



## Self-Study Report

Prepared for the Fall 2024  
Visit of the Association of Theological Schools  
Commission on Accrediting

Starr King School for the  
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# Introduction

## Mission and Context

Starr King School for the Ministry (SKSM) was founded in 1904 as the Pacific Unitarian School for the Ministry and incorporated in 1906. Our first class of four students included two white men, one white woman and one Japanese man who returned to his country as a minister after completing his education. From our very beginning we have valued diversity and service: our motto, chosen by first president Earl Morse Wilbur, is *Non Ministrari Sed Ministrare*, not to be ministered unto but to minister.

At first classes met in the First Unitarian Church of Oakland; property was purchased in Berkeley, but the move was disrupted by San Francisco's Great Earthquake in 1906. Wilbur and his students pivoted from book learning to earthquake relief, responding to this trauma with practical aid and spiritual care.

SKSM was founded because our west coast Unitarian ancestors believed that the theological education of their time was inadequate. They hoped for ministers trained in the practical arts of ministry, not just scholars of biblical languages and patristic theology. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson, they dreamed of ministers who could acquaint people directly with Divinity and convert life into truth.

Eventually this scope expanded to include [Unitarian Universalists](#) and other liberal or liberationist religious leaders. Our multi-religious<sup>1</sup> progressive orientation has created a haven for individuals whose identities might challenge a more traditional seminary, perhaps even deliberately excluded. Some of our students do not claim any specific religious identity or spiritual practice.

We recognize that social change must be grounded in a spiritual cry for justice and peace. From our very beginning SKSM was a radical new vision to expand theological education and today, 120 years later, we remain one of the most progressive theological schools in North America.

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<sup>1</sup> Our understanding of multi-religiosity has been shaped by the work and practices of Professor Ibrahim Farajajé, our last provost, also known as Ibrahim Baba. For him, Organic Multi-Religiosity is a way that individuals and/or communities engage spiritual and theological practice which is not exclusive to one tradition, while prioritizing connectivity and countering oppression and cultural misappropriation. In the words of Ibrahim Baba, organic Multi-Religiosity “interrupts practices of considering religions as monolithic, rigidly-separated traditions in conflict from one another (as though they could only exist in relations of conflict), but rather understands them as having complex and constantly-morphing relationships in successive generations and in ever-widening geographical and cultural contexts.”

Our mission, [Educating to Counter Oppression and Create Just and Sustainable Communities](#), was introduced in 2000, the fruit of a decade's concern with White Supremacy and oppression. Today our students are attracted to SKSM because of what we call our "ECO" (pronounced "ee-ko") or "ECO-CJSC" mission, which underpins everything at SKSM from curriculum choices to investing. Since 1988, under President Gordon McKeeman, we have explicitly addressed issues of institutional racism and sexism within SKSM.

ECO-CJSC has provided a deeper articulation of the educational priorities of our mission statement. The integration of ECO and our mission is now expressed through four academic learning goals (which we previously introduced in the 2019 self-study), which are further elaborated into our Eight Threshold competencies (further detailed in our discussion of Standard 3). The four learning goals, also known as the Four Cs, are as follows:

1. Cultivating multi-religious life and learning
2. Countering oppressions and embracing radical hospitality
3. Creating just and sustainable communities
4. Calling forth wholeness, healing, and liberation

In 2004 SKSM President Emeritus McKeeman boasted, "Our Graduates are among the [Unitarian Universalist] denomination's most effective leaders." In 2024, this is still true: the current President of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), Sofia Betancourt, is the fourth SKSM graduate to be elected to the denomination's highest office. Only three theological schools have produced UUA presidents, the others being Harvard Divinity School (four) and Meadville Lombard Theological School (two).

In the 1980s, SKSM formally defined itself as a "whole greater than the sum of its parts" with an "integrated approach to education centered in engagement in the world."

In 1997-1998, SKSM offered its first online course, Unitarian Universalist History, twenty-seven years ago. A second online course was offered, Unitarian Universalist Polity, in 2000. Initially these courses were intended for special students, not degree candidates. Our early adoption of online technology facilitated the pivot to exclusively online courses during the acute pandemic in 2020, with the vision of the Dean of the Faculty and the support of the Director of Digital Learning.

Portfolio conferences and threshold courses also date from 2000, when SKSM celebrated President Rebecca Parker's decade of service with pedagogical innovations. From the very beginning, Thresholds were conceived as a way to integrate the classic roles and offices of religious leaders with the traditional academic disciplines of religious and theological studies.

