

# Christian Faith and Pedagogy at SPU

## **Foreword**

This document identifies how our Christian faith shapes our pedagogy at SPU. Specifically, we hope that this document will inform our perspective on the integration of our faith and our pedagogy to the following audiences: current and potential faculty; current and prospective students (both undergraduate and graduate) and their families; board of trustees; administrators, alumni, communities at large, and potential donors.

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# Christian Faith and Pedagogy

**S**EATTLE PACIFIC UNIVERSITY is a community that centers itself on the Christian faith, confesses the triune God, and grounds its identity on the reconciling work of Jesus Christ. Our community aims to be a multicultural expression of this covenant which manifests itself in our daily lives through dialogue, worship, and our pedagogy.

Our aim is to prepare future-ready and resilient graduates, who are prepared for and able to serve a world that needs their talents, with a particular emphasis on preparing them to reflect and act upon the world alongside community members who have been marginalized. In doing this, we pursue our academic disciplines with rigor and respect for the norms of our guilds but also consistently seek to examine our disciplines through the lens of Christian faith. We desire that each student who elects to attend our university will encounter Jesus Christ in their studies, in the faculty and the staff, and in the life of the University.

In this document we discuss three overarching goals for infusing the Christian faith in our pedagogy at SPU: edifying the student, reflecting our context, and highlighting our future hope. By being forthright in our position as Christians and explicit in our faith-filled pedagogy, we aim to serve as an inspiration for all who attend our university and a model for the next generation of professionals. The appendices provide more details on how these can be and are implemented in our core required courses (both undergraduate and graduate) and in our broader range of courses.

## **Pedagogy that edifies**

Our methods and practices in teaching are focused on pursuing truth and developing the whole student, seeking a holistic education informed by the Christian faith.

### *A pursuit of truth*

The university is a place where scholars and students together pursue the truth about what the world is like, what is good and just, and how best to live. Scholarly inquiry in the arts and humanities, the sciences, theology, and the professions all aim to discover, create, and invent, for the purpose of better understanding and

serving ourselves, God, and the world. Christian scholars and students can pursue such discovery without fear; rather, such pursuit is a way of loving God with our whole minds. We affirm that truth is not, in an ultimate sense, socially constructed; yet at the same time we acknowledge that each of us have been shaped by our experiences, and that none of us is privileged to search for truth from a neutral or objective platform. Consistent with the university's Wesleyan foundation, we aim to discern truth through a posture of reliance on Christian Scripture, immersion in the Christian tradition, the use of reason fostered by the Holy Spirit, and attention to both common and individual experience. Thus we affirm that truth is best sought in community where a diverse set of perspectives can be brought to bear on the quest.

*Honoring the image of God in each other*

In our teaching we approach each student as one of God's "image-bearers." This requires that in all aspects of our pedagogy we treat each student with utmost respect and dignity. This does not mean that every view is of equal merit or that it would be inappropriate for a faculty member to highlight how a position is misguided or wrong. It does mean, however, that all students, regardless of their particular beliefs or other characteristics, should feel welcome, respected and loved as children of God in our classrooms and on our campus. Our faculty are also shaped by the ongoing teaching of the Spirit, and we acknowledge that this instruction often flows from the insights and questions of our students.

*A commitment to attend to our students as whole people*

Our understanding of Christian integrity requires that we see each student as a whole person. Our pedagogy does not seek to separate the intellectual from the spiritual. As a university in the Wesleyan tradition, we embrace the desire expressed by Charles Wesley to unite "knowledge and vital piety." We believe that learning occurs best when all the dimensions of an individual are engaged in the process. As students expand their intellectual understanding, we encourage them to reflect on how this learning interacts with the spiritual dimensions of their lives, their vocational self-understanding, and their sense of purpose.

## **Pedagogy that reflects our context**

SPU's faculty design courses that incorporate three aspects of our context as a Christian university in a multicultural city: teaching and learning that are relational, engagement with local and global communities, and responsiveness to and through our diversity.

