

The Integrative Seminar Across Seminaries

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One of the most important evolutionary shifts in theological education was the move in the 1970s from “field work” to “field education.” Whereas seminary students have, for generations, supplemented their incomes by serving part-time in ministry jobs appropriate for the non-ordained, the choice on the part of seminaries to appropriate such experiences into curricula marked a change in attitude about the role of experience in formation for ministry. Over the past thirty to forty years, field education programs have become increasingly integral to students’ seminary experiences. In many settings, field education constitutes the core of the curriculum and is reported to be the most memorable and useful component in students’ preparation for ministry.

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Many theological field education programs in accredited seminaries include an on-campus component meant to help students to integrate academic and experiential learning for ministry. This article describes the options that lay before a seminary leader when she or he seeks to design or reform this component of the seminary curriculum. The courses vary widely across seminaries, but courses are usually described as opportunities for students to connect classroom learning with that which is happening in the field. This article will describe the variety of "integrative seminars" currently offered at selected schools accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. Through this description, the article will offer leaders an idea of their options when they seek to create or improve upon the integrative, on-campus component of field education for students.

The motivation for this research originated with the need to assess the Field Education Program at Andover Newton Theological School. The program at Andover Newton has had a national reputation and a rich history. The on-campus component of field education at Andover Newton was entitled "Practicum," and it had been in existence for over thirty years. In an assessment process following the appointment of a new director of field education, numerous problems with the Practicum were uncovered. In order to explore options for change, we investigated how other seminaries resolved the question of how to promote the integration of classroom and field-based learning for ministry. In the process, we discovered that the question we were asking is neither new nor unique, but timely; what is the appropriate role of ministry experience in their on-campus curricula?

METHODOLOGY

With the help of a grant from the Wabash Institute, we studied how other seminaries provided on-campus experience for students in field education. How is integrative learning, from theory to practice and back again, understood? How do seminaries integrate learning from field education into the seminary curriculum? We contacted theological schools in New England for program handbooks and course syllabi to help us to design our study. We introduced the survey with this question: "What method and/or process does your school use to facilitate the integration of ministerial theory and practice?" The survey included the following eight questions:

1. Does the field education program include an “in-class” peer group experience? If so, what is the focus of the groups? How are the groups formed?
2. How many hours per week are the students in class? Do students earn credits for this class, and if so, do they pay for their credit hours in the same way as any other academic credit earned?
3. Who facilitates the class? How is the class structured? What process is utilized to engage the students in dialogue? What are some of the topics the students might be encouraged to discuss?
4. In what way does the faculty participate in the field education program, particularly in regard to the peer group experience?
5. How does the field education program help the students integrate the practical aspects of ministry with the theoretical and theological understandings inherent in ministry?
6. What is the nature/focus of the peer interaction?
7. From your perspective, what makes your field education program unique among seminary programs?
8. Are there other schools you might suggest that have field education programs with a peer group component or an integrated process of some type that you think might help us in our study?

We selected a sample of participants based on a typology offered in *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and the Pastoral Imagination*.¹ That text suggests the following broad categories of theological schools: Roman Catholic seminaries, Jewish Rabbinical schools, denominationally-affiliated Mainline Protestant seminaries, Bible training schools (i.e., Evangelical Protestant schools), and schools of Emancipation (i.e. African American schools). Since Andover Newton falls into the category of Mainline Protestant denominational seminary, we opted to select schools that fell into the same category for our study. We chose twenty-four schools listed on the Association of Theological Schools Web site. We called them (with little success) and sent surveys via e-mail (with fifty percent participation). Through snowball sampling (asking respondents if they might recommend other schools we should contact), we contacted four more candidates for participation. Ultimately, we received sixteen responses to our survey. We supplemented some of that data with information available through field education program Web sites.

We analyzed survey data using the qualitative research software *N*Vivo*. In order to develop a coding structure, we employed a grounded theory strategy for data analysis: We studied responses as a whole and generated a list of themes (or “nodes”) as concerned the apparent goals, structures, and underlying assumptions guiding integrative seminars. From that list of nodes, we sorted survey responses in order to develop clarity about the nature of integrative seminars in theological education today. Our study uncovered that seminaries organize field education on-campus courses in many different ways.

