

**Report on the 2016 SPS Student Learning Outcomes Assessment and Graduate Exit Interviews  
Dr. Richard B. Steele, Associate Dean of Graduate Studies  
November 15, 2016**

**Part I: Spring 2016 Student Learning Outcomes Assessment Workshops**

The Accreditation Self-Study Report submitted by SPS to the Association of Theological Schools in January 2016 indicated that one or two of the six Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) would be assessed annually on a rotating basis. SLO 1 was assessed in spring 2015, and the findings were included in the Self-Study Report. SLO's 2 and 6a were assessed in spring 2016 at two different but identically structured two-hour workshops. These SLOs, together with the "academy," "abbey" and/or "apostolate" objectives nested under each, are as follows:

Student Learning Outcomes	Objectives: <b>Academy</b> , <b>Abbey</b> , <b>Apostolate</b>
SLO 2. Students will interpret and respond to Christian Scripture.	i. Students will interpret the Bible as Christian Scripture, attending to the historical context, literary features and religious message of each book, and to the overarching unity of its witness to God.
	ii. Students will meditate on the Bible as Christian Scripture, attending to its divine authority for their life and vocation.
	iii. Students will apply the Bible as Christian Scripture, attending to its practical relevance to the people and contexts of our world today.
SLO 6a (MDiv): Students will practice the professional skills suitable to their vocation.	i. Students will speak, write, preach and teach effectively. ii. Students will design and conduct meaningful liturgies. iii. Students will listen sensitively to all persons and provide compassionate and effective pastoral care and counsel. iv. Students will nurture others in the Christian faith, be exposed to various models of church leadership, church planting and church revitalization, and engage in ministry across cultural boundaries. v. Students will plan, manage, evaluate, and improve their own work and that of their organization. vi. Students will raise and manage funds ethically, effectively, and in accordance with basic accounting principles.

The first workshop was conducted with twenty members of the SPS Advisory Board on May 19, 2016. The second was conducted with seventeen members of the SOT Faculty on June 6. A total of 36 different artifacts, gleaned from nine different SPS classes taught in 2015-16, were assessed at the two workshops. The participants at each workshop were divided into six table groups of between two and four members, and each table group assessed three artifacts, using a standard rubric. At each workshop, three table groups assessed artifacts from classes to which SLO 2 is assigned, and three table groups assessed artifacts from classes to which SLO 6a is assigned.

**Performance Indicators:** The 2016 ATS Self-Study Report identified the following performance indicators: For SLO 2: 85% of the student artifacts assessed in a given year would receive a score of at least 9 out of 12 on the assessment rubric used. Assessors would consider the “academy,” “abbey” and “apostolate” objectives for SLO 2, as shown above. For SLO 6a, 85% of the student artifacts assessed in a given year would receive a score of at least 9 out of 12 on the assessment rubric used. Assessors will consider the six “apostolate” objectives for SLO 6a, as shown above.

**Quantitative Analysis: A comparison of the tabulated results with the performance indicators:**

1. For SLO 2, 7 of the 18 (= 38.88%) artifacts assessed reached the benchmark of 9. But if one includes all the artifacts whose total score ranged between 7 and 10, i.e., all those that “fully meet expectations,” plus all the artifacts whose total score exceeded 10.5, i.e., all those that “greatly exceed expectations,” the number doubles to 14 of 18 (= 77.77%), still a bit short of our 85% benchmark. Put differently, the overall average final score for the 18 artifacts assessed for SLO 2 came to 8.08—again, well within the category of those that “fully meet expectations,” but below the benchmark of 9.
2. For SLO 6a, 7 of the 18 (= 38.88%) artifacts assessed reached the benchmark of 9. But if one includes all the artifacts that “fully meet” or “greatly exceed” our expectations, the number jumps to 16 of 18 (= 88.88%), just over our 85% benchmark. Put differently, the overall average final score for the 18 artifacts assessed for SLO 2 came to 8.22—again, well within the category of those that “fully meet expectations,” but still below the benchmark of 9.
3. Students generally received higher scores for Assessment Criterion 2, which concerns the “organization and documentation” of their papers, than for Assessment Criterion 1, which concerns prose style, and Assessment Criterion 3, which concerns theological reflection and argumentation. Apparently our students are more skilled at structuring theological arguments than composing elegant English prose, or writing with spiritual depth, or applying key religious ideas to daily life.

