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# ADVENTURES INTO DIGITAL TEACHING, LEARNING, AND FORMATION: A CASE STUDY FROM WARTBURG THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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## Abstract

The changing needs of the church, advances in teaching and learning technologies, and decreasing candidate pools have put many theological education institutions in a tail spin. This article focuses on a story of adaption and change: Wartburg Theological Seminary's evolution from a deeply grounded residential school to one offering an innovative, hybrid curriculum. After a brief history of Wartburg's foray into distance education, the article describes what we do, why we do it, why it matters, and what we are learning by creating a new curriculum and method of delivery that better meets the needs of those who are in the process of becoming leaders for a church that is constantly changing.

## Introduction

Wartburg Theological Seminary—one of seven seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—is nestled in the rolling hills rising from the banks of the Mississippi River at Dubuque, Iowa. Modeled after the German fortress near Eisenach, where Martin Luther took flight from the emperor and translated the New Testament

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into German, the tower stands tall behind the Luther statue, beckoning people to come and visit. While not its original location, Wartburg Theological Seminary has dwelled in this location for nearly 130 years. The roots of the Lutheran legacy stretch deep in this soil.

This article is about adaption and change by a highly communal seminary that ironically is now developing a deeper understanding of its identity and how its historic DNA allows it to live out its mission of teaching, learning, and formation in unprecedented ways. Readers will learn about Wartburg's adventure of transformation from serving exclusively as a deeply grounded residential school to the implementation of a highly innovative, hybrid curriculum. After reviewing our initial forays in distance education, this article explores what we now are doing, why we are doing it, why it matters, and what we are learning by venturing into a unified curriculum that employs dynamic new methods of delivery to better meet the needs of those who will be the leaders for a church that is constantly changing.

### **Wartburg's Story: The Early Years**

Like most seminaries across the country, Wartburg's history is grounded in residential theological education. This history originates with the vision of life together by Pastor Wilhelm Loehe, who in the mid-nineteenth century laid the foundations of the Loehe Legacy that still informs Wartburg's values today.<sup>1</sup> The Mission Statement of the school has shaped its self-understanding for decades: "to serve the church through the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America by being a worship-centered community of critical theological reflection where learning leads to mission

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<sup>1</sup> Ann L. Fritschel, Craig L. Nesson, and Winston D. Persaud, "Loehe's Legacy and the Apostolic Calling of Wartburg Theological Seminary for the Church and World in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," <https://www.wartburgseminary.edu/download/loehe-legacy/>, accessed July 21, 2018.

and mission informs learning.”<sup>2</sup> This mission shapes its identity as a teaching and a learning organization, with each continually informing the other. Wartburg stands firm in its vocation to live for the flourishing of the church.

The Mission Statement continues: “The community embodies God’s mission by stewarding resources for engaging, equipping, and sending collaborative leaders who interpret, proclaim, and live the gospel of Jesus Christ for a world created for communion with God and in need of personal and social healing.” Note the strong presence of language that grounds the institution in place, location, and geography, especially the references to “embodies” and “sending.” Wartburg’s distinctive matrix of commitments includes worship-centeredness, intentional formation in community, a spirituality that draws from the best of Lutheran pietism, commitment to “open questions” (valuing differences of viewpoint on nonessentials), diaconal service, missional purpose, and global horizon. These characteristics continue to shape Wartburg’s mission with every new initiative in distance education.

Wartburg has articulated Twelve Pastoral-Diaconal Practices as curriculum outcomes to assess the curriculum and its effectiveness in leader formation.<sup>3</sup>

- Practice of Being Rooted in the Gospel
- Practice of *Missio Dei* in Word and Sacrament
- Practice of Biblical and Theological Wisdom
- Practice of Ecclesial Partnership
- Practice of Complex Analysis
- Practice of Curiosity
- Practice of Pastoral Concern

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<sup>2</sup> Wartburg Theological Seminary Mission Statement, <https://www.wartburgseminary.edu/mission-and-vision/>.

