

Saint Paul School of Theology Board Notes

September 2021
Tex Sample, Chair

ATS SELF-STUDY

Every ten years Saint Paul School of Theology, like other theological schools, engages in a self-study for accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). As you can imagine, this involves a great deal of work: the gathering of data, drafting reports, assessing and evaluating all dimensions of the school's work, the writing of a lengthy self-study, and many other things too numerous to list here. Even so, it is a very important opportunity for the school to assess its work and make plans for its future.

We are excited about the coming ATS team site visit, which will be September 27–30. While these can be anxiety-ridden times, Saint Paul has prepared a strong self-study document that reports the amazing progress the school has made the past five years. If you read the Board Notes or are otherwise in touch with the school, you know that we have gone through a time of struggle, then stabilization, and that we are now in a time for visioning about the future.

Things are going very well, and our self-study names areas for continued growth. In a summary of the recommendations for the future of the school the following were named: develop an integrated plan for institutional effectiveness, increase attention to and support for global engagement, expand the diversity of the student body, continue to increase enrollment, maintain financial equilibrium, and maintain quality education.

We see the coming self-study site visit as an opportunity to learn and to move into a new and exciting time. Believing that the Spirit of Christ opens the future for us, we see the exploration and conversation with the self-study team as occurring at a very strategic time in the life of the school. We ask for your prayers and support.

JULY BOARD MEETING

We had a full agenda at our July Board meeting. Not only did we have reports from the four major Trustee committees and the Trust and Collaboration Task Force, which we will discuss below, but we also had two very significant presentations.

The Trustees began a new procedure at its Board meetings, that of inviting members of the Faculty and Staff to join us and share their personal and professional stories so that we might better get in touch with them. At the July meeting, VPAAD Jeanne Hoeft plied us with her personal and professional story and how she eventually came to SPST. The Board very much appreciated this time with Jeanne. We will continue to invite faculty and staff to our meetings into the foreseeable future. Opportunities like these will enable us to better know the Faculty and Staff and, we believe, build stronger relationships.

Also, Saint Paul Alum and Chair of President Blair's Advisory Committee, Congressman Emanuel Cleaver II joined us. He engaged attendees with his personal, pastoral, and political story.

NEW TRUSTEE

We want to welcome Debra (Debbie) Buzard to the Board of Trustees. For the past 21 years she has served as Director of Outreach Ministry at the First United Methodist Church of Kearney, Missouri. Prior to that time, she worked for 21 years as a full-time homemaker and mother. She holds a BA in Journalism and Mass Communication from California State University and a MA in Journalism and Mass Communications from the University of Iowa. She is Certified as a United Methodist Missouri Conference Sponsored Volunteers in Mission Team Leader.

Born in St. Louis and raised in Webster Groves, Missouri, she has also lived in California, Arizona, and Iowa. Married for 42 years she raised two children, one of whom passed away in 2014. She loves travel, physical activities, swimming, biking, and hiking. She currently serves on an advisory council for

Notre Maison Children's Home, Port au Prince, an orphanage in Haiti, and as President of Partners in Education Haiti. We are delighted to have her with us and the rich experience and capacities she brings to the Board.

VPAAD RESIGNATION

VPAAD Jeanne Hoeft reported that, while she will continue as a faculty member, she will be resigning as Dean on June 30, 2022. Accolades and heartfelt appreciations were expressed for her extraordinary work at Saint Paul. Her resignation, as of next year, required the formation of a VPAAD Search Committee to begin immediately. A committee of Faculty, Staff, and Trustees was initiated and has already begun seeking nominees for the position.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF OKLAHOMA CAMPUS RESIGNATION

The Trustees also received the resignation of Dr. Anne Walker, Director of the Saint Paul program on the Oklahoma City University campus. She has accepted a position at Phillips Theological Seminary in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she resides. Expressions of appreciation for her work were offered by the Board, and we wish her Godspeed in this new position.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

President Blair reported on the very positive state of the school and shared his conviction that we have gone from a time of insecurity to one of strong stability. It is now time to vision for the future. Having recently enlisted the services of an executive coach, he indicated directions he will take in administration, communication, and visioning. He also announced that he would be setting up listening sessions with Trustees, Faculty, Staff, Students, and other stakeholders of the school. All of these actions are part of a process of moving the school toward a new vision of its direction and work.