When asked in a recent interview why it is important to help develop religious leaders, SKSM's current president responded:

*...the world needs more progressive, savvy, and ethical religious leaders in a way that we have never needed them before. We live in a world that is beset by extremist religion...And the only real counter to that is progressive, loving, embracing, inclusive religious leaders who understand*

*the importance of community and of working together.*

~ The Reverend Rosemary Bray McNatt

## Recent Major Developments

The site visit during the previous self-study process occurred in September 2019. As Starr King made plans for the next phase of the school's history, no one anticipated the dramatic interruption of normalcy that would occur just six months later. In late February 2020, school administrators began to closely monitor developments as the COVID-19 disease was beginning to take root in multiple countries around the world. Just as cases were starting to rise in California the following month, SKSM made the decision to shutter our campus for a three-week period, concluding with the spring break. All faculty and staff would work from home and in-person classes would be conducted remotely. Early in the second week of our self-declared closure, the nine counties of the San Francisco Bay area declared a joint "shelter in place" order, establishing the country's earliest pandemic lockdown. Fortunately for SKSM, our independent initiative and prior twenty-three years of experience with online education enabled a fairly smooth transition into fully online education, as opposed to the abrupt adjustment for most of our sister schools in the Graduate Theological Union (GTU).

The coronavirus pandemic erupted in the middle of a period of significant strategic planning for the school, named our "New Beginnings" process, and the initial efforts were shared during the previous self-study. The working groups appointed by the Board of Trustees had already been exploring possibilities for relocating the school, establishing new partnerships, and stabilizing our finances. During its November 2019 meeting, the Board approved a plan to sell our building in Berkeley, which the school had inhabited for 77 years. Starr King would lease space on the campus of the historic Mills College in Oakland. Expectations were high for a mutually supportive relationship between two institutions with shared social justice commitments. For Starr King, access to Mills dormitories to house visiting students during our January and August residential intensive courses was an attractive prospect. There was also potential to place SKSM's Wilbur Rare Book Collection within the archives in Mills library.

Our New Beginnings conversations resulted in another milestone in April 2020, when the Board voted to initiate our withdrawal from the GTU, to be completed two years hence. It was a difficult decision, as Starr King had been a member of the consortium since 1964. However, it had become clear that remaining in the GTU was not a fiscally sound decision, for three reasons. First, over the preceding years the GTU had reduced the number of shared services centralized under consortial management, requiring member schools to secure their own information technology and financial aid services, implement their own course registration software, and more. Second, the increasing cost of supporting a doctoral-level research library was untenable as our percentage of residential students continued to decline. Finally, our survey of enrollments for recent years indicated that less than one-fifth of our students embraced the opportunity to cross-

register for courses at other GTU schools. SKSM could continue to educate our students more cost-effectively by operating with complete independence.

Starr King vacated our historic property in June 2020, but all materials, equipment, and records went into storage as the Mills College campus remained closed. In October, the move into our leased space in Vera Long Hall began. When the pandemic appeared to be effectively subsiding the following spring, we made plans to relaunch hybrid classes – divided between on-campus and online participants – in Fall 2021. The rise of the Delta COVID-19 variant, however, left both faculty and students uneasy about returning to shared physical space, so these plans were canceled.

Mills College was embroiled in uncertainty as well, having been severely financially impacted by the pandemic. The school's leadership announced in March 2021 that Mills would cease to function as a stand-alone, degree-granting institution. In June, Mills announced that it would become a regional campus of Northeastern University. The following spring, Northeastern declared that tenants must vacate the Mills campus so as not to interfere with redevelopment plans. SKSM suddenly needed to move the school for the second time in as many years. We were able to secure a reasonable and attractive lease to an office suite in downtown Oakland, promptly packing again and relocating at the end of May 2022.

By this time, Starr King had functioned as a *de facto* online seminary for more than two years. Our new facility entailed another step away from the old “brick and mortar” model of theological education, as it is a smaller space with limited capacity for holding in-person or hybrid classes. The convulsions of the pandemic now lingered in excessive inflation, adding to the financial burdens impacting our students and exacerbating the already high costs of property and rentals in the Bay Area. It was increasingly apparent that we would not return to an academic program that readily resembled our methodology in early March 2020. The questions at the heart of our reflections have concerned the nature of a Starr King education in the post-pandemic world.

Knowing that our students, as well as our faculty, have missed the feeling of in-person community, and knowing also that face-to-face connections are deeply formative, we have begun to build a rhythm of hybrid opportunities, allowing members of our community to connect in shared space without penalizing those whose circumstances prevent them from doing so. Our first hybrid event was our Commencement ceremony in May 2022, in which our graduands, students, faculty, VIPS, and guests were split between those participating at the host site and those participating via Zoom. The following month, the annual UU Polity Immersion class, taught during the UUA General Assembly, was also conducted in a mixed format. These same programs repeated in hybrid form the following year and were joined by our first-ever hybrid orchestration of Symposium, which is Starr King's annual learning and community-building retreat. Our intent is to continue these offerings as the hybrid high points of the year and to explore other potential combinations of physical and digital gathering.