### *A relational approach*

Made in the image of the triune God, we confess that human beings were created for relationships with one another and with God. Our pedagogy affirms that the best learning occurs in the context of relationships—relationships between students and with their faculty. Our commitment to relational learning shapes the development of our faculty, our use of technology, our class sizes, and our instructional design.

### *A pedagogy of engagement*

As people called to love God and love our neighbors, we affirm a pedagogy of engagement with the world. We reject an understanding of education that suggests learning occurs best from a cloistered distance. We value our urban setting, and we routinely ask our students to visit, study, and learn from the city. Many of our classes include off-campus components, and representatives from the community are often invited to meet with our students. As we aim to learn from our community, we also seek to connect classroom learning with opportunities to serve both locally and globally. We believe that our lives are to be lived in service to God and to others, and our classes are taught from this perspective. Our goal is to help prepare our students for a lifetime of service.

### *An embrace of diversity*

We confess that God intends humanity to manifest God's glory throughout the globe—expressed in different racial and ethnic identities, speaking different languages, and inhabiting distinct cultures. And we affirm that in the end God's people will include every tribe and nation and culture, all of whom will join in common worship of our triune God. In anticipation of that glorious future, we celebrate and honor diversity in its many dimensions. And we seek to provide a welcoming and hospitable environment in our classrooms and across campus that

invites, respects, and embraces all students and the distinctive contributions that each brings to our community.

## **Pedagogy that highlights our future hope**

Through our curriculum, we challenge students to grow, discern, and stretch in order to bring hope and service to our world.

### *A future hope*

Christians are called to live as signs of hope in our broken world. We place hope in, and longingly await, the end in which Christ will reconcile all things to himself, and God's shalom will prevail. We point and call our students to works of justice and mercy, expressing our hopeful expectancy in God's ongoing redemption of our world. Our teaching aims to build confidence in our students that their work matters, for they are invited to anticipate God's coming kingdom.

### *Vocation and calling*

We urge our students to seek the Holy Spirit's guidance to discern their vocation and calling, and to see their future work and activities as bringing hope to the world. We encourage them to envision purposeful lives in which their beliefs are manifested in their careers, communities, and families.

### *Impacting the disciplines*

In some cases academic and community engagement will lead the student to conclude that there is a broad alignment between the key movements of a particular discipline and a Christian understanding of the world. In other cases it may lead the student to critique some of the discipline's foundational assumptions. In all cases this engagement will lead students to demonstrate both knowledge and proficiency in the discipline itself as well as apply relevant theological principles and values to the discipline.

## **Curricular aims**

Students should expect to encounter our Christian faith across the curriculum, in every class, though the form of this encounter will vary greatly depending on the

course topic and the faculty teaching the course. The aim is that all students will seriously consider the intersection of their beliefs with each topic they study.

#### *Undergraduate common curriculum*

Each undergraduate student is required to take a series of courses exploring the Christian faith. The University Foundations sequence is comprised of three courses which introduce students to the practices, sacred texts, and beliefs of the historic Christian tradition. The courses encourage students from diverse backgrounds to reflect on their own lives through the lenses of formation, reconciliation, and vocation. In addition, two University Core courses explore the historical emergence of the modern global system and its patterns of human inequality, as well as philosophical challenges to Christian theism from contemporary philosophy and science. (More details on these courses are provided in Appendix A.)

#### *Undergraduate disciplinary majors*

In addition to the common, required courses, the Christian faith will animate courses in each of the various majors as well. In some classes it may be as simple as a faculty member choosing to open the class session in prayer. In other settings it may be as extensive as requiring students to assess a particular argument from a theological framework. Where appropriate, certain courses may include instruction on the use of classical spiritual disciplines. Others may engage in related service-learning work. In still other cases, faculty may reflect how beauty (in art, music, or even a well-crafted mathematical theorem) can be oriented toward worship.

