

## Senior Project and Seminar Vanderbilt University Divinity School

### I. General Definition

The Senior Project is an opportunity to demonstrate critical and reflective understanding of religious faith and the implications of that faith for religious practice, society, and the lives of individuals in relationship to a specific problem in the practice of ministry. It is not a research paper, although it demands research and draws on reading and reflection already undertaken in other courses and contexts during the degree program. It is not a reflective essay, although it demands creative thinking and constructive proposal. The Senior Project is a 25-30 page (not including notation and bibliography) practical theological project focused on a specific issue in ministry in dialogue with appropriate analyses of contemporary culture and religious tradition (themes, symbols, community, literatures). It is an interpretive work that brings the divinity school education into rich conversation with a problem in ministry that needs deeper consideration. In its understanding of this issue, the Project demonstrates acquaintance with scriptural and historical expressions of religious faith, critical reflection on this faith, and the embodiment of this faith in social and pastoral action. As such, it models a method of engaged reflection, involving the three movements of encounter, interpretation, and embodiment of religious traditions, that should inform future ministry.

### II. Content and Approach

There is not one set format for a good Senior Project. There are, however, useful frameworks developed by practical theologians (e.g., Thomas Groome, James and Evelyn Whitehead, Don Browning, and Robert Schreiter), liberation theologians (e.g., Juan Luis Segundo; Holland, Joseph and Peter Henriot), and feminist theologians (e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether).

These scholars all suggest a hermeneutical or pastoral circle that might guide the research and writing of the Project. This circle of research, reflection, and action can be entered at any point but generally moves from the (1) experience and identification of a problem to (2) analysis of the problem to (3) theological interpretation and reflection on the problem to (4) strategy or response. Others describe the movement in terms of (1) insertion or the lived experience of individuals and communities; (2) social analysis; (3) theological analysis; and (4) pastoral planning. The steps of this circle should be familiar to you by the time you reach the Senior Project, having engaged them in the first year Colloquy, Supervised Ministry, Constructive Theology, and other Divinity course work.

*Question and problem:* A critical first step is to formulate a question. This requires careful listening and attention. The question may be related to questions that

motivated you to seek a Divinity degree or it may have arisen directly out of a specific case study in field education. What specific puzzles or struggles regarding ministry have emerged for you during your course work and field education? A good question falls between extremes, neither too small as to be trivial nor too large as to be beyond the scope of a Project. Is it worth it? Is it possible to complete in the time and space allotted? A good Senior Project will contain a clear statement of a question and a thesis or a constructive response to it.

Once one has a clear central question, a project in practical theology generally follows three additional steps: exploration and analysis, constructive reflection and interpretation, and strategic suggestions for practice.

*Exploration and analysis of the problem:* This involves what anthropologist Clifford Geertz and congregational studies often term a “thick description” of the issues under consideration. This description can come through examples or cases. It might include an investigation of how the question or problem emerges in the life of religious institutions, an investigation of how social science sources, such as psychology, sociology, and political science, have understood the problem, and attention to theological dimensions. Social analysis examines causes, probes consequences, and makes connections. It should include attention to race, gender, sexual identity, and class analysis and injustices related to each (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, colonialism). What are the dimensions of the problem? How does it occur? What are the causes and effects? Why is it important? What are the major themes involved? Analysis of the problem also involves attention to theological issues. What are the great themes you have studied that have critical bearing upon the problem? What does the problem have to do with the efficacy of faith or prayer, God’s providence or judgement, faithfulness or sin in community, the nature of salvation, the role of minister and laity, etc.? Try to identify theological issues embedded in the problem and in the way your question is experienced in practice.

*Constructive reflection and interpretation:* This entails understanding the analyzed experiences of the problem in light of specific resources within religious traditions, such as scripture, social teaching, denominational positions, historical materials, and theological scholarship. It also involves critical evaluation of such sources as they pertain to the specific problem. Your prior analysis should help lead you to resources in scriptural exegesis, congregational history, theological and pastoral texts etc., which will be especially relevant to the theological dimensions of the question you are studying. You’ll need to lift up themes from the theological resources that pertain to the theological themes embedded in the problem or issue you’ve studied earlier.