THE TRUST AND COLLABORATION TASK FORCE

The Trust and Collaboration Task Force completed its assignment this past year and submitted its report to the Board. Initially created as a temporary group, it moved to be officially disbanded and a new Trust and Collaboration Task Force established for the future, which has been named. The initial task force did important work not only in its discussions but by its employment of consultant Dr. Mildred Edwards. Her recommendations are now being pursued by Administration, Faculty, Staff, Students, and Trustees

ACADEMIC COMMITTEE

Oversight of the work on the ATS Self-Study with the Executive Leadership team has been a major part of the Committee's work this past year. At the July Board meeting the Committee moved the approval of the penultimate draft of the ATS Self-Study, which was endorsed unanimously. Also, on a motion from the Committee, the Board approved a Complaints Policy, a new document to be included in the Faculty Handbook. This has been a very significant year for the Committee and its hard work and leadership have been much appreciated, especially in preparation for the ATS visit. We are also pleased to report that the number of new students this fall of 2021 is 34 (33 degree-seeking and one non-degree-seeking), which is the largest entering class at Saint Paul in recent years.

GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

Over the past two years the Committee has worked steadily to increase the diversity of our Board. Presently we have 11 men and six women. Of the total board, four are people of color, three men and one woman. As reported above, we are welcoming Debra Buzard to the Board who was recently recommended for membership by the Committee and was enthusiastically elected by the Board.

RESOURCE COMMITTEE

Saint Paul closed out its fiscal year on June 30, 2021, and surpassed its budget in all financial categories: annual fundraising, net tuition and fees, the limit on endowment drawdown, and grant monies, including MEF funding. The Committee noted that contingency planning and flexibility are key in this uncertain time for our denomination and higher education. Such plans have been made and carefully discussed so that the school can make financial moves on short notice, if necessary. Moreover, the linking of the budget to the strategic plan enables the school to achieve its strategic priorities from a resource perspective.

Presently, the focus on investing in our people (faculty/staff) in salaries and benefits is the important place of our resource work. In the past two years bonuses have been given to all SPST employees and the time is getting closer for additional investment in those who work at Saint Paul, our most important resource.

The school is in a very healthy financial situation, an unusual circumstance in much of theological education today. We are grateful to the administration for the expansive fundraising and careful fiscal planning and money management that have characterized their work.

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND EVALUATION COMMITTEE

Saint Paul has operated with an annual planning cycle for the past couple of years. At the July Board meeting, we learned that the Executive Leadership Team is working to integrate more fully these action steps of each department within the strategic planning cycle. This will lead to an updated strategic planning cycle in the near future.

The Committee also reported on the development of indicators of effectiveness (IOCs), especially for Goals 2, 3, and 5 of the Saint Paul Strategic Plan, 2017–2025. Developing concrete IOEs, communicating adequate metrics, providing effective means of reporting, and doing so in a timely manner are top priorities in making the best use of the planning cycle. We await the completion of the development of this work. It is also crucial to begin the next strategic plan of the school, since our current one has a terminal date of 2025. It was the consensus of the Committee that an eight-year plan was too long, that we need plans more in the three- to five-year range because things change so fast. The new strategic plan will be streamlined and cover a shorter duration.

VISIONING FOR THE FUTURE

In previous meetings the Trustees had asked that we spend less time hearing reports and more time thinking about the future. In keeping with this request, the Board spent a significant amount of time visioning and thinking about the future and the challenges facing theological education and congregations across the country, especially in the Midwest. A host of issues was raised such as, the impact of COVID and beyond, online worship and its contributions and deficits, the split of the United Methodist Church, the commitment to racial justice, the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people, and many others. These important conversations and the arrival at specific plans and concrete goals for the future will occupy the school for some time to come.