By the time a student completes a major, they should expect to have been asked to engage their discipline through the lens of a theologically informed set of values; however, integrating faith into academic disciplines demonstrates itself differently. For example, Theology may go into theories and historic significance. Whereas the Arts may discuss how persons integrate their faith practice into the making of their work through the language of worship. Or, faith conversations may arise in case studies of professionals that practice their faith as a way to dive deeper in subjects. Through the lens of faith the designer may see their profession as a call, whether this is through just treatment of colleagues/clients or using design methodologies to shape difficult abstract problems into concrete solutions. Thus, the discipline will greatly shape the way that faith authentically shows up in the courses.

### *Graduate level*

Each SPU graduate program is, or aspires to be, one of the leading programs in engaging its particular discipline with a theologically informed set of values. To accomplish this, graduate programs require a course relating Christian theological and ethical commitments to disciplinary practices.

Suggesting that all SPU graduate programs will be characterized by a deep intersection of specific disciplines with theologically informed values does not presuppose that all or even most graduate students will share a Christian worldview. A mix of student faith perspectives offers an ideal context for cultural engagement. Graduate faculty will be adept at listening, learning from others and giving expression to God's truth in language and concepts accessible to all of our students, regardless of their viewpoints.

### *The Praxis of teaching*

In addition to influencing the course content, the expression of our Christian faith should be evident in all three areas of teaching praxis: planning, instruction, and assessment.

When planning a course, unit, lesson, or class session, the faculty member's faith may be expressed in time spent in prayer seeking wisdom, in reflecting on scriptures that align with or challenge the topics to be covered, in conversing with colleagues to discover Christian traditions that intersect, and in considering the unique, God-reflective design of our individual students' minds. It is in this planning stage that we have the opportunity to commit to honoring our students' diverse strengths by incorporating their background knowledge, language, and experiences to make our teaching meaningful. This planning should involve our faculty engaging with one another to consider faith across the curriculum—not just in individual courses. This faculty engagement, both within and across departments, aims to foster a cohesive and integrated student experience.

During the instruction phase, the fact that our faith is based on the incarnate life of Jesus, a master teacher, compels the faculty to practice effective pedagogy. Our Christ-likeness may be expressed in our instruction when we help our students achieve the high expectations we hold for them, when we attend to the differing access needs of individuals, when we foster a respectful learning environment, when we engage students in developing their own understanding and promote their own thinking, or when we use representations to develop the concepts we are teaching. We may choose to be explicit in our discussion of Christianity in our

lessons, explicit in the expression of our faith in classroom devotions, or explicit in the synthesis of Godly dispositions with disciplinary topics.

In our assessment of our students' learning and of our instruction, we begin in a posture of humility, knowing that scripture warns us that, as teachers, we invite stricter assessment of ourselves. Therefore, we may express our Christian praxis through providing fair and equitable experiences for students to apply the lessons, offering formative feedback to guide students and enhance their learning, and analyzing student understanding to plan our next steps in the teaching-learning process. Again, we may choose to support our students during periods of assessment through explicit Christian practices such as public prayer, scripture reading, or focused devotions. Ultimately, the practice of our faith through assessment is about honoring the student as made by God and in God's image.

## **A posture of confessional hospitality**

We enthusiastically welcome students into our community from all faith perspectives. We respect our whole student body and seek to welcome all of our students into our community and extend to them the love of Christ. As a Christian university, we recognize that our student body includes students who embrace the Christian faith, students who embrace other faiths, students of no faith background, and students with still other perspectives. All of our students have chosen to participate in the life of our community while aware of our deep commitments to Christ. While some classes invite students to reflect on their spiritual formation through the lens of their own faith traditions, our overall approach to education is substantively shaped by our Christian tradition. We see the SPU educational experience as an opportunity for all students to explore the Christian faith or, for those who wish, to go deeper in their Christian faith.

In conclusion, we desire that all students will cultivate an understanding of Christian faith and practice as part of an education at SPU. Furthermore, our commitment to the Gospel includes a deep conviction that we have good news that is worthy of being shared and would be of great benefit to each of our students. This good news leads us to educate in a manner that edifies the student holistically, invites engagement of ideas in our multicultural community, and highlights the hope provided by our Lord, Jesus Christ, the light of the world.