CONFIGURATION, CREDIT, AND INSTRUCTORS

Most seminaries surveyed described field education courses looking like conventional on-campus classes with an instructor, classroom, credit, peers, and assignments. Two seminaries, however, have done away with stand-alone field education courses, fostering integrative learning through “post-curricular means.” The American Baptist Seminary of the West connects its field education integrative experience with a course for all second-year students called the “Middler Colloquium” that includes a series of conversations connecting students with ministry practitioners to foster integrative learning between the field and classroom.

Denver Seminary’s field education course is even less directly related to the standard curriculum. The focus is on mentoring. A respondent from Denver Seminary reported that “other than the spiritual formation group and a one-semester course that introduces [the students] to the arena of spiritual formation and the mentoring program, there is no classroom time.” Students earn field education credit via self-directed learning contracts that they live out through intensive mentoring relationships.

Some schools included in this study require two semesters of field education, while others require four. Candler School of Theology, for example, requires its students to complete four consecutive semesters to receive credit for field education. Seminaries also vary as to how many hours students must spend in field education per semester or year. At Church Divinity School of the Pacific, students are expected to spend eight to ten hours ministering in their sites as well as two hours of classroom time. “This includes the Collegium (1 hour),” wrote the respondent, “and one hour of peer group work in their colleague groups.”

Harvard Divinity School offers two options for on-campus experiences to students in their first year of field education: one bi-weekly, ninety-minute discussion group and an intensive option “which involves modules which meet for three weeks in a row.” The module option “involves a similar time commitment. Students do not receive credits for the class and they are not charged tuition. The course, however, is a requirement for graduation with the M.Div. degree.” Harvard Divinity School was the only institution included in this study that did not charge students tuition or offer credit for the field education on-campus course component.

Respondents described diverse credit structures surrounding field education. Bangor Theological Seminary, for example, provides three credits per semester to students in field education, and students are required to take two semesters of field education. Pacific School of Religion holds to this same standard. Garrett Evangelical has a unique structure offering three credits in the first semester of field education and two credits in the second.

Most notably for our purposes at Andover Newton, all schools indicated that students received credit for field education, in-class time included, in a manner comparable to the credits per hour allotted to other courses in the academic course schedule. Andover Newton’s credit allocation for field education did not mirror other courses, which presented itself as one major administrative problem with Practicum.

Many respondents indicated that field education courses are taught by adjunct instructors whose professional identity is that of a ministry practitioner. Because the majority of courses that respondents described involved a significant small-group component, few seminaries reported having just one or two instructors for the course; most using the small group model employ an entire teaching team. McCormick Theological Seminary describes a teaching team with a combination of “resident and adjunct” professors. The content of the field education courses appears to be the most important factor in determining the nature of the teaching team.

THE GOALS AND RELATED CONTENT OF INTEGRATIVE SEMINARS

The goals for integrative seminars that emerged from this analysis included: consolidating learning; integrating theory and practice; forming students’ ministerial identities; improving students’ performance; and teaching students about the Bible, theology, and ecclesiology. Few schools in this

study embraced only one of these learning goals, and even fewer articulated clearly the ultimate goal of their integrative seminars. Most schools purported to accomplish a combination of these goals with a special emphasis on one over the others.

The Pacific School of Religion's respondent indicated a desire to help students to consolidate classroom learning through field experience, but not in order to privilege either the classroom or the field in its significance for learning. That school begins with the premise that theoretical and practical understandings are indistinct from one another: "All practical issues have theoretical and theological implications and theoretical and theological issues raise practical concerns....We refuse to buy into these distinctions." This statement suggests that it is tempting, in an integrative learning experience, to stereotype either experience or theory as the most important learning enterprise. This respondent argues that to separate theory and practice in this way this would constitute not just a false hierarchy but a false dichotomy.

At the American Baptist Seminary of the West, students "are actively encouraged to integrate their classroom learning with their church field experience." In addition to a small group processing experience for those in field education, Bangor Theological Seminary offers a core class, "Introduction to Pastoral Studies." Bangor's respondent wrote, "This prepares the student[s] for their practical experience by emphasizing Theological Reflection." Bangor's practice suggests a mutual consolidation, where a classical teaching technique from field education (theological reflection, which will be described in greater detail later) is used to consolidate classroom learning. In most cases, when consolidation is among the goals of an integrative seminar, it is field education that is to consolidate student learning from the classroom.