<sup>3</sup> A rich discussion of practices in theological education has taken place. See especially the foundational work of Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity in Theological Education* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2001) and Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

- Practice of Personal Faith and Integrity
- Practice of Collegiality
- Practice of Evangelical Listening and Speaking the Faith to Others
- Practice of Immersion in the Context
- Practice of Engagement with Cross-Cultural and Global Dimensions<sup>4</sup>

These practices are used to assess student progress at various milestones in the seminary journey, as well as at three and ten years after graduation. Wartburg Seminary's core curriculum centers on the formation of leaders who demonstrate these Twelve Pastoral-Diaconal Practices for the life and mission of the church. These practices have guided the faculty through ongoing curriculum revision and innovation. Given our new distance education modalities, it has been particularly challenging for Wartburg to explore what it means for the school to foster the practices of *Missio Dei* in Word and Sacrament, Collegiality, and Immersion in Context now that so many students are accessing their education in contexts where daily chapel and refectory conversations are no longer part of their schedule and when they are serving in a wide array of congregational contexts.

Wartburg undertakes continual assessment of the curriculum, in partnership with synods, to monitor emerging developments in the church and world and to make revisions that meet the needs of engaged, compassionate, and wise leaders for the twenty-first century church. Although these practices cultivate a distinctive set of highly relational leadership qualities, longitudinal assessment also indicates the need for ongoing renewal of Wartburg graduates as their ministries extend beyond three to ten

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<sup>4</sup> Twelve Pastoral-Diaconal Practices, <https://www.wartburgseminary.edu/12-pastoral-diaconal-practices/>.

years.<sup>5</sup> This form of assessment helps document the need for more robust patterns of continuing education for professional ministers. We will return to this at the end of the article.

## Early Ventures in Distance Education

With deep roots in the value and practice of residential education and formation, it should be no surprise that the Wartburg faculty was not eager to enter the world of distance learning. Faculty did not have access to email until 1998, which exemplifies how this new way of teaching was countercultural to everything we knew and believed about forming students for ministry leadership.

Within five years of the faculty receiving their first computers, the school transitioned rapidly to incorporate online learning. Wartburg began in 2003 to offer courses online as part of a certificate program for lay leaders in rural ministry out of its Center for Theology and Land. This was followed by additional course offerings in the newly formed Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM) Program, a certificate program for ordination in Word and Sacrament ministry.<sup>6</sup>

In 2006, Wartburg offered its first online course in the master's curriculum. Four years later, in 2010, the institution welcomed its first cohort in a fully distributed learning masters curriculum.<sup>7</sup> Distributed learning at Wartburg entails access to theological education through distance learning technologies, including the possibility of asynchronous participation. This program was designed according to a

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<sup>5</sup> "Assessment of Twelve Pastoral-Diaconal Practices,"

<https://www.wartburgseminary.edu/download/assessment-pastoral-diaconal-practices/>.

<sup>6</sup> Theological Education for Emerging Ministries,

<https://www.wartburgseminary.edu/theological-education-for-emerging-ministries/>.

<sup>7</sup> For our earliest involvement in distance learning, the faculty was informed by Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt, *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

five-year model, with on-campus intensive sessions in January and the summer. These developments followed in fairly rapid succession, but they were not without resistance. Many argued that Wartburg did not need to do what other schools were doing simply for the sake of keeping up. It was feared that our model of formation, grounded in residential learning from the beginning, would be sacrificed.

Yet the faculty persisted. Much to the surprise of some faculty and many alumni, the distributed learning (DL) students were fully engaged and being formed. Although initially they had to face the skepticism of many, this led them to bond into strong cohorts. We continued to explore and implement new methods for including them in the community, especially when they were on campus for intensives, and they were finding their voices. Assessment processes showed similar growth compared to residential students. The skeptics slowly were turning into believers.

It was not long, however, before we realized that de facto we had created two schools: a residential school and a distributed school. On-site intensives were most often offered when residential students were not in session. Faculty found themselves teaching the same class twice during any given semester, online and in the classroom. Institutionally, we were duplicating our efforts rather than becoming more efficient.

In addition, although the distributed option offered an alternate model for access to theological education, it had real limitations.<sup>8</sup> The DL model required several trips to campus, off-site locations for Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), and cross-cultural courses in January. These were challenging for DL students, because most were employed and had limited time off from work. This approach also did not serve to reduce student debt, insofar as scholarships

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Edwin Chr. van Driel, "Online Theological Education: Three Undertheorized Issues," *Theological Education* 50(1) (2015): 69–79.

were not as readily available for DL students. Plus, a fifth year was required to complete the program.

Faculty began to have serious conversations around these issues in the fall semester of 2015. At the same time, Wartburg was approached by a synodical bishop about how students from Wartburg might fill vacant pastoral positions while attending seminary. And the senior pastor of a large church inquired whether Wartburg would be interested in forming a new model, utilizing distance courses while students worked concurrently in their respective congregational sites.