Graduates and faculty celebrating our first post-pandemic Commencement in 2022

The past five years have also witnessed several significant developments for our academic program. Shortly after the conclusion of the previous self-study, Starr King undertook a careful re-evaluation of our partnership with The Chaplaincy Institute (ChI) for the training of interfaith chaplains and spiritual directors. The cost of the joint program with ChI, as well as discrepancies between the ChI educational model and Starr King's ECO-CJSC philosophy, led to the decision in the summer of 2021 to end the partnership and launch our own Chaplaincy Concentration for degree students. The concentration has proved to be immensely popular with students: its courses are routinely among the highest enrolled. Building on this success, SKSM launched a standalone Certificate in Chaplaincy Studies in 2023.

Noting that our students seeking credentialing with the UUA required a more structured path that facilitated their progress toward fellowship with the denomination's Ministerial Fellowship Committee (MFC), as a prerequisite for ordination, SKSM also launched a Unitarian Universalist Concentration in 2023. The certificates program further expanded in the spring of 2024 with the launch of the Certificate in Psychedelic Justice and Companionship, which unites our ECO pedagogical model with training in the burgeoning field of religious approaches to substances variously labeled as psychedelics, entheogens, or plant-based medicines.

Another significant initiative was the launch of the [Center for Multi-Religious Studies](#) (CMRS) in January 2022. While Starr King has long been a premier center for pluralistic theological education that embraces those whose religious and/or spiritual identities collapse barriers and binaries, the institution of the CMRS provides a focal point for disseminating multi-religious scholarship and vocational formation within and without the school. The CMRS sponsors annual lectures, oversees the Certificate in Multi-Religious Studies, and publishes *The Tapestry*, an online journal of multi-religious research, reflection, and art.

In 2022, a learning management system (LMS) team evaluated options and guided the transition from Moodle to Populi as the LMS, alongside its existing function as the student information system. Commencing in spring semester 2022, LMS functions were transferred to Populi,



ushering in a transformative era of online education. This switch has not only boosted accessibility and engagement within SKSM's educational community but also streamlines academic and administrative functions on a unified platform. The integration of Populi has further fortified SKSM's institutional memory, providing a comprehensive recorded history of all facets related to the efficient functioning of the school. Such evolution reflects a commitment to embracing innovative technologies that elevate the overall educational experience for students and staff alike.

Administratively, Starr King has taken multiple steps to provide support services and spiritual care to students. In response to our students' need for spiritual care and counseling, as expressed in the [\*Student Body Mental Health Task Force Report & Recommendations 2017-2018\*](#), we hired an experienced Unitarian Universalist pastor, social worker, and SKSM graduate as the new Director of Spiritual Care in the summer of 2021. The Director's leadership has revitalized chapel services, following a hybrid model that accommodates both online and in-residence attendance to ensure accessibility for all. This approach to **monthly** chapel services has garnered positive feedback from attendees, underscoring its success in fostering a diverse and inclusive congregational experience. This adaptable framework not only embraces technological advancements but also prioritizes community engagement, reflecting our commitment to providing a meaningful and accessible spiritual journey for all participants.

As an institution of higher education in the United States, Starr King benefited from the financial support of the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) generated through the pandemic-era federal stimulus legislation. Over three years, HEERF allowed SKSM to upgrade our technology, provide faculty and staff with equipment for working from home, substitute for canceled courses, and more. Most importantly, the combination of HEERF monies and our own donor-supported SKSM Relief Fund resulted in the disbursement of more than \$200,000 in emergency grants to our students, providing urgent support for essential needs. At the peak, nearly 40% of enrolled students had received at least some level of grant funding. In case after case, the emergency grants enabled students to continue their education in the midst of acute life crises.

Although the acute pandemic is over, there are ongoing challenges facing students, faculty and staff nationwide. These range from health issues and anxiety to staff and faculty compensation and support. In addition, our community grieved the sudden death of a beloved student. Both challenge and opportunity face Starr King in the coming year as President Rosemary Bray McNatt concludes eleven years of service and the school prepares its search for new leadership.

## Recent Accreditation History and Implementations

In January 2020, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) Board of Commissioners granted Starr King an accreditation renewal of five years. The accreditation letter noted that the school would not receive the maximum ten-year term for two reasons: a) "the school's financial

fragility” and b) “inconclusive strategic planning.” In response to these issues, Starr King was required to undertake and subsequently demonstrate remediation steps to improve financial stability, as well as redesign our academic advising system to ensure operational sustainability.