The integration of theory and practice was perhaps the most prevalent among the stated goals of field education courses. This was the espoused goal of Andover Newton's Practicum as well. Denver Theological Seminary framed integration not just in terms of learning but spiritual and emotional support. The respondent writes that the objective of its formation groups are, "(1) to provide a place of support for the stresses of the seminary experience, (2) to provide a place for integration of the diverse resources and experiences involved in a seminary degree, and (3) to explore the resources and disciplines that students will need in order to stay spiritually healthy in the context of vocational ministry." Harvard Divinity School had difficulty describing how it promoted the integration of theory and practice

because this discipline is seamlessly interwoven into the program's structure and not just one course goal.

Duke Divinity School pays particular attention to the development of students' ministerial identity. In its reflection groups, students are specifically encouraged to "discern vocational goals and issues around pastoral identity." Eden Seminary requires students to write a brief paper on ordination and a case study on a wedding or funeral service. Garrett Evangelical encourages students to develop an inventory around their strengths and weaknesses. The guiding question of students' field education course is, "How do you see your ministry in light of scripture and tradition?" Students at the Pacific School of Religion must write a tenpage paper on their theologies of ministry and present a draft to their small groups for input. The Methodist School of Theology's field education course includes a similar writing assignment. Church Divinity School of the Pacific's course attends to "identity and changing role both self-identified and perceived by others, power and authority in the role. All students are expected to balance critical epistemology with intuitive feeling." All of these activities suggest that field education courses are, in many cases, the primary location of students' ministerial identity formation in the midst of the seminary experience.

In many schools, field education courses include attention to the performance of ministry tasks and the development of pastoral skills. Students at Candler School of Theology in their second year of contextual education are given readings and assignments that "correspond to five areas of ministry through which the student will rotate: preaching and worship, mission and outreach, congregational care, education, and administration." Students at Central Baptist Theological School are expected to write two rituals that may include a baptism, wedding, or funeral or some other ritual for a special occasion.

Although no specific field education course included content around the Bible, theology, or ecclesiology, in some cases field education was designed to coincide with other requirements in such a way that students would, by design, engage in particular content while also in field education. In many cases, students were expected to take a ministry survey course alongside field education. The American Baptist Seminary of the West places all middler students serving congregations into the same class for the academic year. The focus of the Middler Colloquium is both academic and practical, with "subjects covered during the middler year [that] include Biblical studies

(gospels and Pauline epistles), ecclesiology, preaching, and worship." McCormick Theological Seminary uses common texts among all small groups, which may include ministry reflections and biblical texts "to reflect on [an] individual's particular reflection." Many respondents indicated using assigned reading with small groups; what makes McCormick Theological Seminary unusual is its choice to use texts to illuminate student-generated reflections, rather than (as what one might call customary) choosing texts first and expecting students' ideas to flow first from the text.

TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATIVE SEMINARS

As one might expect, the differing goals behind integrative seminars have led to a variety of teaching methods as well. In many cases, there are rational connections between the course's stated goals while in other cases, the linkages are looser. The following section describes the variety of teaching methodologies for integrative learning that we discovered in our study.

Case study teaching appears to be a common way in which students engage in integrative learning. Such teaching in field education usually involves students choosing a critical incident from their field education experience, reflecting upon it in writing, and then presenting it to facilitator and group of peers. Church Divinity School of the Pacific requires that students write weekly theological reflections to be read by the facilitator and prepare no fewer than two case studies per semester. As stated earlier, "topics included are: identity and changing role both self-identified and perceived by others, power and authority in the role. All students are expected to balance critical epistemology with intuitive feeling."

Group sharing also appears to be a prevalent method for drawing students out and encouraging them to reflect upon their experiences. Bangor Theological Seminary's small group experience begins with the establishment of a group covenant, the key to which is a high level of confidentiality. Bangor's participant in this study states that there is an overt hope and expectation that students will carry their experiences in this group setting into their ministry careers, making a point of participating in colleague groups while in professional ministry later.

