
Theological Libraries and Non-Credit Pathways for Ministry

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ABSTRACT Non-credit pathways for ministry include pre-degree, post-degree, or alternative to degrees. This paper addresses models for non-degree programs, changing economics, reimagining a non-degree theological education, and the intersection with theological libraries.

INTRODUCTION

While I have been thinking about these things for a while, it was really put into focus over the course of a year when managing a \$50,000 seminary planning grant from the Lilly Endowment: the topic of non-credit programs emerged in a significant way during our planning retreat. We then struck up a conversation with Wesley Theological Seminary that subsequently developed into a \$5,000,000 Lilly Endowment grant proposal. As part of preparing that grant proposal, the library implications became increasingly clear, and so I proposed this paper, conducted a modest survey, and had a number of valuable conversations with colleagues. I acknowledge that this paper owes a significant debt to large number of conversation partners.

My family tree is littered with Methodist clergy—we trace back to the 1790s in Methodist clergy, and even today there are four of us among three living generations. Among an earlier generation of pastors, we had James Franklin Brown, Harry C. Brown, and Clifford C. Brown; all were Methodist pastors who took different routes through theological education that are instructive to the kind of theological education that I will be describing. James Franklin, my great-great-grandfather, heard the call to ministry around the age of 43 years old. He moved from Ohio to Illinois when he was 18 years, never went to college, and never knew anything but farming. So, when he was

licensed to be a local preacher, his only education was a non-credit, non-degree program known as the Course of Study. And he continued to be a farmer in addition to being a preacher.

James Franklin's son and my great-grandfather, Harry Brown, felt a call to ministry at a younger age of 23 years old, a full two decades earlier than his father. Still, he had not finished college, and so he went through the same non-credit, non-degree course of study that his father had completed. But after about ten years of ministry, he decided he should go to seminary to better himself and his family. And so he packed up the family to get a seminary education at Garrett while pastoring a church outside of Chicago. Harry's son and my grandfather, Clifford C. Brown, felt the call to ministry when he was 31 years old. He had already finished college and so, rather than go through the non-credit, non-degree course of study program, he went directly to seminary—again at Garrett. But he pastored a church as a student and took the train to Garrett from southern Illinois.

We have three examples who all happen to be in different generations of the same family and had different experiences of theological education. James Franklin was both a second-career pastor and what we might call bi-vocational or multi-vocational in farming and ministry. His non-credit, non-degree program was the only preparation and off-ramp he needed for decades of ministry. Combining farming, pastoring, and going through a traditional degree program would have been both unaffordable and impractical. Harry gets started a bit earlier in the ministry, goes through the same non-credit, non-degree program as his father but then finds it difficult to advance in full-time ministry without going to seminary. Unlike his father, he has no second vocation or career. In this case, the non-credit, non-degree program becomes an on-ramp to a theological degree. Finally, Clifford bypasses the non-credit, non-degree program altogether and goes directly into a theological degree. Each of these stories illustrates both the past and future of theological education.

MODELS FOR NON-DEGREE PROGRAMS

In the Wesleyan movement, we have had since at least 1816 a non-credit, non-degree program known as the “Course of Study.” While it has changed and evolved over the last 200 years, it is a required theological and leadership education program for licensed local pastors. Prior to that time, the model was a simple apprenticeship—the

new preacher would be attached to an older preacher to travel a circuit together and was given a small set of books, sized appropriately for the saddlebags of the day used by the circuit-riding preachers.

Many models for non-credit, non-degree credentialing of clergy and other types of church leaders can be seen within a wide range of religious traditions and cultures. In terms of theological education, one might say that traditional graduate theological education is more the outlier than the norm. Religious bodies themselves have often piloted and directed this type of education. The contemporary counterpart to an apprenticeship model is quite common. Similarly, correspondence-based education, competency-based education, and video-based instruction is widely available.

Curriculum might be uniquely prepared for certain cultures and contexts. A program in Iowa is specifically targeted to the preacher farmer. A Lutheran curriculum in Alaska is devoted to the Inuit Native American community. There are non-degree programs developed by or targeted to Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and likely many more. Many churches, judicatories, and even publishers and non-profits have created modest training programs in various areas of theological education. Several theological seminaries have developed certificate programs, online learning opportunities, and other kinds of formalized non-degree programs. My brother-in-law, who leads a multi-site church in Pittsburgh, contracted with a Canadian seminary to provide a customized theological education to his whole staff.

Clergy preparation in this non-credit, non-degree space might consist of anything from a single preparatory weekend retreat to a multiyear set of courses, from individual learning to learning cohorts, from basic studies to advanced studies. In addition to the formal education component, religious bodies might add lengthy examinations, formal interviews, regular assessments, and ongoing mentoring or supervision. With few exceptions, there is extraordinarily little oversight or coordination among these efforts. If there are standards, they can be defined at the denomination level, at the local church level, or any place in between. Potential learners face a dizzying array of choices. As illustrated at the beginning, these non-credit programs can be sufficient preparation or offramp into ministry. Or they can be an onramp to other educational programs and even graduate-level theological degrees.