# Appendix A

The following are taken from other documents as of Spring 2019 and gathered here for highlighting their relevance to this particular document.

## **Required Courses for all Undergraduates**

### *Description of courses*

Three University Foundations (UFDN) and two University Core (UCOR) courses are required of all four-year students:

- “Christian Faith,” which explores the lived experience of faith as expressed in formation, vocation, and reconciliation.
- “Christian Scripture,” which provides a way of conceptualizing, reading, and practicing the truth of Scripture as the authority for Christian formation.
- “Christian Theology,” which reflects upon the relationship between God and humankind as expressed in the Scriptures and experienced in a life of faith.
- “The Emergence of the Modern Global System,” which explores how the modern global economic system was formed, with emphasis on the history and patterns of human inequality which mark today’s societies.
- “Faith, Philosophy, and Science,” which explores challenges to the Christian faith which arise from modern developments in philosophy and science.

(Transfer students are only required to complete a course in Christian Scripture and a course in Christian Theology.)

These courses introduce students to the biblical heritage and to the distinctive doctrines and practices of various strands within the historic Christian tradition; to the role of Christianity in shaping the economic practices of modernity; and to questions from philosophy and science about the viability of a Christian worldview. Students are challenged to understand themselves, their heritage and traditions, and the world from the perspective of the Christian faith.

*Desired learning outcomes*

University Foundations Program Student Learning Outcomes:

- Students will be able to identify and describe key practices of the Christian life, focusing on their relationship to faith formation and Christian community.
- Students will be able to identify and discuss how the diverse collections of both the Old Testament and the New Testament narrate the story of God's redemption, reconciliation, and restoration of all creation.
- Students will be able to identify and discuss specific Christian doctrines, focusing on their interrelationship and their implications for Christian thought and life.

University Core Program Student Learning Outcomes:

- Students will be able to identify the history and patterns of human inequality that mark today's societies, and will examine how Christians should respond to a world that is both deeply divided and globally interwoven.
- Students will be able to articulate a series of important issues about religious faith that arise from philosophy and science, and will gain a capacity to discern the strengths and weaknesses of philosophical arguments relevant to a Christian worldview.

## **Required Courses for all Graduate Students**

*Theological Reflection Course Requirement for graduate Students (GP-11)*

All graduate students will complete at least three credits in graduate courses in disciplinary-focused, Christian thought and practice. These credits can be taken together in a single course or can be separated in one or two-credit modules.

A GP-11 course (or module) meets the following criteria:

- the primary focus of the course is to put the specific content and methods of an academic discipline into dialog with the core beliefs and practices of the Christian faith;
- the course is taught from the perspective of SPU's Statement of Faith;

- the course is taught by a faculty member, including adjuncts, who can affirm the SPU Mission Statement and the SPU Statement of Faith; and
- texts for the course shall include the Christian Scripture and significant works of Christian theology or theologically-informed interdisciplinary scholarship.

Such courses will be:

- taught by a practitioner of the discipline in question who also holds a masters-level degree in theology;
- taught by someone who holds a doctorate in theology and possesses some expertise or practical experience in the discipline in question;
- co-taught (along with a regular faculty member from that program) by a member of the SPU School of Theology; or
- taught by a faculty member or adjunct without an advanced theological degree but who has received appropriate theological training or engaged in significant and relevant theological study.

*Desired learning outcomes*

The student academic engagement will reflect both a deep knowledge and proficiency in the discipline itself and a rigorous and sensitive application of relevant theological principles and values.

## Appendix B

The following are some examples from our faculty (primarily in their own words) of how our faith is manifested in our courses or in daily interactions with students. These are organized into a section of examples that would be relevant for all majors and another section of examples specific to certain majors. Of course, even the major-specific examples would have parallels to other majors.