*Strategic suggestions for practice:* This includes bringing these theological resources into dialogue with the practical arena through strategic suggestions for practice and concrete proposals for a solution or possible solutions to the problem. What are the implications of the theological resources you examine for your concern? How do they inform practical and strategic considerations? Can you formulate responses that are informed by your reflection? How do they seek to overcome injustices of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism? Do specific theological themes or doctrines need critical

reinterpretation to respond adequately and appropriately to the problem? This strategic practice theological section must avoid sounding like a laundry list of trivial suggestions for congregational life (“10 ways to enrich your women’s groups”). It may include a reconstruction or reinterpretation of major theological themes and doctrines. But it also must show evidence of the relevance of what you’ve studied here at the Divinity School to what you will do with your degree beyond and after your time here.

### III. Senior Project Samples

Senior Projects, awarded the grade of Honors, will be retained on reserve in the Divinity Library (non-catalogued) for student and faculty perusal for a period of two years for each Honors Project.

### IV. Senior Seminar

Senior Seminar provides an opportunity for students to explore, research, and write the Senior Project, guided by a faculty member, in concentrated dialogue with other students, in light of any desired selected common reading and with prescribed steps for completing each step, such as the proposal, introduction, initial section, first draft, etc.. Students will discuss general strategies for the Project and its development as well as their own individual proposals and drafts, receiving encouragement, suggestions, and critique from fellow students as well as a faculty member.

### V. Senior Seminar Process

#### A. Student Registration and Faculty

MDiv students register for Senior Seminar in the fall term of their final year in the program. The Dean and Associate Dean assign faculty to teach senior seminar on a rotating basis with consideration given to leaves, etc. Senior Seminar is regarded as part of a faculty member’s regular course load.

#### B. Grades

1. Students will earn a letter grade for their participation and work in the Senior Seminar. This grade is separate from the grade of Credit, Honors, and No Credit, which is assigned to the Senior Project. Both grades will be reflected on the student’s transcript.
2. The grade for the Senior Seminar will be based on attendance, engagement with course material, engagement with the work of colleagues, development of a draft Project over the course of the semester, and timely submission of the

final draft. The faculty member leading the student's section of Senior Seminar will assign this grade.

3. The grade of Credit, Honors, and No Credit for the Senior Project will be based on the written content of the Project and the Project conversation and will be determined by both readers at the conclusion of the conversation.

#### C. Project Schedule

1. A final draft of the Senior Project is due to the professor on the last class day of the Senior Seminar in the fall semester.
2. Students will receive written comments on the Project from the professor no later than the day established for grades to be submitted. Students will have an opportunity to revise their Senior Project in light of the comments. Some Projects may need no further revision whereas other Projects will need minimal or extensive revision prior to the spring due date.
3. The final Senior Project will be submitted in duplicate to the Registrar no later than February 2<sup>nd</sup>, at which time the Projects will be distributed to first (professor of the Senior Seminar) and second readers for evaluation.
4. The second reader provides another faculty reading and evaluation of the Project. The reader will send comments and a suggested grade of Credit, Honors, or No Credit to the first reader and the Associate Dean and Registrar. This is not the final grade for the Project, which will only be assigned after the Project conversation.
5. If the first two readers disagree about the suggested grade (e.g., Credit vs. No Credit or Credit vs. Honors), the Associate Dean will appoint a third reader.
6. If both readers evaluate the Project as No Credit the student must retake the Senior Seminar.
7. Project conversations will be scheduled for the two weeks after Spring Break and will include the student, the first and second (or when necessary, the third) readers, and other guests as invited by the student. The Senior Project grade of Credit, No Credit, or Honors will be assigned by the two faculty readers after the conversation.
8. At the conclusion of the conversation faculty readers will give the student a copy of written comments and the Project.

#### D. Project Conversation

The conversation provides an opportunity for faculty feedback and student response, an experience of collegial consultation and conversation, and a forum for public communication of Divinity work.

## VI. Sources Cited\*\*

Browning, Don. *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care*. Fortress, 1983 (ch. 5 and p.100).

Groome, Thomas. *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision*. Harper & Row, 1980.

Holland, Joseph and Peter Henriot. *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*. Orbis, 1983.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Beacon, 1983.

Schreier, Robert J. *Constructing Local Theologies*. Orbis, 1985.

Segundo, Juan Luis. *The Liberation of Theology*. Orbis, 1976.

Whitehead, James D. and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead. *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*. Sheed and Ward, 1995.

\*\*For a more extensive bibliography, see Robert Kinast, *What are They Saying about Theological Reflection?* Paulist, 2000, pp. 85-92.