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A Course Format Rotation Strategy

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Smaller theological schools face distinct challenges. One of those challenges is how to provide coverage for a comprehensive theological curriculum while maintaining a reasonable teaching load for elected faculty members while also providing for student needs. Another is finding qualified and competent adjunct faculty to provide needed coverage while guarding against the liabilities of creating a "shadow faculty." Yet another challenge is providing sufficient flexibility in its course schedule to accommodate the current trends in student profiles: fewer residential students, more second career working students, seminarians who maintain full time ministry positions while completing their degrees and increased expectations about the use of instructional technologies, and the shifting ratio between traditional full-time and working part-time students.

All of those factors bring added complexity to curriculum program planning, especially for smaller theological schools. There are only so many professors who can teach only so many courses within only so many hours in so many weeks in only so many classroom spaces. It may not take long for a dean to realize the limitations of being able to piece together a course of study that provides balance, flow, sequencing, and helps students make progress in their course of study. When you get to the point students cannot map out a way to complete their degree program, that is the day you start having student retention issues. That is also the day the dean needs to start making programmatic changes.

Course Format Rotation Schedule in the MDiv

The following courses will be offered on a format rotation schedule in order to meet the goal of offering two-thirds of the M.Div. online and to offer expanded scheduling options for students. The rotation schedule below will be reviewed and revised as need to meet the needs of students for making progress in the course of study.

<input type="checkbox"/> Online <input type="checkbox"/> Classroom <input type="checkbox"/> Hybrid	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 1
Core Requirement Courses	2014-2015	2015-2016	201206-17	2017-2018	2018-2019
<i>Summer Term</i>					
M3206 Exploring Ministerial Identity	<input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Fall Term</i>					
B1511 Intro to NT I	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
B1111 Intro to OT I		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
HT2111 Intro to Christian Tradition I	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>
HT2410 Ethics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>
HT2610 Mission	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
M3110 Ministry of Preaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
M3206 Exploring Ministerial Identity		<input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> or <input type="checkbox"/>	
M3211 Intro to Spirituality	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
M3321 Christian Ministry I	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>
M3730 Educating in Faith (CE core)		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
M3740 Models of Ed. Ministry (CE core)	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
M3815 Intro to Christian Worship	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Winter Term</i>					
B1111 Intro to OT I	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Spring Term</i>					
B1512 Intro to NT II	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>
B1112 Intro to OT II		<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	
HT2112 Intro to Christian Tradition II	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>
HT2160 Baptist Identity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
M3110 Ministry of Preaching	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> + <input type="checkbox"/>

A Course Format Rotation Strategy

One strategy for meeting the increasingly diverse and complex needs of students is to consider a course format rotation schedule. With existing instructional technologies for online learning and the growing acceptance of alternatives to traditional classroom lecture approaches, a small school can creatively address numerous challenges in curriculum scheduling.

The attached sample course format rotation schedule is from the fictional Central Generic Theological Seminary. This school has a small faculty of seven full time elected faculty members. It expands its faculty body with a few affiliate and adjunct faculty who teach occasional specialized courses. Fortunately, this school was an early adopter of online instructional technologies (IT) and has the internal resources to provide a sufficient number of dedicated online courses to justify the expense and to make best use of IT options for pedagogy and programming. Over the years they've developed effective faculty development training practices to help their instructors become efficient in online and classroom teaching, including their adjuncts.

Below are the guiding rationale and advantages, of this school's rotation strategy [Download CGTS 5 year rotation schedule](#)

Rationale for the schedule

- The rotation offers broader scheduling options for students, who are increasingly non-traditional (non-resident, second-career, working). They come with high expectations about convenience and the use of instructional technologies. Increasingly, they are digital natives, most of whom have taken at least one online course in their high school and college careers.
- The rotation focuses primarily on core required courses. These are the most critical to offer in different options for helping students make progress toward degree completion.
- For core courses with high enrollments, the schedule offers two options for the same course on any given year: an online or hybrid format with a traditional classroom format. This helps reduce the size of the class, making for a better learning experience, and, provides students with options when there's a schedule conflict.
- The rotation of online and classroom options increases the span of learning pedagogies for students, which has enriched the learning experience.
- The five year rotation schedule encompasses the span of time most students within the student body will complete the degree. With a five year rotation schedule students can map out their course of study and balance the format options that best fits their needs.
- Elective courses that are requirements for degree program concentrations are also put on a rotation schedule. Very often students in concentrations face additional obstacles in course schedules. A format rotation schedule alleviates many issues.
- The schedule tracks the "balance" of formats across the five year rotation. While providing for flexibility in the course of study is important through online and hybrid formats, traditional classroom experiences remains important for several reasons. This school has found the right "mix" of formats over the five year schedule to provide balance. It ensures that their classroom offerings never fall below 50% of their format options on any given year.

Advantages of the schedule

- The online course option has increased student's ability to take additional courses with fewer schedule conflicts
- The online course option has helped working students make faster progress in their course of study by not requiring "clock time" in the classroom
- The online and hybrid course options has helped students begin their degree program studies earlier by not having to immediately relocate to the seminary to start classes.
- The online and hybrid course options has helped senior students accept ministry placement and internship opportunities before finishing their formal studies. They can relocate to a different geographical context and still complete their program of study due to the flexibility in schedule options
- The mix of formats allows the dean and registrar to track and demonstrate compliance

with residential requirements by the accrediting agency

- The format rotation has made it unnecessary to offer evening classes to accommodate the school's increasing non-residential, non-traditional students. This relieves faculty of additional stress and inconvenience.
- The schedule has sufficient intentionality to provide correctives to instructors who only want to teach online or only want to do traditional classroom. It follows the rule, "The curriculum first; the needs of the students second; personal preferences, predilections and peccadilloes last."

As a result of its experience with a variety of course format options, and the application of an effective assessment plan, this school has developed a more mature understanding of its curriculum. For example, the school does not over-focus on different course formats because its focus is on assessing student learning outcomes. Each course, regardless of the format, has the same student learning outcomes which are aligned with the program goals. While the experience of the course may be different depending on the class format, the learning outcomes remain those of the course of study. The school does not differentiate between "residential" and "non-residential" students. Those categories have become moot in light of greater emphasis on student learning outcomes, clearer assessment rubrics, and close monitoring of contact-hour requirements.

Is a rotation strategy right for you?

- Are your students having increasing difficulty planning their course schedules?
- Has your student body profile shifted to the point you need to accommodate more non-traditional students with different scheduling challenges?
- How well are you providing for a variety of non-instructional, non-classroom lecture options in your curriculum's learning experience?
- How well does your course of study meet increasing student expectations about instructional technologies, including online learning?
- How well are you equipping your faculty to teach with a wider range of pedagogies and in using emerging instructional technologies?

<https://wabash.center/2014/06/a-course-format-rotation-strategy/>