Under the pressure of time, the faculty spent the spring semester of 2016 assessing and brainstorming possibilities. We asked ourselves tough questions: How do we educate and form leaders for a church that does not yet exist? What will leadership in the twenty-first century look like?<sup>9</sup> Out of an intense series of creative sessions, a new way of approaching theological education emerged for Wartburg, one that was wholly different and yet perfectly aligned with our core commitments, who we have been, and who we want to become.

Thanks to the addition to staff of a Director of Educational Technology and a subsequent Association of Theological Schools Innovation Grant, the faculty has engaged in an ongoing process of faculty development, supported by the insights of consultants and active engagement in dedicated time together, including faculty retreats. These activities assisted the faculty to begin shifting student advising from focusing mainly on meeting academic and candidacy requirements to a paradigm that encompasses holistic formation of all students from the time of admission to graduation and first call theological education. The faculty developed best practices of “advising as formation” and used digital media for advising at a distance.

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<sup>9</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2018).

## New Ways of Thinking

In the fall semester of 2016, the first class of a newly designed curriculum was admitted. This approach was designed according to three models—residential, distributed, and collaborative—and two tracks—synchronous and asynchronous. It was and is a brave new experiment requiring a new way of thinking on the part of the faculty. Ironically, the initial discussions about curriculum revision did not reveal many concerns about teaching content. We tweaked some existing courses, added some new ones, and let go of a few of the previously taught courses. By and large, the content we delivered was going to remain consistent. The major change came in delivery: three learning models and two learning tracks (synchronous and asynchronous).

The learning models refer to the path by which students earn a Master of Divinity Degree: Residential Learning (RL), Distributed Learning (DL), and Collaborative Learning (CL). RL students follow the more traditional path, moving or commuting to the seminary campus and being physically present for each class period. RL students normally do not join via video conferencing (although the new curriculum allows for that under special circumstances). CL students are placed in congregations during their entire seminary program (normally four years) and serve in ministry on a half-time basis while being expected to participate in all classes synchronously (in real time) via videoconferencing. DL students also may access the classes remotely but have the option to participate synchronously or asynchronously. DL students can make the decision on a class-by-class basis but are expected to commit at the beginning of the term to the same track for the entire semester.

This required more than a technical shift for the faculty and staff. While resources were allocated to renovate dedicated classrooms with the necessary interactive video technology, additional resources were invested in training faculty in how to design courses in a way that allows



students to meet course objectives without privileging one model or track over the others. Faculty participated in teaching and learning workshops led by pedagogical specialists in digital teaching. Together we are developing a new language around design thinking, flipped classrooms, and digital learning ecosystems. Wartburg created a new, full-time staff position to focus on digital teaching methods to assist faculty and students in their teaching and learning.

Beyond the challenges of introducing an extremely quick turnaround in learning the basics of the livestreaming technology just days before classes were scheduled to begin, the greater miracle of this shift is that faculty are “all in.” While there is a huge spectrum of comfort levels among the faculty as a whole (from early adapting innovators to those needing more time), moving forward with the new curriculum—in content and means of delivery—was a unanimous decision. We all had to make the shift to the three-model, two-track approach, even those who were teaching courses that were included in the previous curriculum. We had to rethink all the basics about how we teach: how to design a syllabus, how to lecture, how to facilitate small-group work, and even where to orient ourselves when teaching before a camera.

The faculty is discovering how students in each of the three distinctive models bring added value to the entire teaching and learning community. Residential learners, who are present in the on-campus classroom, contribute to the teaching and learning community with their robust participation in Wartburg’s vigorous campus community of daily worship, life together, and extracurricular offerings. Distributed learners, who are engaged in a variety of daily occupations and participate in the same course by a combination of video recordings of the classroom sessions together with asynchronous learning materials, bring the experiences of their daily lives and local congregations to the mix. Collaborative learners, who serve concurrently in a

congregational placement while completing their degree and are required to attend classes synchronously through interactive video technology, contribute from their many practical ministry experiences and the questions that arise in their congregations.

## Learnings and Ongoing Questions

This curriculum innovation has meant a paradigm shift for Wartburg Theological Seminary. Although the faculty has remained deeply committed to the learning outcomes articulated in the Twelve Pastoral-Diaconal Practices, the new curriculum requires from faculty new intentionality about delivering these outcomes to the three distinctively different student populations. We have had to revisit our basic teaching practices from the perspective of learning by design.<sup>10</sup> This in many ways was a tremendous challenge, insofar as most faculty coming out of their own graduate education have never invested significant time in examining and developing their pedagogy. At the same time, the sharing of successes and failures in delivering the new curriculum has provided the occasion for a rewarding and ongoing conversation about our effectiveness as teachers.

