faculty of 15. While the majority of students still come from the comparatively small community of Lutherans in the South, the student body is increasingly diverse in origin. Directly owned by the ELCA (as are all ELCA seminaries), it understands its primary mission as forming pastors and lay leaders for the church and has shaped its life around that mission.

LTSS has understood itself to be a residential seminary, i.e., the paradigmatic student around whom the curriculum and life of the seminary is built has been the full time student who spends extensive time on campus most weekdays and is thus available during the day to interact with faculty and other students, attend chapel, and participate in a variety of activities. The seminary owns extensive student housing and is located in an affordable residential neighborhood, so most students live on or close to the seminary. For most of the seminary's history, this commitment was assumed without debate and fit well with the predominantly younger student population. In recent decades that commitment has been questioned by the rise in the number of non-traditional students who cannot commit to full-time study, whose family lives do not permit extensive time on campus, and who thus do not fit the assumptions upon which the total life of the seminary has been built.

Over the past two decades, LTSS has re-affirmed its commitment to being a residential seminary. On the one hand, this commitment has undoubtedly reflected a certain degree of inertia. The faculty all are products of such an educational model and it fits well with what they know best how to do. On the other hand, however, newer developments have strengthened this commitment, especially the decision of the newly formed ELCA to give the seminaries a greater responsibility for the total ministerial formation of the student and LTSS's commitment to spiritual formation as a significant aspect of the student's seminary experience (see the faculty statement on spiritual formation: http://www.ltss.edu/pdf_04/spirstate_we.pdf). In addition, objective data supports the effectiveness of this model. In a recent survey by the ELCA of the extent to which first-call pastors feel prepared by their seminary education for the tasks they are facing, graduates of LTSS saw themselves as better prepared than did graduates of all other ELCA seminaries. The sense of the faculty has been that LTSS should focus on that which it does best, which is to provide an education for the full-time student.

Nevertheless, doubts exist about this model. The number of students who wish to study part-time and to take night or weekend courses continues to increase. Financial pressures have made a

larger student body attractive, increasing the need to accommodate part-time students. Perhaps more importantly, reflection on the seminary's vocation as one of the few accredited seminaries in South Carolina impacts the discussion. As an ecumenically committed Lutheran seminary, are we called to be more open to training students of other churches? A significant number of United Methodist students have been a part of LTSS life for at least 25 years; a new program of Baptist Studies was begun in the fall of 2004 in cooperation with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of South Carolina. Many non-Lutheran students cannot study full-time, however. How do we serve them? In addition, in light of the racial history of the South, are we called to be more open to training ministers for historically African-American churches? We have long had a small number of AME students, but again they are often part-time. How can we better meet their needs? (A significant result of the discussions among the six LTSS faculty at the Lexington Seminar was a recognition that even if there were no financial pressures to increase the student body and thus reach out to a larger range of potential students, these questions about the seminary's vocation would themselves impel us to such outreach.)

This issue was at the center of LTSS's narrative at the Lexington Seminary in the summer of 2004. The participants came to frame the issue this way: *how can the virtues and strengths of full-time seminary education be best extended to part-time and "other time" (i.e., night and weekend) students?*

II. Project Design

The project design began with two goals:

A. A clearer, more reflective sense among the faculty of the nature and grounds of our commitment to full-time education as the paradigm that shapes our comprehensive seminary life.

B. A strategy, developed and supported by the faculty and administration, to provide classes and other opportunities for part-time and other-time students that will extend to them as fully as possible the virtues and strengths we find in full-time education.

These goals meshed with the final stages of a curriculum review and revision that had begun in 2003, which had identified the need better to address the needs of part-time and commuter students.

Goal A was the focus of a faculty retreat held January 20-22, 2005 at the Lake Logan Episcopal Center near Asheville, North Carolina. The group of faculty who attended the Lexington Seminar designed the retreat, which was led by the project leader, Dean Michael Root. Almost all discussion focussed on how the faculty saw full-time and part-time education in relation both to the seminary's mission and to our particular resources, assets, and limitations. At the end of retreat, the faculty was able to produce a consensus statement on this topic:

LTSS is committed to full-time study as a primary focus of its curriculum because such study: - brings students together for an extended time conducive to the interaction with each other and with faculty and staff that solidifies and deepens learning;

- *allows students to take courses in the grouping and sequence the seminary finds most beneficial to learning and formation;*
- *allows better integration of what is learned;*
- *provides a comprehensive context for the transition into ordained and other ministries;*
- *provides a context for the reflection and social interaction with peers and mentors crucial to the fullness of ministerial formation that is the goal of education for ministry.*

We expect that the majority of our students will remain full-time students.