CHANGING ECONOMICS OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

The economic systems that have sustained full-time, graduate-level trained ministry are fragile, if not completely broken. The economics of higher education as a whole also provide challenges to theological education. A major shakeout is underway among ATS schools as the pool of students seeking the MDiv and the donor pool in congregations are both shrinking. This business model is no longer sustainable, practical, or directed to the needs of the emerging church.

Most seminaries in the ATS are or were structured to offer graduate-level education culminating in the expensive and time-intensive MDiv, because we believe forming full-time pastors is the core of our mission. Other master's programs are often derivative of the MDiv, utilizing its core courses or outcomes. Tenured and non-tenured faculty are structured to serve that MDiv curriculum; it is the principal focus of accreditation standards and the denominator in traditional measures of quality like teaching load and student-faculty ratio. Fundraising and endowment build toward subsidizing the MDiv. We offer other master's, doctoral, and non-degree programs that utilize the excess capacity of the faculty, staff, and campus and only as an ancillary part of our mission.

Many seminaries, including Perkins School of Theology, were started through the generous support of churches and laity such that students typically paid little or no tuition, room and board were heavily subsidized, and weekends featured bountiful paid opportunities for preaching and ministry. This is no longer the case. Tuition (which we control) and increasing layers of university fees (which we don't control) regularly exceed the church and endowment support for scholarships. Seminary student housing was absorbed by the university many decades ago, and the local preaching/ministry opportunities for student pastors are neither as plentiful nor as financially generous.

CHANGING ECONOMICS OF MINISTRY

On the church side, one can simply look at denominational statistics to see a reduction in the number of ordained clergies with graduate theological education. I attended the Oklahoma Annual Conference a few weeks ago where they counted one ordination and nineteen retirements. Many churches are simply not able to afford full-time

clergy, and multi-staff congregations are typically employing fewer of them. Churches can merge, create larger clergy circuits, and deploy a greater number of congregational lay ministers, but the resulting reduction in full-time clergy remains the same.

The common thread among pastors in underserved communities is multi-vocational clergy and congregational lay ministers: despite their educational needs or desires, they often cannot access or afford theological education—particularly not an expensive and time-intensive Master of Divinity degree. Even more problematic for a large and growing number of clergy is the fact that the largest and best-organized non-credit programs are coordinated and supported by religious bodies, all of which are facing major funding and staffing challenges. For example, the UMC Course of Study has been traditionally supported by general church funds and robust staffing, at multiple levels, to ensure quality and coordination throughout the denomination. But the UMC has been in a long decline, and it faces a major splintering and potential reorganization that threatens to further dissolve funding and staffing capacities. As funding, authority, and support continue to diminish, the ability to coordinate and fund robust and consistent offerings is threatened even as the demand for such training grows. Thus, the denominational bodies that have traditionally organized and financially supported non-degree pastoral education face significant reductions in size, mission, and funding in the coming years, leaving an uncertain future even for existing programs.

REIMAGINING A NON-DEGREE THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

While graduate theological education has been normative for most of our lives, it's a relatively new invention—as is most of higher education that we experience today. Even the idea of formal seminary education didn't really emerge until the 16th century. The Association of Theological Schools was founded in 1918, with standards emerging in 1936, the birthing of Atla in 1946, and the now-familiar pattern of seminary self-studies and peer evaluations not appearing until 1956.

Pastoral leaders need and deserve a quality theological education that draws on the best resources seminaries have to offer. At the same time, even those completing a master's degree need new skills and competencies at points in ministry, whether that is before,

during, or after their master's studies. Theological schools have the opportunity to develop affordable, accessible theological education offerings that can serve as pre-degree, post degree, or alternatives to the MDiv that allow more pastors in more communities to do the work of transformation.

Through a collaboration, we seek to develop, standardize, and market the educational offerings most needed to serve and strengthen pastors, particularly in missional and underserved communities. In some cases, this may mean non-degree or certificate programs that serve as an alternative credentialing path to ordination or a credentialing path for a specific set of skills (e.g., evangelism, spiritual direction, conflict transformation). We also see routes for stacking these credentials into a degree program; for example, courses can serve as an onramp to a Master of Arts or Master of Divinity degree, particularly for students who do not have a bachelor's degree but who have the capacity and desire for advanced theological education.