As with all innovation, early and later adapters can be found among faculty members. Due to our previous asynchronous online teaching, however, many foundational practices already served as part of the faculty's repertoire of methods, especially for teaching asynchronously. Nonetheless, we are in a continual process of experimentation and assessment as we revisit established assumptions about teaching and learning practices that are often left unexamined. The dynamic character of the new curriculum, which demands faculty expertise in using

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<sup>10</sup> Two books have been particularly useful to the faculty in this process: Nathan Loewen, *Effective Social Learning: A Collaborative, Globally-Networked Pedagogy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015) and G. Brooke Lester, *Understanding Bible by Design: Create Courses with Purpose* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

interactive video, also provides much immediate gratification from our students in appreciation for the leap we have taken.

This is a major shift in our institutional culture. As a teaching and learning community, we are developing habits of ongoing experimentation and creativity. The following questions that are driving our ongoing work can serve as a model for all schools involved in leadership education.<sup>11</sup>

*What is formation, and what is our institutional role in the formation of students?*

The new curriculum gives attention not only to education but to formation of students. This accords with significant research on reimagining theological education as “practical wisdom.”<sup>12</sup> The origins of this undertaking are ancient, rooted in the classical notion of phronesis. How does theology become incarnate in bodies, in praying, in everyday life, in congregations, and in popular culture? Formation focuses on how theology becomes embedded in every fiber of life—personally, communally, and ecologically.

Our goals for formation are grounded in the Twelve Pastoral-Diaconal Practices, which have guided and continue to direct our institution and in evaluating the effectiveness of the formation process. This new endeavor in digital teaching and learning is teaching us new ways to engage the formation process and how to measure it. What once took place through check-ins with students in refectory conversations or before and after class needs to be revisited

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<sup>11</sup> Our work is especially informed by Norma Cook Everist and Craig L. Nessian, *Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> See especially [Dorothy C. Bass](#), [Kathleen A. Cahalan](#), [Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore](#), [Christian Batalden Scharen](#), and [James R. Nieman](#), *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016).

and expanded to include the new student populations in different contexts.

The role of the seminary is key for facilitating and equipping the team of partners working together in the formation process during seminary and beyond. We see the need to deepen the alignment of the seminary's learning objectives through the training of local supervisors, mentors, and congregation members—all those who are in daily relationship with our students.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, it is imperative for the seminary to be transformed by its encounter with the church leaders and contexts where our students are immersed. We understand the need to create a team of “champions” for each student—people actively involved in the formation process—that includes not only faculty advisors but candidacy committees, leaders in the local congregation, and designated mentors.

It is typical for CL students to be formed in educational partnerships with field education supervisors and mentors. But how might we address formation with students in the DL track who are not serving in congregations and thus unable to avail themselves of the working relationships inherent to field education placement? To answer this question, we gained assistance from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS).

Using a grant provided by the ATS for innovative initiatives, Wartburg Seminary's aim was “Building a Shared Learning Community Among Seminary, Congregations, and Synods.” At the heart of the grant activities is the development of a new paradigm for thinking about academic advising. We aimed at transforming faculty advising from focusing mainly on meeting academic and candidacy requirements to a paradigm that encompasses holistic formation of students in all three models (RL, DL, CL) from the time of admission to seminary to graduation

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Dean K. Thompson and D. Cameron Murchison, eds., *Mentoring: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2018).

and first call theological education. The faculty explored “advising as formation” by developing best practices with students in all three models, including the use of digital competencies for advising as formation.<sup>14</sup>

In this grant initiative, we began to provide training for congregations, supervisors, and mentors for becoming more effective partners in the teaching, learning, and formation of students in the collaborative model. Through faculty visits to CL students, supervisors, and congregations, we developed cooperation between congregations and the seminary, so that the seminary curriculum is transformed by experiences from congregations hosting students and that congregations are enriched by the teaching and learning resources of the seminary faculty.

The faculty who make visits have also noted the different levels of preparation among CL students, the uniqueness of each congregational context, and the value of intentional formation of congregations as teaching and learning sites, including the training of supervisors and mentors.

*What are the new roles of partners (congregations, synods, mentors, nonprofit organizations, and clinical pastoral education sites) across all three models?*

The changing role of partners is significant for our educational paradigm shift. Historically, a limited number of congregations served as internship sites for students in the third year of their four-year degree program. A new category of “collaborative congregations” was developed. These unique congregations (and the supervisors and mentors within them) work with students during their entire four years of seminary—teaching, learning, and accompanying the student on the journey.