This emphasis on full-time education correlates with significant benefits for learning and formation that accrue from the residence on or close to the seminary campus of a significant portion of the seminary community. Informal learning and formation is significantly furthered by the contact this residential community makes possible. An open community, grounded by those living on or close to campus, provides significant benefits for the wider community, all of whom can participate in various community activities. A residential base helps to create the continuing worship community foundational for the entire life of the seminary. A significant residential community also relates the seminary to its immediate context in the Eau Claire neighborhood.

The seminary should commit itself to seek ways to extend the benefits of full-time study to more of its part-time students and other-time students. Among the ways to be explored are:

- *cohorts of part-time students*
- *greater worship opportunities for part-time students*
- *more intentional orientation for part-time students*
- *better communication*
- *more attention to the specific needs of students from other traditions*
- *a common space for part-time students*
- *a class schedule more attentive to the needs of part-time students.*

Both this statement and the process that produced it were of great importance. The move toward a more coherent part-time program could thus be connected with a sense of the specific focus of the seminary's educational efforts. Criteria for what sort of program we should design were provided. The process not only provided faculty buy-in, but also was an opportunity for a focussed discussion of our educational mission.

On the basis of this statement, a task force was appointed to design the part-time program. The task force included faculty, students, recent graduates, and representatives of local churches.

During the course of the spring and summer, the part-time program was designed. A memo written during the process stated that in order to form a part-time program that would fit with our emphasis on extending the virtues of full-time education, our program would include:

- *a coherent sequencing of courses for part-time students,*
- *organizing them in cohorts for a more consistent experience of community,*

- having a significant number of classes in which the part-time and full-time students are together, so that we can avoid the "two seminaries" phenomenon.

Our MDiv curriculum involves a large number of required courses and is carefully sequenced. When the task force surveyed present part-time students, it was discovered that they were not interested in Saturday classes. Many of our part-time students serve churches and Saturdays were occupied with church business or with difficult-to-find time with family. The task force decided to design a program in which all classes would be held on Monday night, Tuesday night, and late Tuesday afternoon. Producing a workable and educationally coherent sequence that matched the present MDiv sequence was technically difficult, because of the sequencing of prerequisites and because we have such a small faculty, often with only one person in each discipline.

The faculty was opposed to a part-time program that would exist parallel to the full-time program but with little interaction between the two groups of students. There should be one student body; part-time and full-time students should take a significant number of classes together. Nevertheless, the part-time program should not become the tail that wags the dog. Full-time students should not be required to take more than one night class per week.

Each fall, a new cohort of students would begin the program and move through the program together. The need was recognized for formative worship and community experiences for these students. The survey of present part-time students, however, found that their desire for community life in seminary was low, since they already had church communities in the vicinity that they had not left.

The proposal for the part-time program was adopted by the faculty in August 2005 and presented to the seminary Board of Trustees at its October 2005 meeting and adopted. The program was publicized during the winter and spring of 2006. A brochure was widely distributed to Lutheran, Methodist, and other clergy within South Carolina and bordering metropolitan areas (Augusta, Charlotte, Savannah). The first cohort began in the fall semester of 2006. A comprehensive review of the program is to occur during its third year of operation in 2008-9.

The project design called for a faculty retreat which would include a discussion of where we were in the part-time project in the late summer of 2006. We held the retreat, which focussed on issues of collegiality and mutual accountability, but did include a discussion of the part-time program.

III. Resources Used in Developing and Implementing the Project

The primary resources were internal, including faculty discussions and a survey of present part-time students. We did survey other part-time programs as presented on various seminary websites. The dean and assistant dean did confer with the administration of the Charlotte campus of Union Seminary-PSCE (Richmond, VA). Their input proved quite helpful.

