Princeton Theological Seminary Embraces Bold Vision for PhD Program in a Changing World

The Doctoral Program: A Cornerstone of Princeton Seminary’s Theological Leadership

The vitality of the Christian tradition is not inevitable. The work of sustaining and extending this tradition must be taken up anew by each generation. Eighty-two years ago, the Board of Trustees of Princeton Theological Seminary positioned this institution to help lead the way by establishing a doctoral program that offers world-class training in the theological disciplines. That visionary decision, backed by significant investments by the Board, administration, and faculty alike, has borne astounding fruit. Graduates of this program have gone on to distinguished careers in the church, the academy, and the public arena. In the process they have advanced and amplified the Seminary’s core mission, solidifying the institution’s reputation as a global leader in theological education—a place where the wisdom of the Christian past and present is brilliantly and faithfully brought to bear on the most pressing crises of today.

The doctoral program’s outsized impact is evident in its legacies for:

The Church. Perhaps no other institution in the world is able to sustain a doctoral program that is at once so excellent and so deeply committed to the church. Our graduates include groundbreaking theologians such as Renita Weems, Rubem Alves, and Bruce McCormack, all of whose work has not only won academic accolades but has also helped believers on the ground to better love God and neighbor. Other alums, from Kenda Creasy Dean and Leonara Tisdale to Ching-fen Hsiao, have made waves by stoking imaginations of what the church of tomorrow might look like. Still hundreds more have devoted their careers to teaching future pastors or pastoring local churches, testifying along the way to what is possible when we love God with all our mind.

The Academy. It has often been the case that more scholars at Association of Theological Schools (ATS) institutions hold doctorates from Princeton Theological Seminary than from any of other single institution. This predominance among rank-and-file faculty is one of the doctoral program’s key legacies, as these scholar-teachers have gone on to shape generations of leaders for church and society. Our graduates also include pioneering architects of theological education all over the world: Anna May Say Pa, principal of the Myanmar Institute of Theology; Kim Yong-Bok, President of Hanil University and Theological Seminary; and Jung-Sook Lee, the first-ever woman president of both Korea’s Torch Trinity Graduate University and Church History Society. In the United States, many alums, including Scott Sunquist, Leeann Van Dyk, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., and Jonathan Walton, have gone on to lead major theological institutions. Frank Yamada is the current executive director of ATS.
Our graduates range far beyond the pulpit and lectern, answering the call to be salt and light in the wider world. Noted Civil Rights activist Prathia Hall helped to inspire Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech and eventually went on to hold the Martin Luther King Chair in Social Ethics at Boston University’s School of Theology. Sang Cha made history as the first-ever female acting prime minister of South Korea before becoming president of the Asia region of the World Council of Churches. Craig Dykstra served for 23 years as the Vice President for Religion at the Lilly Endowment, a position that offered him the opportunity to build and strengthen organizations across American civil society.

Whatever its remarkable contributions to the world beyond Mercer Street, some of the doctoral program’s most significant legacies are for Princeton Seminary itself. The value of this program is a large part of why our peer set includes institutions like Harvard, Yale, Duke, and Emory; and it is our inclusion in that elite peer group that facilitates our recruitment and retention of the best faculty, who in turn attract the most talented students into our other degree programs. For these reasons and more, the doctoral program is today—as it has long been—a cornerstone of Princeton Theological Seminary’s ambition to provide theological leadership for church and world alike.

The PhD Review Taskforce: A Brief Overview of the Process

It has been decades since the last stem-to-stern review of Princeton Theological Seminary’s doctoral program, and in the meantime the landscape of American Christianity has changed dramatically. Particularly germane are the shrinking rolls of mainline churches and the shrinking faculties of mainline seminaries. The struggles of these institutions, which have long been prime destinations for our PhD graduates, raise questions about how the doctoral program can best serve church and world going forward. On Mercer Street, too, change is afoot, with significant new additions to the faculty and renewed attention to the culture of the PhD program.

For all these reasons President Craig Barnes appointed a taskforce in May 2021 to conduct a comprehensive review of the doctoral program. The hope, from the outset, was that the taskforce’s work would help to ensure that the program continues to set the pace in theological education for generations to come.

Heath W. Carter, Associate Professor of American Christianity, was appointed to chair the taskforce that included two representatives from each of the four academic departments, as well as the Academic Dean and the Senior Associate Academic Dean. Over the course of the 2021-2022 academic year the taskforce gathered data and solicited input from all major stakeholders, including alumni, faculty, and current students; from leading national experts on doctoral education in the theological academy; and moreover from an external team comprised of four eminent scholars, who conducted an entirely independent review of the doctoral program and submitted a report with recommendations in late-December 2021.
In January the internal taskforce moved into a period of intensive deliberations about the ideal shape of the program moving forward. Among the guiding convictions that informed the conversation:

- The strategic importance of the PhD program for the overall mission of the Seminary. No other independent seminary can sustain a comparable level of excellence in doctoral education. It is imperative, for church and world alike, that this continue to be an institutional priority.
- If this program is to fulfill its potential, then we need to compete for the very best students, with entering cohorts that more and more reflect the breathtaking diversity of Christianity in the contemporary world. It is therefore imperative that the training and overall experience we offer be world-class and world-renowned, and that our funding packages remain highly competitive with those of peer institutions.
- We must both sustain academic excellence and take a hard look at why we do what we do. The Seminary must continue to produce world-class historians, theologians, biblical scholars, and practical theologians. However, doctoral program requirements have a history, too, and have varied widely over time. Our current requirements should be scrutinized in light of current needs and hopes.
- Given that even the most successful doctoral programs today place only ~50% of their graduates into tenure-track positions, it is imperative that we help students and faculty alike see the relevance of doctoral training for a wide array of career paths. We need to shift the culture to where students and faculty alike have a sense that there are a variety of successful outcomes of the program. Graduates might work in academic or ecclesial worlds, to be sure, but jobs in government, non-profit, museums, journalism, publishing, the corporate world, and beyond should also be on our radar.
- The doctoral program should be tailored for completion in five years. Given that we only offer five years of funding, there is an ethical imperative to make sure it is routinely possible to secure the degree in that timeframe. This dovetails with studies from across the wider academy, which indicate that longer tenures in doctoral programs produce worse outcomes for students and institutions alike.

THE SHAPE OF THE FUTURE:
HIGHLIGHTING SOME OF THE TASKFORCE’S MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS*

- **Associate Dean for PhD Studies.** Create a new Associate Dean for PhD Studies, and hire someone into that leadership role by the 2022-2023 academic year.
- **New Professional Development Initiatives.** Generate major new professional development initiatives to ensure that the graduates of our doctoral program are equipped to hit the ground running in a wide variety of potential career paths.
- **New Shared Interdisciplinary Seminar.** Develop an interdisciplinary first-year seminar exclusively for doctoral students, in which they are introduced to the academic study of Christianity/religion. This course would be co-taught each fall by two faculty from two different departments.
- **Revamped Academic Programs.** Conduct a comprehensive review of the academic program in the 2022-2023 academic year, tailoring the requirements for completion in five years and ensuring that students are prepared for a diversity of career trajectories.
• **Funding and Support.** Offer doctoral student funding packages with a total valuation at or above the median value of those offered by its peer institutions and commit to funding conference and research opportunities at or above the median amount offered by peer institutions.

• **New 5 + 1 Postdoctoral Fellowship.** Consider developing a program in which students who defend in five years could be eligible to receive a postdoctoral fellowship for a one-year period.

*These are just some of the highlights of the full report, which was unanimously approved by the faculty in May 2022.*