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<sup>14</sup> Significant resources used by the faculty include Deanna A. Thompson, *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2016) and Christian Scharen, *Fieldwork in Theology: Exploring the Social Context of God's Work in the World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2015).

To accomplish this challenge of building strong partnerships with our collaborative congregations, supervisors, and mentors, Wartburg now has a full-time director of contextual education, whose responsibilities include the formation of CL students. We are expanding our focus on the development and use of training materials for the supervisors, mentors, and students in our collaborative congregations. New materials include: (1) a study guide for the book, *Mentoring for Ministry*,<sup>15</sup> (2) a training video on key findings from the *Learning Pastoral Imagination* research by Auburn Theological Seminary, (3) a training video on the “Five Stages of Learning Ministry over Time” by Christian Scharen,<sup>16</sup> and (4) a training video on “Best Practices in Coaching for Supervisors and Mentors” by John Martinson, Director, Clergy Coaches.<sup>17</sup>

These resources are no substitute, however, for ongoing and intentional relationship building among seminary, synod, and congregations. The vital role and responsibility that partnerships have in all three models, particularly for the CL students, becomes even more indispensable for the ongoing formation of students. Stewarding resources to identify, nurture, and support partners are crucial. Resources for training supervisors and mentors in alignment with the educational and formation process are crucial, as well as tools for spiritual discernment among each of our partners in their distinctive roles. Moreover, it is incumbent on the seminary to be in a state of readiness to learn from these partners, including especially from the congregations, supervisors, and mentors who are working with our students on a daily basis.

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<sup>15</sup> Craig T. Kocher, Jason Byassee, and James C., eds., *Mentoring for Ministry: The Grace of Growing Pastors* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Christian Scharen, “Learning Ministry over Time: Embodying Practical Wisdom,” eds. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra, in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 265–288.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.clergycoaches.org/index.html>.

It is not uncommon for congregations to feel called to contribute to the education of future church leaders, but not all congregations are called to be CL sites and to be committed to serving as teaching and learning sites. Some congregations might be better suited to serve as sources of candidates, to provide financial support, or to host retreats for those discerning a call to professional ministry. Wartburg is working on developing criteria to assist congregations in discerning how they might best be called to participate in the formation of leaders for the church, recognizing that for some congregations, this goes beyond their capacity merely to serve as collaborative congregations or internship sites.

*How do we measure student learning, not only in the classroom but beyond the classroom? How do we gather feedback, and what do we do with it?*

The addition of new models and tracks in theological education demands new ways to accumulate and assess data. Wartburg built on previous methods of assessment collection by adding real-time listening posts to gather student feedback. For example, distributed and collaborative students are asking about new modes for Wartburg to embody what it means to be a worship-centered community. This feedback is leading us to explore effective and dynamic models for livestreaming chapel services to those at a distance. Regular formal and informal faculty conversations also take place about what we are learning through formal and informal assessment in and out of the classroom in order to constantly improve the educational experience.<sup>18</sup>

Gathering information is only the first step, however. We need feedback mechanisms in place to make midcourse corrections as needed. Becoming nimble as an organization has been crucial for our ability to learn and respond, envision, and execute. We are learning that a fine line can be

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<sup>18</sup> Parker J. Palmer and Arthur Zajone, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal—Transforming the Academy Through Collegial Conversations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

drawn between being an institution that responds to the actual needs of students and creating a culture where students expect every desire to be satisfied. This issue is related to the increased expectations made by students in a consumer culture.

*How does innovation serve our institution and grow out of our DNA in order to move us deeper into our mission, rather than becoming an end in itself?*

Wartburg must ask itself continually how it can embrace innovation in theological education without sacrificing its core identity and values. Part of our institutional work is to generate a culture of creativity. Based on design theory, we have created a process of innovation and experimentation. This approach is based on clear criteria that move new ideas from an initial concept to full integration into the life of the organization.

This means that intentional assessment must be built into the process to determine whether an idea should continue to move forward, be placed on hiatus, or be completely dismissed. Creating this process has been and continues to be the first step in becoming truly open to the work of the Spirit in our midst in ways that welcome new learnings—including the possibility of failure—and encourage accountable creativity. The final measure of success remains the mission of the seminary and its strategic plan, which is based on the mission of the institution.<sup>19</sup> The new strategic plan prioritizes four values: diversity, collaboration, evangelism, and responsibility. The strategic planning process is continual and thereby allows for ongoing assessment of initiatives and experiments that contribute to institutional innovation. The collaborative learning model is one of the primary initiatives within the strategic plan that is undergoing assessment three times each year.

