
The Role of the Theological Library in Scholarly Formation

A Case Study

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ABSTRACT: Scholarly formation of seminary students has parallels to the discipline of spiritual formation, primarily in offering the seeker a structured set of practices toward the goal of maturity. In a religious order, a candidate seeking spiritual maturity enters a community whose rule of life forms the candidate through spiritual disciplines of worship, prayer, study, confession, and service. In the academic setting, the *telos* of scholarly maturity involves librarians as members of the formational community which admits aspiring scholars to the academic disciplines of the curriculum, such as reading, study, courses and fieldwork, and writing, alongside community exercises of worship, meals, and prayer.

We have both formerly worked as librarians at Harding School of Theology (HST) in Memphis, Tennessee. In August 2023, Harding University announced plans to move the Harding School of Theology to the university's main campus in Searcy, Arkansas. To give the HST community an opportunity to reflect on the contributions of its 66-year presence in Memphis, the seminary planned a Homecoming in April 2024 and invited presentations from alumni about the seminary's contributions to various scholarly disciplines. Dr. Berryhill was asked to present a study of the L. M. Graves Memorial Library's contributions to theological scholarship. That April 2024 presentation gave rise to this presentation, in which we describe the role of the librarians in the intentional formation of scholars.

SCHOLARLY FORMATION'S PARALLELS TO SPIRITUAL FORMATION

The maturing of scholars is in some ways parallel to the discipline of spiritual formation. Both these transformative processes have a *telos*, an end toward which the process aims, that is, a maturity that equips the candidate for a life of service in community and in the world. Second, both processes receive candidates who desire formation into a *community*. Third, the community defines and governs intentional practices, or *disciplines*, by which the candidate is shaped toward the *telos*, whether that end is spiritual maturity or scholarship.

THE *TELOS* OF SCHOLARLY FORMATION AT HST

In the academic world, maturity is called scholarship. Scholarship is participation in intellectual discourse in a disciplinary community which has conventions of inquiry and standards of authority, namely advancement of knowledge, governed by peer review. A scholar is someone whose wide and deep knowledge has produced recognized advancement in their discipline. A scholar becomes an authority by building an outstanding record of achievement recognized by their peers.

The Mission Statement on the 2024 HST website says that it “challenges Christian leaders to develop deeper faith in God and higher standards of ministry and scholarship.” It “challenges Christian leaders to integrate spiritual growth, ministry experience, and rigorous scholarship.” The website’s “About Us” page asserts, “We hope to build leaders who can build communities, all through the power of Scripture scholarship and academic rigor.” The online catalog of Harding School of Theology says it “provides quality training for excellence in ministry and scholarship. We offer strong biblical and theological scholarship that is seasoned with a commitment to ministry. Consequently, our mission is to produce biblically informed and spiritually mature men and women who will devote themselves to long-term ministry.” (HST 2024)

So, Harding School of Theology sees itself as an academic community that intends to form students by a system of discipline as scholars for service to the churches.

THE FORMATIONAL COMMUNITY AT HST

People desiring formation seek a community which will be partners in the seeker's transformation. Who are the formational members? In Catholic religious orders, for example, the person seeking spiritual formation enters a covenanted community to live according to a community rule, such as the *Rule of St. Benedict*. While various traditions and communities have varying rules for their members, they all have covenantal rules which vest authority in the community, and to which the entering candidate vows obedience. The communities also have senior members whose responsibility it is to lead and govern the community, its work, and its worship. Modern universities, which evolved from these historic communities, have parallel community structures.

In modern academic settings, the authority of the community lies not in the church but in its accreditation, that is, recognition by peer institutions in its accrediting association. The association develops and expresses a set of standards to which member institutions (and their libraries) agree to conform and to which member institutions hold each other accountable. These standards and the policies to implement them are communicated to prospective students by the school's catalog, which prescribes degree plans, the courses of study, and the regulations which govern the faculty and students.

At HST, the faculty, including the librarians, govern the curriculum by developing it, approving changes, and deciding together what degree programs and requirements will meet the needs of the students and the accreditation standards. The classroom faculty and the library faculty serve on committees together. Together they support research and the development of the library for the sake of the curriculum. The head librarian is the collection development officer, scouring publication notices, reviews, and catalogs, as well as receiving recommendations and requests from classroom faculty, students, alumni, and other researchers. From 1962 to 2023, the library collection grew from 7,000 to 177,000 volumes, including ebooks.

Community life in many seminaries before the internet age was primarily residential. Although commuting students from the region also enrolled, HST steadily increased student housing spaces on campus from the 1960s through the 1990s. From 1962 until her marriage

in 1978, the founding librarian Annie May Lewis (née Alston) lived on campus as well, and even brought her mother to live with her there. “I thought I was the most blessed of all the faculty members because I lived with the students day in and day out,” she wrote in 1996 (Lewis 1996, 1). A classroom building also included a kitchen, a student lounge, a heritage room, and a large auditorium. Campus life also included daily worship in the chapel in the historic Mansion, which served as the offices for faculty and staff.

The campus community included not only the faculty but also the staff and a student association. HST relied on enthusiastic support from Memphis-area congregations for meals, events, and fundraisers. The faculty served as elders, ministers, counselors, and teachers in these congregations. The professors wrote and spoke not only for the academy but also for the churches. Students also served as ministers and teachers in many of these congregations.

THE FORMATIONAL DISCIPLINES AT HST

Traditional spiritual formation includes community and individual exercises of worship, prayer, study, confession, and service.

Scholarly formation at HST includes, first of all, a curriculum developed and owned by the faculty. The foundation of that curriculum is a research methods course required of students in the first nine hours of their degree program. Since 1968, the head librarian at Harding School of Theology has taught this three-hour course. The course introduces students to graduate study in general, to the library’s personnel and physical plant, to theological research tools such as reference books and databases, and to conventions of writing and documentation expected by the classroom faculty. In 2022, a DMin introductory course was added, taught by the librarian and the DMin director, on the purpose, methods, and skills of ministry research.

After these foundational experiences establish a relationship with the library and librarians, students consult frequently with the librarians for help in research and writing. This relationship continues long after the students graduate and enter careers in ministry or academic work. Graduates have lifetime borrowing privileges and alumni access to databases.

As the school, like other seminaries, has adopted remote and hybrid course models, the library has used endowment income to purchase ebooks and database subscriptions. The library “computer lab” has been converted to a “smart classroom” for both remote/hybrid teaching and for conventional instruction.

Scholarly formation of students outside of classes also includes reading and conversation. In successive renovations, the library has taken pains to include spaces for coffee and conversation, group work, use of electronic resources, and reading.

The faculty in the classroom and in the library model scholarship, select resources such as textbooks and field experiences, teach courses, direct reading and research, evaluate student work, supervise student assistants, and mentor developing scholars by including them in conferences, writing, and publishing opportunities.

These formative practices have produced scholars in universities and seminaries, as well as ministers whose scholarship benefits the church.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Several attendees expressed appreciation for the usefulness of the parallel between spiritual and scholarly formation.

REFERENCES

Harding School of Theology. 2024. <https://www.harding.edu/hst/>

Lewis, Annie May. 1996. “Campus Housing: More Than Bricks and Mortar.” *The Bulletin* 37 (3): 1.