**Qualitative Analysis: Insights from workshop participants on student artifacts:**

1. More robust exegesis of the scriptural text is needed in sermons. Use of up-to-date scholarly commentaries is lacking, and students are over-dependent on study Bibles and one-volume commentaries.
2. More robust analysis of the local congregation and prevailing culture is needed in sermons. Use of ethnographic and social-scientific research is lacking.
3. Theorizing is not theologizing! Avoid abstractions and generalizations in sermons!
4. Lecturing is not preaching! Keep geographical and historical info to a minimum!
5. Preaching is not about the preacher! More concrete examples and illustrations—and fewer I-statements and personal anecdotes—are needed in sermons.
6. More concrete take-aways and practical applications are needed in sermons. Scholarly work is certainly needed in sermon *preparation*, but the delivery should move from “What?” to “So what?” and “Now what?”

### **Suggestions from workshop participants for improving curriculum and instruction:**

1. Encourage professors to “back-design” their course in light of the SLOs assigned to that course. (Profs tend to design courses with inputs, rather than outcomes, in mind.)
2. Encourage students when writing sermons not to ask, “What do I want to *say*?” but instead, “What do I want people to *do* in response to what I say?” Move from “What?” to “So what?” and “Now what?”
3. Teach exegetical and homiletical skills *together*. Help students to read Scripture not just “critically” and “theologically,” but “pastorally” and “spiritually.”
4. Focus instruction on the skills and habits ministers need to “make connections” with people, to help people feel that they matter.
5. Help students not to over-rely on their own experience, but to focus more on the content of scripture and the Christian tradition.
6. Assess first-year students’ gifts and graces, aptitudes and interests, strengths and weaknesses. (A good tool for this might be [Profiles of Ministry](#), available through ATS.).
7. Create more opportunities for enhancing creativity and spiritual maturation *throughout* the student’s course of study, not just in the first-year core courses.
8. Consider instituting a “capstone course” or “integrative experience” for MDiv students?

### **Part II: 2016 Graduate Exit Interviews**

Ten students, who either completed degrees from Seattle Pacific Seminary during academic year 2015-16 or were expected to do so by the end of summer 2016, participated in exit interviews. They were assured that their responses to the interview questions were completely confidential, that the completed forms would be destroyed after the ADGS’s summary report was written, that all answers would be aggregated and anonymized, and that no student’s course grades, degree completion or later letters of reference would or could be affected by their exit interview response. Students were also informed that they, the SPS faculty and the SPS Advisory Board would receive identical copies of the ADGS’s summary report, and that an abbreviated version of the report would be posted to the [Educational Effectiveness](#) page on the SPS website.

### **Student Feedback on the SPS Program**

1. Respondents were nearly universal in praising the AAA curriculum model *in theory*, and most felt that it deeply enhanced their spiritual and theological formation. But one student, indicated that it does not seem “as unique among residential or semi-residential seminaries” as she was led to believe when she matriculated. And several noted that although we work hard at being a “community,” we can hardly call ourselves an “abbey” in the strict sense. For that term connotes living together under a rule, whereas most SPS folks are commuters, either by choice or because of the limited housing opportunities near campus.
2. Many respondents affirmed that “abbey” elements—using the term now to refer to the spiritual formation and accountable discipleship elements of our curriculum and co-curriculum—are heavily emphasized in the first year, but fall off sharply thereafter. This point has been made repeatedly by SPS students over the years, and in response to it we have already

made THEO 6002 a pre-autumn class for *second*-year students. (Members of the Class of 2016 would not have benefited from this change.) But the point cuts deeper, as it does not seem that abbey elements are stressed much in most of our courses, and because such elements as are available—Kingswood Dinners and the mid-week prayer service in the Alexander Chapel are noteworthy and much appreciated examples—are not always well attended, especially by faculty.