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<sup>19</sup> WTS Strategic Plan, <https://www.wartburgseminary.edu/strategic-plan/>.



*How do we help students discern which is the right model for them?*

Congregations are not the only ones in need of discernment about the character of partnership. Not every student will thrive or even succeed in the collaborative or distributed learning models. Some students are better served through residential learning, not only to meet their own learning and formation goals but to flourish holistically. Wartburg is intentional in listening to prospective students from the beginning of the inquiry stage. Too often, distributed learning is misperceived as the model of convenience, which appears to avoid the hassle of leaving one's present home and circumstances. This attitude is contrary to our theology of call and vocation. All students need to be challenged to understand that ministry is countercultural in being primarily for the sake of others and the needs of the larger church. Wartburg has developed holistic language to talk about institutional culture, the need for learning and formation, and respecting one's life responsibilities.

Students in all models make sacrifices. Faculty and staff work closely with syllabi, process, procedures, and student conversations to create a culture where decisions can be made based on the learning needs of each student. Sometimes that can mean a model or track change after the program has started. The learning styles of students vary and are not always suitable for success in every model or track. While we understand there is value added for each model and each track, some expectations for success cannot be met by every student.

Students in residential learning participate in the richness of campus life, including the many extracurricular events to enrich the entire teaching and learning community. Students in distributed learning have involvements in daily work, local community, and congregation that must be honored. Students in collaborative learning have daily and weekly immersion in congregational ministry that contextualizes

their learning but also creates a unique set of demands, especially given the rhythm of the church year and the weekly patterns of congregational life. It is important that students discover the model and track that most enhances their learning and formation. To further enhance intrinsic motivation for learning by students, Wartburg is examining the potential of competency-based assessment to foster new adventures in self-directed learning.

*In what ways have these new models and tracks changed how faculty understand themselves as teachers and advisors of students?*

This paradigm shift forces each member of the faculty to rethink how he or she teaches. Traditional understandings of teaching were often grounded on what the teacher brings to the classroom and how students engage the content provided by the instructor. Most of us in this way learned to teach according to how we were taught, primarily toward the mastery of content. In a digitally hybrid learning environment, the teacher's role is transformed.<sup>20</sup> How do we curate and creatively introduce course content employing methods that students in all models and tracks can access and engage to meet the learning objectives in a measurable way? Meeting the needs of different types of students means that we must become more intentional as teachers and proactive in thinking about course design according to the learning objectives.

The faculty member no longer serves as the only instructor in the class. Moving into a digital, hybrid classroom is not about translating a course from the residential classroom to an online format. It is about rethinking how all students are taught, synchronously and asynchronously. Content can be engaged in multiple ways, including these three: (1) From the instructor to the student. Here the instructor brings lectures, readings, and other voices to the learning community and creates the structures

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<sup>20</sup> Cari Crumley, *Pedagogies for Student-Centered Learning: Online and On-Ground* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

whereby students engage the content. The instructor provides individual student feedback through the traditional methods (grades, rubrics, comments, etc.). (2) From student to student. In a hybrid classroom, students are not able to hide in post-and-reply forums. Learning opportunities are created and structured so that students across all models and tracks can hear each other's voices. Students are responsible for their own learning but also for the learning of the whole teaching and learning community. Contributing intentionally to the learning of others is a key indicator for leadership that will raise up others as new leaders. (3) From their respective contexts to the teaching and learning community. Students bring their whole and varied lives to class. For example, when hurricanes Harvey and Irma made landfall in Puerto Rico, power and internet disruptions meant that students in those areas of the country were unable to "come to class". We had to make other arrangements for teaching and learning that took the disaster on that island into consideration.

We need to add a fourth dimension to this expansive learning community. As we have noted, congregational sites where CL students are serving in ministry also become part of the classroom learning community. It is not uncommon for insights from a class on the Lutheran Confessions in the morning to find their way into a confirmation class in the evening. CL students enrich classroom learning by sharing experiences from ministry in their congregations. Teaching experiments between faculty and students also have been undertaken in the collaborative congregations. In lieu of a final paper for a course this past semester, one student co-taught a course with a faculty member using livestreaming by Zoom with members of the congregation. Another cohosted a four-week Facebook live Bible Study with the course instructor. The teaching experiments have employed the use of educational technologies to facilitate participation by members of collaborative congregations in new forms of theological education.