### **Addressing Financial Shortfalls**

The concern about the school’s financial sustainability pre-existed the most recent affirmation of accreditation. In June 2017, the Board imposed an N8.b financial notation on Starr King, which declared that the institution lacked both adequate financial resources for long-term viability as well as a credible plan to correct this issue. The notation was extended by one year in June 2019 for good cause and then again in June 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Starr King was required to prepare a report that demonstrated the development of adequate financial resources as well as “ongoing planning and evaluation procedures for institutional vitality and educational effectiveness.”

In the accreditation renewal letter, ATS required an additional interim report, originally due April 1, 2020, and eventually postponed by one year, in which SKSM would outline a “system of timely budgetary reports of revenues and expenditures to those persons with oversight responsibilities.”

The ATS Board of Commissioners reviewed [Starr King’s consolidated statement](#) on financial progress and budgetary reporting as well as our FY2019 and draft FY2020 audits. Acknowledging the progress the school had made, the Board voted in June 2021 to remove the financial notation. Additionally, the Board required SKSM to submit a progress report on achieving financial equilibrium by November 1, 2022. The [interim report](#), delivered to ATS on time, articulated the major actions taken by the school, including reductions of expenditures and endowment draws, comprehensive reviews of financial and accounting data, the preparation of a capital campaign, and the development of new recruitment strategies. The report also provided our FY2021 and FY2022 audits.

### **Revising Our Academic Model**

The 2020 accreditation renewal letter also noted the heavy burden placed on SKSM faculty due to the intensive nature of our academic advising model. The ATS Board expressed concern about the wide range of duties placed on a faculty advisor, “including course selection, intensive vocational discernment, mental health support, and spiritual direction.” Starr King was required to revise our advising model into a more sustainable structure and submit a report by October 1, 2020.

The SKSM Curriculum Committee formed a working group in Fall 2019 with the task of surveying the faculty, researching advising at comparable schools, and preparing a draft outline for a new advising model. The new model was approved by the faculty in May 2020 and implemented in the fall. The new Director of Spiritual Care, an experienced and licensed clinical

social worker, began offering pastoral counseling and spiritual direction. Detailed guidance was written to help students identify the correct personnel to consult on various curricular or support-service matters. New frameworks were created for the degree portals of the initial threshold self-assessment, mid-degree portfolio conference, and the petition to graduate. Finally, limitations were set on the number and length of advising meetings expected per semester. The revised structure of academic advising was written into SKSM's faculty and student handbooks and communicated directly to students upon implementation.

The [interim report](#) on our revised advising model was submitted on time. In November 2020, the Board of Commissioners accepted the report and voted to require an additional report by April 1, 2022, which would examine the impact of the new model on the budget and educational program, as well as faculty scholarship and development. The [subsequent report](#), delivered to ATS on March 31, assessed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, detailed the responsibilities of the Director of Spiritual Care, and identified steps taken to support faculty research. The report was accepted by the Board of Commissioners in a letter dated June 1, 2022, and no further action was requested of SKSM.

### **Relocation Approvals**

As indicated by the above narrative on major institutional developments, Starr King twice petitioned ATS for relocation approval as we moved first to Mills College and then to our current office suite in downtown Oakland. We filed our first relocation petition in August 2020. A focused evaluation visit occurred on October 14, 2021, after a delay from spring 2021 due to the pandemic. The evaluation committee confirmed the availability and appropriateness of resources at the Mills location and recommended approval of the new location.

Just eight months later, Starr King filed a second relocation petition as we were vacating our leased space on the Mills Campus. A focused evaluation visit was conducted by SKSM's ATS liaison at the time, Dr. Elsie Miranda, on October 13, 2022. In [the report](#) Dr. Miranda submitted to ATS the next day, she recommended approval because the new facilities appropriately resource the school for administering its online degree programs.

### **Implementation of Recommendations from Previous Self-Study Process**

In our previous self-study report, we listed multiple recommendations for enhancing our compliance with the ATS accreditation standards at that time, in congruence with our mission and ECO values. Additionally, the ATS reaffirmation of accreditation highlighted four principal areas of growth: governing board infrastructure, appropriate care of the rare book collection, clear expectations and support for faculty research, and a schedule of comprehensive evaluation.

As the following pages demonstrate, we have made effective progress in the first three concerns. In addition, SKSM has successfully implemented many of our declared recommendations. These include the creation of a new employee handbook, the development of a digital filing system for

student records, new policies for online education and social media, and revisions to degree program requirements. On the other hand, certain recommendations became obsolete upon the sale of the campus, departure from the GTU, and functional conversion to online education due to the pandemic.