### **From SPU's faculty**

*All majors:*

- Many of our faculty open class with a prayer, or a moment of silence or reflection, or a devotion or Scripture reading, often tied to the ideas to be discussed that day. Throughout the quarter, many faculty offer to pray for students, especially those who request it and are willing to share their needs; this is an expression of love and recognition of our frailty and common humanity.
- Some faculty make available a “gratitude wall” on which students write what they are thankful for, or a discussion board, where students write whatever is true, noble, good, etc., in order to celebrate it. (This can be done for online classes as well as in-person classes.)
- Many faculty facilitate relationship-centered learning, between faculty and students and among students themselves. This enables us to see the value of being therapeutic in our relationships no matter what we are doing. An education steeped in a Christian worldview allows space for warm, supportive relationships grounded in a Christian understanding of human preciousness and dignity, and our faith provides a large toolkit for dealing with pain, adversity, and moral crisis. It also allows students to bring their whole selves to the course, its subject matter, and its constituents. Faculty urge students to consider that education is not just about cultivating oneself; it is about learning to serve and contribute. This includes serving classmates by collaborating in their learning process. Faculty model this by working alongside students, and being open to relationship with them; some faculty open up their homes to teach a session once a term. Other faculty engage in service learning projects off-campus with their students.
- In many SPU courses, faith-informed teaching allows us to identify social and cultural inputs that may be having a corrupting effect, so we can name them

and then be free or realign, so as to “no longer be conformed to the pattern of this world.” Students can examine the roots of structures/institutions we take for granted—whether those roots were inspiring, or, as is true in many cases, exploitative. We can together acknowledge the very real role of human spiritual experience in the creation of those structures and systems. An SPU education allows us to acknowledge that entire vector of human experience that secular education leaves out.

- When discussing ethics or plagiarism, faculty are encouraged to touch on Christian ethics and morality.
- Faculty can explore the motivations behind and qualities of good work. Many qualities of good work, such as competence, reliability, and excellence, are valued both in our Christian tradition and by those who do not share our faith commitments.
- When appropriate, faculty can model vulnerability and integrate their own faith and belief system; that is, offer personal examples from their own faith journey. Faculty might ask students to think about what motivates them to get up in the morning—what drives them? And instructors can share their own rationale for how their faith motivates them.
- Faculty can invite students to interrogate each discipline’s values from a Christian perspective. Perhaps they might assign Biblical passages alongside secular texts in our disciplines. Biblical passages can be a great way of motivating discussion about poverty, inequality, and hope for the disadvantaged.
- Many disciplines can be used to point to the limits of human understanding.
- Faculty are encouraged to remind students that their grades do not reflect on their worth.
- Faculty can model and emphasize the reality that questions are encouraged in Christian higher education; they are not out of bounds for the Christian faith.
- Faculty are encouraged to help students understand that our endeavor in the academic disciplines is also an invitation to reflect God’s Grace and Love.
- In contexts where potential conflict may emerge, such as extended team projects, faculty can encourage students to consider what God might be teaching them

through these interactions. What might their responses and actions be indicating about their need for growth in certain areas?

- Recognizing that emerging tensions that many students of faith feel as they encounter new ideas, it is helpful when faculty are intentional in talking about their own faith. This can include honest reflections on their own experience of addressing challenging questions or tensions in their faith, as well as helpful resources they found in resolving those tensions.

*Major specific*

- In a **Business Law** course, faculty may help students understand where the law intersects with theology by asking the following questions: “Should Christians file lawsuits against their fellow human beings? Should Christians sue other Christians?” This can create an amazing opportunity for students to discuss their ethics and how faith (or the lack thereof) shapes their understanding of such ethics. How do they perceive their faith to shape their understanding of the law and the business world?
- In **Theater** courses, some faculty ask students to think about their orientation toward acting in a serious manner: a. What does it mean to you to be a theater artist? b. What does it mean that you are a theater artist who is a Christian? Or, as an institution, we ask: how does our Christian identity influence our choices for theater plays? In theater management classes, faculty urge students to focus on the community that they are creating the productions for: look at the community, what do they need? (One student developed a theater company that would serve people transitioning out of prison. Another focused on Native American communities.)
- In **Finance** courses, some faculty note the several hundred Biblical verses on wealth, money, and so on. When relevant, some faculty integrate such scripture into course material, as a supplementary or additional text, and explore how a Christian should consider these in relation to business practice.
- In **Sociology** courses, some faculty build theological content into the coursework. For example, some assign Biblical passages alongside secular texts in Sociology, and Biblical passages can be a great way of motivating discussion about poverty, inequality, and hope for the disadvantaged. It is also a way of showing students that the Bible as holy text, is also a “text”—it must be read,

and it contains commentaries and wisdom that pertain to the disciplines and how we practice our profession.