Beyond case study presentations and group sharing, *mentoring* appears to play both an intentional and a subtle role in teaching integrative courses. Abilene Christian Seminary requires students to be in Faculty mentoring

groups, which extend beyond the student's time in field education. Each Faculty member meets with five to seven masters of divinity students each semester for a total of six semesters. In most schools surveyed, however, small group experiences are led by experienced pastors. This would rationally lead one to assume that this staffing choice represents a hope that the pastor will mentor the seminarians and give them perspective and wisdom from the life of ministry. However, no respondent included in this study overtly stated why practitioners lead these groups.

Using a teaching tool that is unique to theological education, many schools describe engaging students in *theological reflection*. In this practice, students choose critical incidents in ministry (which range from outward crises to inner dilemmas) and reflect on them from the perspective of their faith. This teaching technique embodies attributes of both case study and group sharing while inviting the divine into the reflective process. At Abilene Christian Seminary, for example, the respondent states of the course accompanying field education that the "primary focus is theological reflection/intentional practice." The school uses a three-pronged approach: reflecting as a whole class in plenary, reflecting in a small group, and using the distance learning software BlackBoard.

Most respondents stated that students were expected to write about their field education experiences using a theological reflection approach of reporting incidents and then examining them in light of scripture, tradition, and belief. Several indicated assigning reading on the spiritual practice of theological reflection as the only or as one of the few reading assignments associated with the integrative seminar. One respondent stated that a limitation to teaching using theological reflection is that students ordinarily choose incidents one might call negative or traumatic. They rarely choose to write about positive experiences or quotidian ministry moments, which are also worthy of investigation and reflection.

As was stated earlier, at a small number of schools included in this study, the course that accompanied field education included what one might call "Introduction to Ministry" content. In these courses, however, teaching practices are in many cases integrative in their own ways; they employ more student input and involvement than might a conventional lecture or text-based course. McCormick Theological Seminary's small groups take on particular topics relevant to ministry—such as ministerial ethics, pastoral identity and authority, and challenges in administration—

and connect them to student experiences in the field. The American Baptist Seminary of the West responded, "In the fall we have two professors working together in teaching preaching and the Gospel studies material. An additional professor (the director of field education) teaches several class sessions on the subject of worship." At Central Baptist Theological School, the field education course includes analysis of worship rituals the students design: "At our best, both the discussion of each of these rituals and the written rituals and case studies in peer group include theological reflection, application, and critique."

FACULTY INVOLVEMENT

Members of the full-time, tenured or tenure-track faculty are involved in integrative learning at the schools included in this study in wide-ranging ways and at varied levels. In some settings, they are involved for the purpose of quality control and understanding the students' experiences in the field, thus taking the role of observer and conversation partner. The Pacific School of Religion includes two faculty members and a representative from the student's field education experience in students' middler exams; Andover Newton has a similar practice. The American Baptist School of the West sends small groups of seminary representatives to visit field education sites, and faculty members participate in those groups. They speak "extensively with the pastor and church leaders." Faculty members also lead the "colloquia" that comprise the on-campus learning experience for students in field education.

Candler School of Theology now has a practice in place that mirrors Andover Newton's original Practicum: small groups of field education students participate in classes co-led by ministry practitioners and professors. At Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, faculty members provide plenary sessions for field education integrative courses but do not facilitate small groups. Plenary sessions focus on prepared case studies, on which faculty members are asked to reflect from the perspective of their academic discipline and life experience. At Boston University, faculty members facilitate small groups of five to seven students directly on an alternating schedule.

Harvard Divinity School does not involve the teaching faculty at this point but is moving decisively in that direction. The model it will use next

year resembles Garrett's, inviting faculty members to reflect on a case study from the vantage point of their scholarship and experience. At Yale Divinity School, the faculty participates in the field education program through providing three panel discussions per year. Some schools use a combination of these methods to involve faculty members. The United Methodist School in Ohio requires faculty members to review learning agreements and to make site visits when small group facilitators are unable to do so.

Several respondents identified their greatest challenges as faculty involvement and, related to that, a sense that the field education course and experience are discontinuous with the rest of the curriculum. One respondent placed the blame for this disconnect on faculty members' multiple commitments and overwrought schedules.

