

Saint Paul Accreditation and Future-Building

Commitment to Quality

As a seminary of the United Methodist Church, Saint Paul School of Theology is devoted to providing strong theological education for the professional formation of students. The Saint Paul mission statement declares a commitment to “the formation of people for innovative, creative ministry through rigorous academic life; the exploration of Scripture, tradition, and ministry practices; and diverse, contextual experience.”

To assure that Saint Paul is held to the highest standards of the church and academy, the seminary maintains affiliation with diverse agencies that set standards and monitor performance. The seminary is approved by the United Methodist University Senate, which requires accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools and the regional Higher Learning Commission, which assess compliance with Department of Education regulations.

Participation in Assessment

The academic year 2016-2017 has been an active assessment season with visits from the Association of Theological Schools and the Higher Learning Commission, and the seminary is currently scheduling a visit by the University Senate.

Saint Paul hosted a focused site visit by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) in September 2016. A focused visit concentrates on specific issues, and the September topic was student learning assessment. The ATS report found that Saint Paul “has made significant progress in developing plans for assessing its academic programs, and has begun implementing these programs and gathering initial results,” but work remains to be completed: (1) refining assessment tools, (2) analyzing assessment findings, and (3) demonstrating how the analysis shapes changes in degree programs. More recent ATS data for 2016-2017 report that the seminary’s net assets are positive, the budget ended with a surplus, and expenditures trend lower. However, even without external data reports, the seminary is aware of the need to increase enrollment and lower draw on endowment to be more financially stable. Saint Paul challenges reflect trends in many seminaries, but Saint Paul is committed to making change that assures high quality theological education in the Heartland well into the future. Saint Paul will report to ATS in November 2017 about progress in student learning assessment and financial equilibrium.

Many of Saint Paul’s faculty, staff, students, and Board members participated in a routine comprehensive evaluation visit from the Higher Learning Commission in September 2016. The site visit generated some concerns about seminary operations and resulted in a sanction. Saint Paul received notification on March 8, 2017, that the seminary has been placed on probation. Probationary status defines a period during which the seminary can focus on areas for growth and improvement, but the seminary **remains accredited** by the Higher Learning Commission during the probationary period. This notification of probation pertains to the Higher Learning

Commission, but does not reflect a change in status with the Association of Theological Schools or the University Senate.

“Accredited—On Probation”

What is probation? The Higher Learning Commission understands probation as a public sanction attached to a school’s accreditation status, and probation signifies that the school is out of compliance with one or more of the Commission’s Criteria for Accreditation. The Commission defines the period of probation as not more than two years following the date when the school was placed on probation. Schools remain accredited while on probation and have opportunity to remedy the concerns that led to the public sanction.

The Higher Learning Commission placed Saint Paul on probation effective February 23, 2017. The Commission’s Board based the decision to designate Saint Paul as “Accredited—On Probation” because of concerns about resources, governance and administrative structure, strategic planning, and systematic improvement. The comprehensive evaluation visit to Saint Paul in September 2016 and multiple written reports by Saint Paul provided the basis for the HLC Board decision.

Effect on Students

Naturally students want to know what the HLC decision means for your courses, faculty, activities, and programs. On a day-to-day basis, you will see no change in student life because the accreditation issues are not primarily about student learning and programs. The modes of course delivery, the course schedule, your instructors and advisors, student support systems, and most aspects of campus life are not affected. However, some other details might be reassuring to know.

First, if you are in courses and/or a degree program, the seminary is still accredited by HLC (as well as by the Association of Theological Schools) and is still approved by the United Methodist University Senate.

Second, if you are applying for further graduate studies (maybe a Ph.D. program), the courses on your transcript come from an accredited seminary. However, ask the school to which you’re applying whether the probationary status of the seminary will affect your admission because each school defines its own admission requirements.

Third, if you are cross-registered at Saint Paul or plan to transfer credit to another school, most other schools will accept the courses for transfer. To be sure, however, you should contact the university or seminary to ask directly about transfer credit requirements, which are created by each institution.

Saint Paul remains committed to preparing students for creative, innovative leadership, ministry, and service. Student learning and support are the seminary’s highest priorities. We are confident about progress in the year ahead.

What to Expect

The central concerns about Saint Paul are related to Criterion 5 of the HLC Criteria for Accreditation and Core Components. Criterion 5 holds accredited schools accountable for

sound resources, planning, and institutional effectiveness. Saint Paul was judged to be noncompliant with four core components:

- A resource base supporting current educational programs and strengthening their quality in the future
- Governance and administrative structures promoting effective leadership and supporting collaborative processes to fulfill the seminary mission
- Processes encompassing systematic and integrated planning
- Documented work showing systematic improvement of seminary performance

The Higher Learning Commission requires specific deadlines for accountability. The seminary is required to provide evidence that it has addressed the issues that led to the February 23, 2017 sanction no later than July 1, 2018 in preparation for HLC's on-site evaluation to take place no later than September 2018.

In February 2019, the HLC Board of Commissioners will determine whether the institution has demonstrated compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation and whether probation can be removed.

Building on a Foundation

Because Saint Paul has been engaged in self-assessment, the seminary is candid about and aware of the challenges noted by HLC. Consequently, the seminary Board, administration, and staff have already been developing strategic and thoughtful actions toward resolution of deficiencies. Recent work forms the foundation upon which the seminary will build a stronger resource base, leadership, and planning. Here is what the seminary has already accomplished:

- Staff and administrators are building a comprehensive enrollment management plan to be completed in May 2017.
- Staff and administrators are developing an institutional assessment plan with measurable indicators of the quality of work in every area of seminary work.
- Faculty has defined benchmarks for assessment of student learning outcomes and applied the data to evaluation of course delivery systems (face-to-face classes, online and hybrid courses, and video conferencing).
- The Board of Trustees has revised governance and bylaws and is leading the seminary into understanding and implementing shared governance.
- The Board of Trustees has defined the skills needed for leadership and is recruiting talented trustees.
- The Board of Trustees approved the Strategic Plan 2017-2025 and is establishing priorities for seminary work. Administrators and staff have drafted an implementation plan and report quarterly to the Board about progress (beginning in fall 2016).

Saint Paul School of Theology will keep community constituents and stakeholders aware of plans and progress toward full compliance with HLC Criteria for Accreditation.

For further information, visit <http://www.spst.edu/accreditation/>. The Saint Paul website gives access to the Higher Learning Commission public disclosure notice. To learn more about the Higher Learning Commission, visit their website at www.hlcommission.org or call 800-621-7440.