*Who are the students, and how do they relate to and learn from one another?*

Part of the ongoing work of Wartburg Seminary is to constantly revisit its institutional understanding of the meaning of *community*. Our rich history of defining community primarily in terms of sharing a geographical location has been tested by our desire to expand into digital learning. We have learned that our paradigm shift in the delivery of teaching and learning does not merely involve replicating traditional understandings of community so much as living into a new definition of community that is evolving in continuity from the previously embodied reality.

We are discovering the value of seeing our diverse set of learners as a holistic learning community, not as separate types with different labels.<sup>21</sup> Like siblings, each unique student in each distinct model within each specific track has certain learning needs. But we can still share a common identity as members of the one Wartburg community. Hence, we start with a focus on community formation from the beginning of each semester.

The first week of every semester, called Prolog Week, is a time when all students in every model and track are required to be on campus. The schedule during this intensive week provides six contact hours for each course, when students and instructors gather together in person. Faculty plan that time intentionally for relationship building, not primarily for content delivery. Evening reading or writing assignments are kept to a minimum, so students have time to gather on their own in groups, spending time in conversation, rest, and play. Digital access to courses is not available during Prolog Week. By the end of this week, every student knows the face and name of every other student in each class.

To foster community among the entire Wartburg student body, faculty design different degrees of connection

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Holly J. Inglis, *Sticky Learning: How Neuroscience Supports Teaching That's Remembered* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

among students across models and tracks throughout the semester. Course goals and instructor proclivities dictate the extent and creativity in faculty-student interactions among those in the various models. One faculty teaching team designs their course around units, with each unit containing at least one class activity in which students pair up across tracks and hold meetings that facilitate working together on a shared project. Pairings are determined by the instructors to assure conversations across models and tracks.

Two key findings can be shared: (1) The inclusion of synchronous and asynchronous access to the teaching and learning community have enhanced the learning of all, faculty as well as students, and (2) The quality of faculty teaching and learning is improving due to the intentionality about faculty development involved in these curriculum changes. We continue to assess our hypothesis that overall student learning is of a higher quality due to the interaction of students and faculty in all three models.

*How do we distinguish between equity and equality regarding student access and experience?*

Initially we were worried that having students join by livestreaming would be a distraction for the residential students. And at first, some of the returning residential students struggled with having the classroom “disrupted” by the synchronous interlopers. We listened carefully and patiently to their concerns. But in the end, we have worked hard not to privilege one group of learners above another. When teaching and learning are done well—intentionally and with creativity—the involvement of students in each model raises the bar for the other two.

Because of Wartburg’s digital learning adventure, residential teaching and learning have become stronger and better. Students in the classroom are invited to log in to Zoom to participate in breakout sessions with the synchronous students, but they are not required to do so. Each of the models and tracks inform and shape the others.

We become better teachers and students by sharing the same classroom, thus diminishing the possibility of sibling rivalry as we seek to avoid the prioritizing of one over the other. Value is added for the entire teaching and learning community across the spectrum.

### **Learning Pastoral Imagination in Congregational Contexts**

The Wartburg faculty has been stimulated in its reconfiguration of our new hybrid curriculum by the *Learning Pastoral Imagination* project of Auburn Seminary. Christian A.B. Scharen and Eileen R. Campbell-Reed write about the aims of this research:

We find through listening to ministry leaders across the country that ministry today is less about exercising the authority of an office or role and more about embodying an authentic contextual wisdom only gained by daily practice of leadership on the long arc of learning ministry. Yet few studies of learning over time have been conducted, leading to this unique, broadly ecumenical, and national study of learning ministry in practice. . . . This study deepens engagement of Auburn research on patterns of teaching and learning in theological education, offering a dynamic view into the formation of faith leaders for the twenty-first century.<sup>22</sup>

This deep commitment to learning in context, specifically congregational contexts, informs the Wartburg faculty's commitment to the development of the unified curriculum, which for collaborative students places new focus on learning by apprenticeship.

We are finding that our adventure in digital teaching and learning is directly related to the six key findings of the *Learning Pastoral Imagination* study:

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<sup>22</sup> Christian A.B. Scharen and Eileen R. Campbell-Reed, "Learning Pastoral Imagination: A Five-Year Report on How New Ministers Learn in Practice" (Auburn Studies, Winter 2016), <http://pastoralimagination.com/>.