LESSONS LEARNED

Perhaps our most interesting finding was the extent to which we are not alone in discerning a new direction for Andover Newton's field education course component. We found that several schools are experimenting with ways in which they might connect the field education experience with the academic lives of students. Among those schools is Abilene Christian Seminary. That school's respondent wrote:

We are experimenting for the first time next semester with a possible major curriculum change. The change might result in allowing students to connect any colloquy [faculty-led discussion group] to any class. One of the ministry professors is planning to add a one-hour component to his class where the student would get involved with service learning at a social justice site and integrate a reflection assignment and readings with the content of the three-hour course.

American Baptist Seminary of the West is also planning on using a new curriculum which claims as its focus an interdisciplinary approach to field education. The respondent writes, "We have integrated the peer group setting with the academic setting through the Middler Colloquium coursework." Overall, four respondents wrote of significant curricular changes taking place at their seminaries that involve linking classroom and field education more closely; even those respondents who did not describe that particular form of change indicated in many cases that the integrative component of field education is under review at their seminaries.

A second striking lesson was the emerging language for describing what happens to students when they place classroom learning in conversation with their work in the field. Along with “integration,” the term “contextualize” was favored by many respondents, which is not surprising considering the number of field education programs that have renamed themselves “Contextual Education.” Candler School of Theology is just such a school, nicknaming their program “ConEd” and placing an emphasis on continuity between the school and students’ learning sites. Candler is one of the schools that is experimenting with new ways to formalize this connection through integrative programming via the classroom: “In order to be even more intentional in this integration, Candler is moving to a new model in which a variety of courses are contextualized in such a way that as a student serves in his/her ConEd site, at least one assignment serves as a bridge between theory and ecclesial experience.”

A final striking theme among respondents was the changing understanding of small group creation and dynamics, specifically the role of diversity. Nearly all of this study’s participant schools described a small group component to on-campus field education courses. Some schools, such as Garrett Evangelical and Boston University School of Theology, select group members carefully with the hopes of creating diverse groups where students will learn from one another. Boston University’s respondent reports paying particular attention to creating groups where students will learn from one another’s sites, not just from one another. Garrett’s respondent stated that the richness of the small group experience on that campus had led him to broaden his very understanding of the many ways in which students bring diversity to seminary settings. The Pacific School of Religion, on the other hand, gives students as much choice as possible in selecting a small group experience; that school’s respondent pointed out that students tend to take greater responsibility for their learning when they have such choices.

The findings of this study provided Andover Newton with a much needed typology—or “menu”—of options from which to choose in renewing Practicum (see table 1). Ultimately, we created a new model that connects the field education course directly with the wider curriculum. Resident ministry practitioners will participate in the teaching of core courses, and then they will meet in break-out sessions from those courses with small groups of field education students. During the core course, the

Factor to Consider	Configuration	Goals Content	Teaching Methods
Options that emerged from national study of field education programs	Small discussion groups Plenary or lecture Taught by faculty or adjunct faculty Credits mirror those offered for all other courses, or separate system and requirement	Consolidating learning Integrating theory and practice Forming students' ministerial identities Improving students' performance Reinforcing student learning about the Bible, theology, and ecclesiology	Case study presentations and discussions on critical incidents Group sharing Theological reflection Writing and presenting on one's theology of ministry Creating, enacting, and reflecting upon rituals
Options selected by Andover Newton for new integrative seminar	Small-group break-out sessions from regular, three-credit courses Led by ministry practitioners also resident in regular, three-credit course Credits mirror other courses with similar time commitment	Integrating theory and practice	Structured group sharing Case study presentations based on theme: Content of the regular, three-credit course out of which the small group breaks out

Table 1: Typology of Integrative Seminars for Theological Field Education

resident ministry practitioner will provide insights into how course material is lived out in ministry. During the small-group portion, students will engage in structured group sharing and case presentations. The cases will be an opportunity for them to intentionally connect learning from the course with their experiences in field education.

Having before us a range of options for course goals, content, and pedagogical methods made the process of investigating future directions less

daunting. We were able to consider the needs of our own setting and then select the combination of practices most appropriate to meeting the integrative needs of our students. Our hope is that the typology presented here is helpful to others faced with such choices. The choices that we made at Andover Newton in light of these options reflect a desire to create a course that lives up to the promise that the on-campus experience integrates theory (classroom learning) and practice (ministry experience in the field).

NOTE

1. Charles R. Foster, Lisa Dahill, Larry Golemon, and others, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and the Pastoral Imagination*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

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