Our self-assessment is that Starr King has made great strides in the development of more sustainable, comprehensive, and appropriate structures and policies to carry out our mission in the post-pandemic world. These accomplishments occurred amid unexpected and dramatic challenges to stable institutional functioning, requiring extraordinary, responsive efforts on the part of staff. Nevertheless, a key recommendation highlighted in our previous report and in the reaffirmation letter by ATS remains underdeveloped. A central concern in the current self-study report is for SKSM to finally commit to regular and rigorous evaluation processes across the entire structure of the institution. Our self-reflection will indicate areas in which we have made improvements and our commitment to build upon this work in the days ahead.

## The Process of The Self-Study

The self-study process began with presentations to constituency groups during the fall of 2022. In accordance with the suggested framework in the ATS Self-Study Handbook, SKSM formed a steering committee and three subcommittees. The Dean of Faculty/Chief Academic Officer, and the Associate Dean, Drs. Gabriella Lettini and Meg Richardson, served as the co-chairs of the process. Three subcommittees were formed, members were recruited toward the end of Fall 2022, and work began in earnest the following spring, dividing assignments of research question generation, data collection, assessment, and text drafting as determined by the subcommittee chairs. The chairs met periodically throughout the period of subcommittee work and then biweekly in spring 2024 as they collated and edited materials into an initial draft report, circulated the draft among constituencies for input, and prepared the final version.

### Steering Committee

Rev. Dr. Gabriella Lettini  
Rev. Dr. Meg Richardson  
Rev. Dr. Chris Schelin  
Rev. Dr. Sheri Prud'homme (spring 2023)  
Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt (*ex officio*)

### Subcommittee 1 (Standards 1, 2, 9, 10)

Rev. Dr. Christopher Schelin, Dean of Students and Faculty, Subcommittee Chair  
Dr. Ted Fetter, Trustee (Board Chair 2022-2023)  
Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt, President  
Charles Clark, Vice President of Advancement (2022-2023)  
Erica Toyama, Director of Annual Giving (2023-2024)

Fred Williamson, Facilities Director  
Teresa Joye, Director of Operations  
J. Tyson Casey, Faculty  
Robin Thompson, Student, Student Body President (2022-2023)  
Dr. Ron Ahnen, Student  
Michael Macias, Student (2022-2023) and Graduate (2023-024)  
Rev. Sangye Hawke, Graduate (class of 2020)  
Rev. Rivka Gevurtz, Graduate (class of 2019)

*Consultants*

Michael Badalov  
Jessica Cloud, Vice President of Advancement (2023-2024)  
Katie Garcia, Graduate (class of 2014)  
Theresa Howard  
Rev. Alison Miller, Board Chair (2023-2024)

Subcommittee 2 (Standards 3, 4, 5)

Rev. Dr. Gabriella Lettini, Chair (on sabbatical SP23), Faculty (FT), Dean of Faculty and Chief Academic Officer  
Dr. Ashley Bacchi, Faculty (PT), (Sp24)  
Tyson Casey (Sp. 24)  
Rev. Dr. Sheri Prudhomme, Chair in Sp. 23 (on sabbatical Sp. 24), Faculty (FT)  
Dr. Som Pourfarzaneh, Faculty, (FT) Director of the Center for Multi-Religious Studies  
Dr. Pamela Hancock, Faculty, (FT) Director of the Chaplaincy Concentration  
Rev. Dr. Tera Landers, Faculty, (PT)  
Dana Moore, student  
Dr. Liesl Dees, student  
Rev. Dr. Traci West, board, academic, Academic Affairs Committee Chair  
Rev. Howard Dana, Graduate (class of 1999) *Consultants*  
Kim Moebius, Coordinator of Academic Programs  
Juliet Chan, Registrar  
Matthew Waterman, Director of Admission

Subcommittee 3 (Standards 6, 7, 8)

Rev. Dr. Meg Richardson Chair, Faculty (FT), Associate Dean  
Rev. Dr. Hugo Córdova Quero, Faculty, Director of Digital Learning  
Matthew Waterman, Staff, Admissions Officer  
Rev. Jacqueline Duhart, Staff, Director of Spiritual Care  
Owais Qureshi, Staff, Student Accounts Manager  
Rev. Kiya Heartwood, Graduate (class of 2020)  
Rev. Zebulon Green, Graduate (class of 2018) and President of the Graduates Association,

Trustee

Rev. Nancy Reid-McKee, Graduate (class of 2018) and former President of the Graduates Association, Trustee

Lauren Martinez, Student Trustee (2022-2023)