IV. Project Results

A. Narrowly viewed

Our hope had been for an initial cohort of five to ten students. Only four students began the program in the fall of 2006. Our sense is that we have not yet developed a means of publicizing the

program to those who would be most interested in it. (The Union-PSCE program in Charlotte spent a longer time in the publicity stage prior to beginning their program.) This year we are having events specifically dedicated to the part-time program at times at which potential students for this program can attend. We may also advertise the program in local newspapers to inform potential students about the program.

Because the part-time program does not exist alongside the full-time program but is integrated with the regular class schedule, it has an impact on that schedule. Some scheduling complications were only discovered in the process of living into the new program. The low enrollment led to questions whether the program was worth the trouble. Enrollment will need to improve for the program to prove viable.

B. More broadly viewed

Regardless of the fate of the particular program developed, the project had the beneficial effect of stimulating a much deeper conversation among the faculty about our educational commitments. While we had repeatedly referred to our commitment to a full-time educational model, we had not articulated just what about that model was important. The conversation and the consensus statement included above have provided a compass for our ongoing development and assessment of our total curriculum.

A side-effect of the project has been a greater readiness of the faculty to discuss questions of educational mission. Prior to the project, the faculty was suspicious of abstract discussions of educational mission as unproductive. What was learned in the 2005 and 2006 retreats was that the faculty was very ready to engage in such discussions when they were linked with concrete decisions that needed to be made in the immediate future. The project thus had a salutary effect of opening up faculty discussion on pedagogy.

C. What we would do differently?

An assumption of the project was that there was a body of potential students who were waiting for the seminary to offer a coherent part-time program and would immediately sign-up. Church leaders told us this and we regularly received inquiries about part-time possibilities from potential students. We thus did not provide a long lead time between adopting the program and initiating the first cohort. Beyond the distribution of a brochure, we did not create an extensive publicity program explicitly focussed on our new part-time possibilities.

At least in our first year, this assumption proved false. We are now developing more extensive publicity efforts.

One potential recruiting problem is the sequencing of our courses and the courses students must take first. ISS requires Greek and Hebrew as prerequisites for most biblical courses. Either Greek or Hebrew must be offered at the beginning of the sequence or the biblical courses will be pushed too far back in the program. It is possible that beginning with Greek or Hebrew intimidates potential part-time students, who are usually less sure of their academic abilities than potential full-time students.

The language requirements do point to an underlying issue the faculty has discussed: is the classical theological curriculum to which we are committed easily taught on a part-time basis? The third year review is to look at this question.

V. Sharing the Wisdom

What did we learn in the project that might be useful to other seminaries, beyond the concrete results of the project?

First, we learned, as noted, the benefit of linking abstract questions of pedagogy with concrete programmatic questions. If discussion of a mission statement produces only a mission statement, without direct consequences for what and how faculty teach, then faculty involvement will tend to be perfunctory. Similarly, questions of how to schedule classes in a way that accommodates the part-time student can be merely technical and ruled by competing self-interests (“What, me teach in the evening!?”) By linking questions of how best to educate clergy with the particular question of whether we would offer a part-time program and of what sort, the discussion of both questions was enriched. The discussion of scheduling was linked to fundamental questions of how we teach and what is our mission in our specific context. The discussion of educational mission was given a practical edge that moved it beyond the merely theoretical.

Second, we learned the benefit of taking up in a focused way a question that had lingered on the edge of faculty discussions for years without resolution. The sense that something needed to be done in relation to part-time students sat uneasily alongside the sense that our focus on full-time education best fit both our educational mission and our limited resources. That sense was never tested and defined, however. The day-to-day and year-to-year business of the seminary never forced a resolution. By making this question the focus of a faculty project, we were able to better define our underlying commitments and see that, at least on paper, we could deal with this question in a way compatible with those commitments. Even if the particular program we have designed proves unsuccessful, we will be in a better place in relation to part-time students than we were. Perhaps we will learn from what we have not done well and re-design the program. Perhaps we will decide that a focussed part-time program should not be a part of what we offer. In any case, we will have a clearer sense of what we are doing and why we are doing it.

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