- Many faculty in the empirical sciences share what fascinates them about their field, and how this wonderment may be connected to a reverence for God, or to lessons in Theology. For example, while teaching a science course (**Biology, Physics**, etc.) some faculty share how fascinating and beautiful science is, because science allows us to experiment and understand creation. There is an obvious awesomeness to the natural world. It inspires a sense of reverence toward life and nature. This is undoubtedly a reverence for God's work, and we are privileged to be able to use our mind to study them. And our mind itself is part of creation, and we get to use it to better understand other aspects of creation. Or, in a **Physics** course, a faculty member compares paradoxes in Physics to similar paradoxes in Theology, and explores how we have to hold two truths in tension.
- In **Logic** courses, faculty emphasize that learning to reason well and argue carefully requires humility, as well as respect and charity for those with whom one disagrees (and these are important ways of loving one's neighbor). Learning how to reason well or identify bad arguments also enables students to rethink their own views when they notice faulty arguments which they once accepted, thereby becoming more open-minded and willing to listen to new arguments. Such virtues are important especially given how polarized the public square has become on certain social, political, or religious issues.
- Many of our **Music** courses incorporate music from the Christian tradition. Music is so deep; faculty can aim to show where music comes from and how music has affected us throughout human history. Faculty can inform students that for some of the greatest composers faith and music were connected. In a **Music Therapy** Program, faculty can show how practicing therapy is an encounter with the other, and through this we express the value of our common humanity.
- Faculty in **Nursing** courses are able to highlight that nursing involves acts of mercy: it is coming alongside people, living amongst the poor and underserved, and showing them God's Love. When caring for someone who is difficult (drug abuser, poor life decisions with health consequences), it matters that we show them acts of mercy and love them as God loves them. Faculty can also exhibit vulnerability, sharing their personal perspectives with harm

prevention (safe injection sites, needle exchanges, etc.) or struggles with ethical dimensions of care. Faculty can also emphasize how nursing invokes caring for someone's spiritual side, care for the whole person, including how to care for someone without imposing your own spiritual beliefs. For example, nurses can ask the patients, "What brings you meaning?" (especially in oncology or significant illness).

- In **Math**, faculty and students can explore the infinite and the beauty which give a glimpse of infinity/God. Mathematics describes patterns that amazingly describe God's creation. Math also can be used to model behavior and discuss the messiness of life.
- **Engineering** can be presented as a form of service to God and humankind. The God-given skills that are honed and developed can be used to serve as God's hands and feet in the world. To that end, before making or designing a product, an engineer should think about whether or not that product should be made. This raises the question "What is a good design/product?" A good design/product is more than just a product that works. Answering this question takes into account the material and spiritual impacts of the product on the people who make it, the individuals who use it, the community that encompasses it, and the environment that provides the raw materials and also absorbs the subsequent waste.
- In **Education** courses, students are invited to consider God's wonderful design in fostering diversity of human bodies, minds, and languages in discussions of what society labels physical, intellectual, and learning abilities and disabilities. Instructors provide examples of the strength this diversity-of-being brings to our communities and how this may be a reflection of what eternity in God's presence will be like. Some instructors of certification courses discuss how the wisdom of specific scriptures, especially from Proverbs, aligns closely with the applications of learning the students are mastering in their assignments and internships. Others draw parallels between varied interpretations of scriptures and the application of educational law, policies, and management practices in schools. Finally, some professors use the opportunities provided during student advising meetings to share a bit of their own life story and in so doing, talk about how their faith experiences and their life in Christ impact their work as instructors.