Anya Wayne, Student

Emily Richards, Student

*Consultants*

Kim Moebius, Coordinator of Academic Programs

Juliet Chan, Registrar

## Abbreviations

ARC	Admissions-Recruitment-Advancement Team
BART	Bay Area Rapid Transit
BPPE	California Bureau for Private Postsecondary Education
CAO	Chief Academic Officer
CCGP	Communal Classroom Guiding Principles
ChI	Chaplaincy Institute
CMRS	Center for Multi-Religious Studies
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
DRO	Disabilities Resource Officer
DTL 2	Digital Theological Library 2
DVCG	Dakin Ventures Consulting Group
ECO(-CJSC)	Educating to Counter Oppressions and Create Just and Sustainable Communities
ESG	Environmental, Social and Governance
FAFSA	Free Application for Federal Student Aid
FERPA	Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974
FTE	Full Time Equivalency
FY	Fiscal Year
GIF	Graphics Interchange Format
GTU	Graduate Theological Union
HEERF	Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund
HMTF	Hilda Mason Teaching Fellowship
ITA	Initial Threshold Assessment
LMS	Learning Management System
MASC	Master of Arts in Social Change
M.Div.	Master of Divinity
MFC	Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the Unitarian Universalist Association
MFN	Unitarian Universalist Ministerial Formation Network
NASPA	Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
SEO	Search Engine Optimization
SKIL	Starr King Independent Learning Course
SKSM	Starr King School for the Ministry
TSA	Threshold Self-Assessment
UU	Unitarian Universalist
UUA	Unitarian Universalist Association
UUMA	Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association
WEAV	Who and what are UUs? Embodied justice, Advocacy and Vision

# School Synopsis

## Academic Program and Enrollment

Starr King School for the Ministry offers the following academic degrees:

- Master of Divinity (M.Div.)
- Master of Arts in Social Change (MASC)
- M.Div./MASC (dual degree)

Degree	# Credits	Headcount*	FTE*
M.Div.	90	60	47.8
MASC	48	4	1.7
M.Div./MASC	114	6	4.8

\*Enrollment figures are for Spring 2024.

Since the declaration of the national COVID-19 emergency in March 2020, all courses have been offered online (with a few exceptions), in either asynchronous or synchronous delivery methods. The exceptions have been Unitarian Universalist Polity and Starr King Symposium, offered in hybrid format since 2022 and 2023, respectively. No instruction is held at or led from our offices at 414 13<sup>th</sup> Street in Oakland, although we do host online chapel services from there.

## Personnel

Starr King has a total of twenty-six faculty (core, advising, adjunct, and Hilda Mason Fellows) and sixteen staff, counted inclusively. Five of these persons have joint positions that entail teaching and/or academic advising alongside administrative responsibilities.

Faculty		Staff		Dual Role	
Full-Time	Part-Time	Full-Time	Part-Time	Full-Time	Part-Time
8	18	14	2	4	1

(Figures as of July 2024.)

Our Board of Trustees currently has thirteen members. Ten are elected, including two student representatives. Three serve *ex officio*: the SKSM President, Dean of Faculty/Chief Academic Officer, and the President of the Graduates Association.

## Affiliation

Starr King is an independent institution, but is affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Association, from which we receive funding in the form of scholarships as well as annual financial support. Our mission statement emphasizes our role in preparing Unitarian Universalist



ministers, and our Bylaws state that the majority of our trustees must consist of members of Unitarian Universalist congregations.

## Compliance

Starr King is approved to operate by the California Bureau of Private Postsecondary Education. The school is solely accredited by the Association of Theological Schools and provides notice of accreditation on [our website](#). SKSM is a US Title IV participant and ATS serves as gatekeeper agency.

The previous link also includes Starr King's required public notice about the upcoming ATS site visit and offers contact information for the public to submit comments. Invitations to comment will be disseminated through our communication channels before forty-five days prior to the site visit.

Starr King is actively pursuing authorizations for online education or religious exemptions from various states, and is approved to provide instruction for students who are resident in –

- Alabama
- Arizona
- California
- Colorado
- Florida
- Hawaii
- Idaho
- Illinois
- Kansas
- Maine
- Massachusetts
- Missouri
- Nebraska
- Nevada
- New Hampshire
- New Jersey
- North Dakota
- Ohio
- Oklahoma
- Oregon
- South Carolina
- Texas
- Vermont

# Standard 1. Mission and Integrity

## 1.1 – 1.3: Mission

The mission statement of Starr King School for the Ministry was formally adopted by the Board of Trustees in April 2009. It reads as follows:

*The purpose of Starr King School for the Ministry is to educate people for Unitarian Universalist ministry and for progressive religious leadership in society. Starr King School's distinctive educational approach is rooted in the Unitarian Universalist values of countering oppressions, cultivating multi-religious life and learning, and creating just and sustainable communities.*

*Starr King School aims to educate the whole person in the service of love, compassion, and justice, through:*

- *Teaching by who we are and what we do*
- *Student-centered participatory learning*
- *Excellence and depth in religious studies*
- *Formation in the arts of religious leadership*
- *Service with congregations and communities*
- *Deepening self-awareness and cultivating spiritual practice*
- *Striving to live in right relationship with self, others, and the earth*

Starr King School for the Ministry is one of two denominationally affiliated seminaries for the education of Unitarian Universalist (UU) ministers, chaplains, and other leaders of sacred social change. The majority of our student body is UU and the remainder are religiously progressive individuals who may or may not adhere to traditional doctrinal or cultural frameworks.

We are a multi-religious oriented institution with some members of various established religions, some who identify themselves as interfaith or multi-religious, and others who call themselves “spiritual but not religious.” All are called to become religious and spiritual leaders, and all are held together by a commitment to shared liberatory values.

Central to our pedagogical philosophy is our commitment to “Educating to Counter Oppressions and Create Just and Sustainable Communities” (ECO). As we state on the home page of our website, we “strive to embody what we hope to see in the world: a just, loving humanity and beloved community in which people are free to be themselves fully and without fear.” Our ECO principles will surface as a recurring theme throughout our self-study report, beginning with this next section on our planning and evaluation.

## Acceptance, Utilization, and Review of the Mission Statement

The mission statement remains generally and widely accepted by our constituencies. A recurrent concern has been whether it adequately emphasizes, and thereby serves as a catalyst, for Starr King's commitment to serve as a center for multi-religious scholarship and vocational formation. The current statement refers to "cultivating multi-religious life and learning" but the headline statement details "Unitarian Universalist ministry" and "progressive religious leadership in society." Demographically, SKSM has become more multi-religious as the percentage of students identifying as Unitarian Universalist frequently dips below the previous average of approximately two-thirds. Questions about the mission statement reflect the deeper tension of maintaining roots and connections with Unitarian Universalism while broadening the school's outreach.

The principles of the mission statement are reflected in the school's new academic initiatives, including the launch of the Center for Multi-Religious Studies, the development of new programs focused on chaplaincy, Unitarian Universalist and psychedelic ministry, and the creation of classroom guidelines that set learning in a framework of equity, mutual care, and thoughtful engagement. Institutionally, the mission statement lies behind efforts to sustain spiritual and community connections through the pandemic and into the COVID-normalized world, including the hiring of a Director of Spiritual Care and our experiments in hybrid events

The acceptance of the mission statement is most fully realized in our ever-present attentiveness to ECO as the hallmark of everything we do at Starr King. Students, faculty and staff, trustees and donors all are focused on countering oppression and its importance both in training our students and in presenting ourselves to the outside world. ECO training is a regular component of trustee meetings, and the ECO course is a requirement for the degree program and certain certificates. Both course instruction and student participation are evaluated in part by their expression of ECO values and practices. Our intent to serve congregations and communities has found new expression in the creation of the WEAV ("Who and what are UUs? Embodied justice, Advocacy and Vision") curriculum for ECO study in Unitarian Universalist churches. Finally, our Roadmap strategic plan, detailed below, centers on the goal of making SKSM "the hub for counter-oppressive theological education."

A habitual tendency at Starr King is to reduce the import of our ECO statement by half, focusing on the deconstructive effort of naming and resisting oppressive structures, and less so on the reconstructive work of *creating just and sustainable communities*. Whenever the school evaluates the extent to which it lives into the mission statement, our reflections should consider the ways in which our processes, policies, and academic programs foster these complementary aspects of sacred social change, beginning with Starr King's intrinsic embodiment of equitable community.

The mission statement serves as the implicit or explicit basis of the school's planning, resourcing, and operations. Our Board of Trustees, administration, and faculty regularly refer to the aims expressed in the mission statement as they make decisions. Nevertheless, it is true that the scope and wording of the mission statement has not been formally reviewed for some time. It is therefore recommended that the Board of Trustees institute a rhythm of reviewing the mission

statement at the inception of every strategic planning process.

Finally, given our multi-religious culture and constituency, some concern was expressed during the self-study process around the continued use of the label “mission statement,” which may infer Christian, colonialist, and corporatist-based assumptions in both history and application. Some prefer “purpose statement” instead, as it can allow space for multi-religious expressions of what SKSM does and how it does so in a more decolonial and interdependent way. Reassessing this nomenclature, as part of a larger project on refining and defining SKSM’s unique lexicon, is recommended.