As part of reimagining the seminary business model and stewardship of seminary assets, we also must look at the specific business model of offering non-degree courses, credentials, and certificates. What "price point" makes sense for learners? Do students pay per course or subscribe to get access to learning opportunities? What level of sponsorship from local congregations or denominational offices can or should be expected? What level of mentorship, community, or support do these pastors need, and how can that be provided? How and how much should faculty, mentors, and others involved in this work be compensated? What level of enrollment within courses or entire programs is needed to be sustainable? What are the fixed costs of infrastructure used to support these programs? These and other questions must be answered through consultation and experimentation to form an effective, sustainable, and replicable model.

THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIES AND NON-CREDIT PROGRAMS

Given this context of theological education and the potential role for traditional theological seminaries in non-degree, non-credit programs, what are or might be some considerations for theological libraries and indeed, for Atla?

As many of you know, I ran a brief survey in April that was distributed through ATLANTIS and several other channels. I had 25 respon-

dents to the survey and probably a half-dozen follow-up conversations with librarians who indicated a willingness to chat further. This is clearly a small sample of Atla membership that is not completely representative. Further, I freely admit that as an amateur sociologist, my survey questions and instructions did not always lead to a consistent response to each question. Thus, the results are suggestive at best and will need to be improved upon or replicated further.

The first few questions were to provide a little background on the libraries and their contexts. The first question used the formulas from the ATS annual report about the type of library. Twenty-two reported being an independent library chiefly serving their institution. Zero reported being in a department or departmental branch library within a larger university or college library system. Two reported being part of a library integrated with a larger university or college library system, and one reported part of a library system jointly administered and/or funded by more than one educational institution.

For FTE enrollment, 15 respondents reported being from libraries serving under 250 FTE, 6 from libraries serving 250–500 FTE, 2 from libraries serving 500–1999 FTE, and 2 from libraries serving 2000–5000 FTE. When asked about the funds devoted to electronic resources, the answers ranged from \$9,200 to \$200,000 with an average about \$52,771 and a median of \$35,000.

The next group of questions allowed respondents to choose among various library services. This is where the data gets a little screwy because I allowed for multiple checkboxes. For example, in asking the question about who can use library computers, 17 respondents checked “Anyone,” and 6 respondents checked “persons enrolled in a non-credit course.” The problem here is that there is no way to distinguish the results from persons who are only able to use library computers because they were enrolled in a non-credit course from those who were already able to use library computers because they were part of “anyone.” The comments in the survey, as well as the follow up conversations, clarified some points here.

In many cases, libraries tended to be fairly generous to the public in providing access to an onsite library—using library computers, Wi-Fi, checkout privileges, research guides, reference services, and onsite use of library subscription databases. The generosity to the public became much more limited in the areas of offsite access to library subscription databases and interlibrary loan. Admittedly, several respondents offered that their current license agreements and interli-

brary loan policies restricted access to registered for-credit students, faculty, and staff. Some interpreted “students” broadly to include non-credit students as long as they were enrolled in recognized courses. A few libraries indicated intentional efforts to reach non-credit learners through offering information literacy sessions, research guides, library cards, and expanded access to digital resources.

My hypotheses, based on this data and the subsequent conversations, is that fuller access to library-licensed resources and interlibrary loan is often based upon a person’s entry into an institutional or library-based identity management system. If non-credit courses or certificate programs make use of a learning management system, or if students need ID cards for building access, those students may be provided a broader authorization to library resources. Thus, persons auditing a for-credit course were most likely to be entered into such systems and have the most access to these resources.

To the last question, 7 of the 25 respondents were interested in cooperative reciprocal borrowing agreements for non-credit students, 9 of the 25 respondents were interested in cooperative access to a selection of licensed databases, and 10 of the 25 respondents were interested in developing open-access resources designed for non-credit programs.

I want to leave you with two final observations, two recommendations for individual libraries, and a potential collaborative vision that has emerged from my thinking and conversations about this topic over the past year.

First, the appreciation for non-credit learners was mixed with a fairly low expectation of library demand or use by these students. Non-credit programs often meet during evenings or weekends when libraries were closed or minimally staffed. Other programs met online or offsite in churches and instruction spaces closer to the students. As noted in the survey responses, libraries offer something less than a full suite of resources to non-credit students. For their part, non-credit instructors also have low expectations for access to library resources, low expectations of the research skills of their students, and see little reward in engaging with library resources or services. Therefore, any argument for information literacy among church leaders is squeezed out by other needed competencies or skills for ministry. This is a difficult but not impossible situation.

Second, despite the lack of current demand from non-credit students, libraries genuinely desired to provide the greatest access to

scholarly resources for non-credit students. If non-credit enrollments continue to grow and exceed for-credit enrollments, it is critical for libraries to be part of the conversation. Further, there are some justice issues at stake for a library association that promotes hospitality, inclusiveness, and diversity. Non-credit programs, due to their lower cost and entry points, tend to serve a more diverse population socio-economically, ethnically, racially, and geographically. What does it say if we don't offer a full suite of library services and resources to these diverse populations? What happens to the place of the library within theological education when library services are out of alignment with a new majority of non-credit students?

