
‘The Isaiah Project’ at Trinity Lutheran Seminary

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A voice cries out:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill be made low;
The uneven ground shall become level
And the rough places a plain”
—Isaiah 40:3-4

Student financial health has been a vital concern at Trinity Lutheran Seminary for decades, as it advances or impedes those preparing for the ministries of the church. Trinity has been proactive in seeking ways not only to provide student aid while minimizing student debt, but also to promote the overall financial health of students and their families. (Many years, Trinity students have had the lowest average debt load among ELCA seminaries.) The leadership for this effort has come from Trinity’s faculty and administration and has been guided by our longtime Director of Financial Aid, Melissa Curtis Powell. Melissa was previously a leader for Trinity’s participation in the Lilly/ELCA program, “Stewards of Abundance.” Thus, the invitation to apply for a grant from the Lilly Endowment under its current program, “Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers,” (ECFFM) fit exceedingly well with our existing philosophy and practice of holistic student financial health.

The original grant proposal for “The Isaiah Project” envisioned a two-fold emphasis: direct work with students (e.g., financial coaching), and efforts to reduce student costs (e.g., increasing enrollment in order to minimize or even roll back tuition increases). While the details of this proposal made sense at the time, we soon learned that we were going to have to revise the proposal significantly if it was to have a maximum positive impact on students. Among the factors leading to an early revision were the emerging design for a new M.Div. curriculum, a significant drop in ELCA M.Div. enrollment, and a significant turnover in administrative personnel, including a new seminary president and a new director of the Isaiah Project itself.

The revised proposal, which also extended the length of the overall project from three to four years (2013–2016), focused on six specific projects:

- Admissions: This project was intended to extend the reach and improve the efficiency of our office of Admissions, Vocation, and Enrollment by providing improved computer software to track

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students from first contact through enrollment. The goal was to reduce costs for all students through increased enrollment.

- Personal Financial Education: This project was designed to encourage students to reflect on their financial stewardship with the goal of helping borrowers to find ways to reduce their student debt, and those who do not borrow to improve their overall financial health.
- A Vision for Stewardship Education: This project aimed to renew stewardship education in the seminary, both curricular and co-curricular, after years of minimal attention to this area. The goal was to improve both individual and corporate stewardship practices. (This project has been coordinated with projects supported by the Stewardship of Life Institute.)
- Intensive/Online Education: This project supported our transition to what we call the “2+2” M.Div. curriculum, which features two years of intensive grounding in theology on campus followed by two years of internship that incorporate the academic work of the former senior year via intensive and online courses. The primary goal was to prepare faculty and internship supervisors for their new responsibilities.
- Career Development: This project worked with our MA students and non-ELCA M.Div. students in the areas of job searches, resumes, and preparation for interviews, with the goal of improving the placement process for these individuals.
- Affiliated Students: This project focused on attracting affiliated students to Trinity for their “Lutheran Year,” with the goal of increasing their numbers as part of the overall goal of increasing ELCA M.Div. enrollment in the seminary.

Although the above descriptions are couched in the past tense,

Trinity received a continuation grant from Lilly and is moving forward with the same six projects in calendar years 2017, 2018, and 2019. The balance between the projects is shifting, however, with the lion's share of financial resources now allocated to intensive and online education that supports the "2+2" curriculum, which the seminary believes is critical to its continuing viability.

I would like to focus more extensively now on three of these six projects. These are the projects that have had the greatest impact on student financial health to date, and are likely to continue to do so into the future.

Personal Financial Education

Although strategies will continue to evolve, this emphasis obviously can continue to have a positive impact on student finances, including the minimizing of student debt. In calendar year 2016, twenty-seven on-campus students participated in one-on-one financial counseling, two off-campus students participated, and two workshops attracted a total of forty-eight students. Over the past three calendar years, the percentage of students borrowing money dropped from 42.16 percent in 2014 to 35 percent in 2015 to 23.76 percent in 2016. Average theological school debt for all graduating students dropped from \$13,986 (2014) to \$11,767 (2015) to \$10,816 (2016). While not all of these favorable trends can be attributed to personal financial education, the participating students have consistently testified to the importance of this resource for their financial health.

Unfortunately, the continuing viability of this successful project has been called into question by the merger with Capital University. At this writing, Capital has announced the elimination of most administrative positions at Trinity, including the Director of Financial Aid. Presumably Capital personnel will take over these functions, although a few consolidated positions at the seminary will be created for which current personnel will be invited to apply. Since personal financial education is labor intensive—even with the use of volunteers for one-on-one coaching—we cannot be sure at this time that this project will go forward as it now exists. We will, however, make every effort to continue to provide this essential service to students in some form.