3. The respondents seemed a bit more appreciative of the way the “apostolate” is working, partly because of Dr. Smyth’s significant improvements in the Contextual Education program, and partly because a number of faculty seem to be crafting assignments aimed at getting students to apply “academic” insights to ministry contexts. One graduate, however, equates the apostolate with “social justice,” which s/he feels is “really lacking our program.” Another commented that “the network of available [opportunities] for professional skill development” is very thin—in comparison, say, with the network of analogous opportunities available to MBA students in SBGE. (It should be added, however, that Ed Smyth and Taylor Ford have been laboring hard to develop just such a network for seminarians.)

#### **Student Feedback on SPS Personnel**

1. Respondents deeply appreciate the SOT faculty as scholar-teachers, and expressed deep appreciation for their personal availability and pastoral sensitivity, and noted with deep concern for how overworked and under-resourced they are.
2. Respondents were also generally positive about the SPS administration and staff. One commented that their “responsiveness has always been quicker than expected,” and another stated, “[those] that I have “interacted were all wonderful, helpful, and very kind to me as an individual.” But another student, though acknowledging that members of the administration “care about student needs and experiences,” complains that “their effectiveness at responding to student concerns, implementing requested changes, and improving student experience has been disappointing.” Unfortunately, this student did not cite specific instances of these failings

#### **Student Feedback on SPU Resources**

1. Classroom facilities are adequate, in the opinion of most respondents, and Kingswood House is a beloved space for studying, socializing and class meetings.
2. The Library is generally deemed adequate to the purpose of general seminary research and study—all the more so, of course, because Steve Perisho is such a phenomenal gift to us all! Specialized materials on topics of gender, race and ethnicity are often not on hand, but can usually be secured by Orbis or ILL within a few days.
3. University housing for graduate students is extremely limited—a major problem that will grow as our student body increases. Out-of-towners are particularly hard hit.
4. The availability of scholarship support is widely felt among respondents to be severely deficient, and fears about tuition debt and the limited number of well-compensated post-graduation employment opportunities are very real.

### Student Self-Assessment of Learning Outcomes

1. Respondents almost unanimously report significant intellectual growth during their SPS years. Here are some representative comments: “SPS has been a truly transformative experience; a wonderful community and a safe space to re-envision life in the context of struggle.” “The capacity to hold several points of view in my head without being mastered by any of them is a skill that I can attribute to my time at SPU.” “I’ve grown by leaps and bounds because I wasn’t a theologian when I started.” “Over the years of being in seminary I have been stretched to new levels and my natural giftedness [as a teacher of the gospel] has been sharpened in ways that I could never have imagined.”
2. Respondents are almost equally affirming of the ways in which their practical skills for ministry have been honed, though a number continue to express uncertainty as to exactly what form their future ministry will take—a point that correlates with the finding in the outcomes assessment workshop that we might be well-advised to begin using some instrument to identify students’ gifts and graces, strengths and weaknesses, and to provide students with individualized vocational guidance.
3. Reports on the spiritual and emotional growth our students have undergone during their seminary years are more mixed. One wrote: “When everyone else was warning me that seminary would be a cemetery for my soul, I found it souring, and have grown deeper every day.” Another said: “It takes great maturity and wisdom to be able to balance pastoral life, family life, and personal spiritual discipleship. Failure to do so can easily lead to mental and/or emotional breakdowns and burnout. The pressures of seminary life in many ways kept this need for balance in plain view at all times, reminding me of the importance of prioritizing, finding balance, asking for help when needed, delegating, and relying on the Holy Spirit for guidance and counsel. I hope to use what I have learned to balance academy, abbey, and apostolate in my own life when I leave the seminary and transition into my re-vamped roles at home and in the church and the community.” But another remarked: “This is my constant growing edge. I don’t know that I’ve come that far in four years. I don’t tend to my emotional and spiritual health that often, and that really hasn’t changed, despite many attempts from others.”