Strategically, I recommend three things each library might want to consider on their own before painting a picture of a fully cooperative system.

For individual libraries, the precise strategies for addressing non-credit students will be multifaceted. The first step is careful engagement. A focus group or ongoing advisory group of non-credit students could help one look at the library resources and services from the perspective of the non-credit student. There might be some initial "easy wins" such as setting up a webpage or research guide that addresses access to library resources from the perspective of a non-credit student. Libraries could also look at policies and procedures to better enable more seamless access to a wider range of library services and resources by non-credit students. A reference librarian might reach out to non-credit instructors to offer library instruction and support for research projects.

Second, when licensing electronic resources, check with your vendors on the definitions of "student" and limitations of access by non-credit students. Some vendors may allow for an expanded definition of student, while others might modify licenses to explicitly include non-degree students. Another approach might be to build non-credit students into existing or supplemental contracts with vendors. Such licenses might require a blend of standards for academic and public libraries or somehow count non-credit students differently. See whether non-degree students can be entered into your library or other identity management system in a way that allows them access to licensed resources.

Third, open access. Strategically, there is broad interest in making more scholarly resources available to everyone – inclusive of both credit and non-credit students. These could be Open Educa-

tional Resources (OER), other open-access journals or monographs, or copyrighted resources unlocked into open access. Over the last decade or more, I have occasionally fantasized about asking each Atla member library to contribute a percentage of its materials budget to supporting open-access works. Beyond open access, we may find an increased appetite for projects like controlled digital lending, expanded reciprocal borrowing agreements, and other initiatives that provide greater access to in-copyright materials. A more universal access to scholarly resources could benefit a wide range of non-credit learners, including those in less formal and more apprentice-based programs.

Finally, let me paint a picture of reinventing theological education as a non-credit cooperative enterprise. Imagine with me that there is a cooperative platform for offering non-credit theological education. It starts with Perkins School of Theology and Wesley Theological Seminary, and we create our cooperative series of preparation for ministry modules in both Spanish and English, then add further advanced modules—perhaps some cooperatively and others under our own branding or expertise. Ideally, we find church bodies, bishops, and individual churches to recognize completion of a certificate as a credential demonstrating theological preparation for ministry and perhaps completion of advanced modules or certificates as credentials indicating preparation for specialized ministry. Going further, we find other programs recognized by other church bodies that would like to join our cooperative. Perhaps we start to develop standards, so that courses taught by one school might be recognized by another and included or stacked into new credentials. Of course, we would have to figure out a revenue sharing model that would include the overall infrastructure, content creators, sponsoring schools, and cohort facilitators.

If we are going to have such a cooperative system, students are going to need to have a way to register, pay for courses, and manage individual transcripts of courses, certificates, or programs completed. This would have to connect or authenticate students to a learning management system for access to the subscribed courses and course content. Having created a system that tracks and authenticates student identity, it's a fairly minor effort to create an authentication system that works with licensed library resources.

Vendors can be quite anxious about the access control questions and although FTE is meaningless in non-credit spaces, we could

provide a headcount of students enrolled in various courses or programs for the purposes of pricing. We could decide upon a “once a student, always a student” model that provides continuous access to these licensed resources or perhaps purges the inactive roles on some regular basis. This could be similar to a public library pricing model. Or, we could decide to establish pricing patterns on a regular snapshot of the number of students actively enrolled at a given time.

In this case, the cooperative project would then curate and license specific resources for the cooperative. This would likely not be the same set of materials as for graduate-level degree programs and would be focused on supporting the non-degree curriculum and programs. The curation and licensing decisions might be made in the cooperative or might be integrated into the program development process at each participating school. If modules or curriculum are developed that needed additional licensed resources, one could evaluate what those might be against the materials already licensed or curated.

As I admitted earlier, this is a significant reinvention of theological education into a cooperative model—a reinvention that duplicates much of the systems and supports of traditional degree programs: admission, registration, payment, authentication, authorization. For libraries, it admittedly creates one set of institutionally licensed resources available to traditional degree students and another set of cooperatively licensed resources for non-degree students. What then about library services? Would the cooperative itself need librarians to provide reference assistance, or would the librarians of participating institutions provide such assistance to the cooperative?

While many questions remain, I am attracted to this cooperative model for doing non-credit theological education. The model could potentially provide the breadth and scale to be sustainable without relying on the credit-hour-based tuition and scholarship model that forms the shaky foundation of many of our institutions. There are certainly risks in creating a cheaper product that might compete with our own degree programs but also the clear opportunity to convert some number of non-degree students into degree students. However, I believe the risks are greater for theological seminaries and libraries to not be involved in creating and supporting multi-layered theological education for multi-vocational pastors within underserved communities.