- (1) Learning pastoral imagination happens best in formation for ministry that is integrative, embodied, and relational;
- (2) Learning pastoral imagination centers on integrated teaching that understands and articulates the challenges of the practice of ministry today;
- (3) Learning pastoral imagination requires both the daily practice of ministry over time and critical moments that may arise from crisis or clarity.
- (4) Learning pastoral imagination requires both apprenticeship to a situation and mentors who offer relational wisdom through shared reflection and making sense of a situation;
- (5) Learning pastoral imagination is complicated by the intersection of social and personal forces of injustice;
- (6) Learning pastoral imagination is needed for inhabiting ministry as a spiritual practice, opening up the self and community to the presence and power of God.<sup>23</sup>

Key learnings of the faculty based on the collaborative learning model correlate in striking ways with the six findings of *Learning Pastoral Imagination*:

- The simultaneity of students taking seminary classes while they are serving in collaborative congregations as colleagues with local supervisors and mentors provides new promise for theological education that is embodied, relational, and especially integrated.
- The seminary faculty, by the contributions of collaborative students in their classes, visits to these congregations, and teaching experiments in these congregations, are being significantly formed in their teaching by ministry practices in varied congregational settings.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 14.

- The extension of contextual learning over the four years of the collaborative program promises to foster repetition in ministry practices that will become deeply embedded through times of crisis and moments of insight.<sup>24</sup> For this reason, the alignment of the seminary curriculum with the collaborative supervisors and mentors is crucial.
- The investment by the seminary in building strong relationships with and providing intentional training for supervisors and mentors is indispensable to the full value of this model.
- Students in collaborative congregations will be forced to navigate the realities of pastoral ministry in context, including the complications of social and personal injustice, throughout their seminary education.
- The focus on formation, prayer, worship, and spiritual practices in the seminary curriculum needs to extend seamlessly to the formation of collaborative and distributed students.<sup>25</sup> This will require new imagination and intentionality by the seminary for engaging in formation in partnership with supervisors and mentors.

Wartburg Seminary finds itself on an adventure to explore the following implications of this research for theological education as a living case study: (1) The shift from a textual paradigm to a contextual paradigm; (2) Taking account of the education and formation of the whole person; (3) To support developmental learning over a lifetime; (4) To cultivate teachers who know the profession

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Diane J. Chandler, *Christian Spiritual Formation: An Integrated Approach for Personal and Relational Wholeness* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2014).



and practices of ministry; and (5) Knowing that relationship to God is at the heart of forming wise pastoral leaders.<sup>26</sup>

The process of theological education and formation is lifelong. In Wartburg's longitudinal assessment of students and alumni, we have discovered that theological education is far from complete at the time of graduation. Many pastors three years after graduation seem stalled in their ongoing development, while those ten years after graduation appear on average to demonstrate decline based on assessment in relation to the Twelve Pastoral-Diaconal Practices. This provides a strong argument for building a bridge between the completion of a seminary degree and the lifelong learning of pastors throughout their ministries. An important assessment question asks how the collaborative model might help address this pattern of decline.

Churches need to set realistic yet robust continuing education expectations for pastors upon completion of their Master of Divinity degree. Many other professions have strict regulations for continuing education, understanding that the pursuit of excellence needs to continue throughout the entire course of one's career and extend beyond the completion of a professional degree. The paradigm for professional development established in other fields challenges the church and theological educators to rethink formation for ministry according to the five stages: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert on the way to mastery.<sup>27</sup>

Normally, seminary education should be expected to lead graduates to the third stage: competent. This paradigm undermines the conventional notion that a seminary education will have taught pastors everything they need to know. What measures are necessary to challenge ministry

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<sup>26</sup> Scharen and Campbell-Reed, 46–53.

<sup>27</sup> Christian Scharen, "Learning Ministry over Time: Embodying Practical Wisdom," in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, eds. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 265–288.

practitioners to continue their professional growth beyond the attainment of competence so they reach the levels of proficiency and expertise in the mastery of the pastoral arts?

The employment of digital methods of teaching and learning has great promise not only for degree programs but for transforming the character of continuing education in the church. We need to deepen what it means to learn pastoral imagination in context also for those already serving in pastoral ministry. The full implications of Wartburg's adventure in digital teaching are just being discovered. We will continue to seek ways to partner with others to extend theological education for the new candidates for ministry who are urgently needed as leaders in the church; we also will seek theological education partners for the lifelong learning of pastors and the congregations they serve.