"2+2" Curriculum

Under the leadership of Academic Dean Brad Binau, Trinity has successfully transitioned to its new curriculum. After two years of theological "boot camp," which includes three semesters of contextual education in local parishes, ELCA M.Div. students spend two years on internship. During this time they complete the academic work of the previous senior year by participating in intensive courses (on- and off-campus) and online courses. This is not to say that these courses are simply the same as the previous senior year courses. They have been redesigned to take advantage of the contextual situation where the student is located, and they have been adapted for the new formats that are being used. We have also been able to utilize the resources of Healthy Congregations, Inc., which is located on the Trinity campus and is led by

Emlyn Ott, a member of the Isaiah Project steering committee. Early feedback indicates enthusiasm for the new design among students, pastors, and congregations, even though we are still working out a few "bugs."

The Isaiah Project has furnished, and will continue to furnish, significant financial assistance to the new curriculum, particularly by supporting the training of faculty and internship pastors, and by funding intensive courses during their rollout phase. Several faculty members have attended courses and workshops at the University of Wisconsin—Madison that focus on the delivery of off-site education, which have been funded by the Isaiah Project. The Contextual Education Director of the seminary has worked with the internship pastors to prepare them for the new pattern.

In keeping with the overall goal of the Lilly Endowment ECFM project to improve student financial health, the new curriculum reduces student expense by reducing the number of student moves. Furthermore, ELCA M.Div. students now receive a stipend and housing for two years of their seminary career instead of one. Settling for two years in one place also has a positive effect on spousal employment (another financial benefit to families), educational continuity for children, and continuity in the ministry of the congregation.

Career Development

Trinity has, to be truthful, provided few career development resources over the years for its MA, MTS, and non-ELCA M.Div. students. Individual faculty members did what they could, and the Director of Financial Aid was alert to employment opportunities that came to her attention, but there was no comprehensive approach. That has changed with the advent of the Isaiah Project. Through leadership from Trinity's Director of Contextual Education and a strong partnership with Capital University's Office of Career Development, assistance is now given in such areas as career counseling, job searches, and resume preparation. As one student said recently, "This has been *so* helpful!"

A key component of Capital's model is the hiring of Peer Career Advisors (PCAs). These are advanced students who are trained to assist other students in all phases of their career development. Trinity's PCAs, funded by the Isaiah Project, have worked diligently to implement Capital's model and to reach out to their target audience. In calendar year 2016, six Trinity students worked as PCAs. They had ninety-three contacts with fellow students and prepared forty-eight "Job Email Blasts," which were especially popular.

We anticipate that this program will transition smoothly into Capital's after the merger, with continuing financial support from the Isaiah Project. Capital hopes to significantly increase MA enrollment at Trinity, so the success of this initiative to date bodes well for the future.

Other projects

The other three projects will continue to be addressed as opportunities present themselves. The goal of providing the Admissions, Vocation, and Enrollment Office with updated software and

more efficient procedures is essentially complete, although we are occasionally able to take advantage of an opportunity to assist this office with a small project that is designed to enhance enrollment. The Vision for Stewardship Education will continue to provide funding for an occasional stewardship elective, and other initiatives have been discussed. We continue to approach potential Affiliated Students as we become aware of their needs.

The major research project

In addition to the operational projects described above, the Lilly Endowment expects grant recipients to initiate a major research project whose results can be shared with the wider theological education community.

Trinity has decided to focus on the evaluation of the “2+2” curriculum as its major research project. A student spouse with considerable statistical expertise has been compiling our evaluations for the six individual projects. Now she is working with the project director and others to design this research project. The expectation is that we will complete the design this summer and implement it soon thereafter. These research results should be useful not only to Trinity but to the broader theological education community.

Going forward

Because we had operational interruptions and had to reconfigure the project significantly in 2014 and 2015—which resulted in temporarily reduced spending—we were able to carry a healthy financial balance into the sustainability phase of the Isaiah Project. Our challenges at this point are not financial. Rather, they revolve around effectively implementing our vision so that the project enhances the new situation as Trinity Lutheran Seminary becomes part of Capital University. There are many unanswered questions at this writing, but it is our expectation that the Isaiah Project will go forward under the overall leadership of the new Dean of the Seminary who is yet to be appointed.

Appreciation for the Lilly Endowment

I cannot overstate Trinity’s appreciation for the partnership with the Lilly Endowment as we have lived through this challenging period in the history of the seminary. Lilly’s flexibility, patience, and helpful insights have encouraged us in ways that go well beyond dollars. What a class act!