## 1.4 – 1.7: Integrity

### 1.4 Integrity with Constituents

SKSM is committed to integrity and right relationship with all internal and external constituents, embodying the values we profess in our mission statement and ECO vision.

Our integrity is outlined by the implementation of policies that establish clear and fair structures for SKSM’s operations. In the past several years, the school has taken steps to improve our processes by increasingly shifting from informal, often *ad hoc* practices to clearly written and enforced policies. Steps in this direction have included revisions to our tuition refund policy, satisfactory academic progress policy, and disputes policy, as well as new policies pertaining to our digital operations (privacy in online education and social media use).

Accountability for living our values occurs through a variety of tools, from direct address during personal disputes to formal instruments of reporting and discussion. Starr King has strongly emphasized the contribution of students on academic committees and the Board of Trustees to ensure full representation of our primary constituents with their needs and concerns. Our cross-constituent advisory group known as Team ECO, consisting of staff, faculty, and student members, regularly evaluates Starr King’s embodiment of its counter-oppressive commitments and makes recommendations for improvement.

A healthy institutional environment depends upon clear and regular communication between the various sectors of the school community so that all persons are adequately informed about new developments, given space to offer questions or insights, and contribute to constructive efforts. The necessity of routine space-making has been heightened by our transition to an almost entirely online mode of operating, resulting in students and personnel feeling more disconnected from one another and the larger community. Monthly staff meetings enable personnel to share their updates and highlight notable issues. The Student Body President typically checks in with faculty during their monthly meeting, and staff have been invited to Student Body meetings as needed to address questions regarding key topics.

In 2022, Starr King reinstated the “All School Meeting,” a time for sharing important announcements and reminders, during the fall and spring terms. All School Meeting currently

occurs every other month during the fall and spring semesters. Student attendance has often been quite low, however. Steps to encourage greater participation across constituent groups may include ensuring a consistent recurring schedule, as well as preparing and sending out an agenda in advance.

Starr King has acted with integrity toward alumni, donors, and external partners through clear and transparent communication about major developments, including our New Beginnings process of institutional transformation and our responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Meetings of the Board of Trustees are not only open to students, employees, and the general public (outside of executive sessions), but the trustees actively invite comments by such attendees during discussions. The school maintains close contact with graduates through the Starr King Graduates Association, which holds a regular meeting during the UUA General Assembly and whose President serves as an *ex officio* member of the Board.

The integrity of our ECO commitment includes recognition of and responsiveness to the global context of human civilization and the persistent challenges of prejudice, inequality, and ecological disaster. An aspect of our ECO statement is the overcoming of white supremacy culture, which has privileged a subset of perspectives and marginalized most cultures and societies as inferior or of secondary significance. Global awareness begins in the design of our courses as faculty elevate historically minoritized communities, practitioners, and scholars in course readings and other materials. Beyond the traditional classroom, SKSM has fostered engagement in global issues through immersion experiences in Turkey, historic Unitarian areas of Transylvania, Rome (experienced from the perspective of minoritized spiritual traditions), and the US-Mexico border. The Balázs Scholar Program brought an international Unitarian to SKSM for a year of study. The COVID-19 pandemic halted all of this programming.

In the near future, Starr King intends to rebuild connections and create new opportunities for our students to encounter and learn from diverse, international communities. In fall 2023, the President attended the 36<sup>th</sup> Congress of the International Association for Religious Freedom in Romania, re-establishing our relationship with the historic Unitarian Church of Transylvania and meeting with other past and potential future partners.

President Rosemary Bray McNatt reconnects with former Balázs Scholar Lehel Molnar at the International Association for Religious Freedom conference.



The Balázs Committee is sponsoring a Transylvania Immersion for a SKSM student or graduate in Fall 2024, and a historic donor will subsidize a selected student's participation in a conference of the International Association for Religious Freedom in Germany in Fall 2025. Potential

opportunities to develop for our students may include new immersion trips, study abroad in Transylvania and the UK, and restarting the program for our students to study at the Tsubaki Grand Shrine, a major Shinto religious center in Japan.

Persistent strains and concerns about the integrity of our operations remain due to limitations of resources, staffing, and physical interaction. A recurring concern expressed by a portion of the student body is a seeming “siloing” of the school’s constituency groups from one another. The integrity of the school in manifesting its ECO commitment is curtailed by our inability so far to increase faculty and staff compensation to a level that is not only competitive with other schools but adequate to the cost of living for those who live in the Bay Area. Efforts should continue to be made toward building trust, fostering appropriate and regular practices of community support, and expanding financial resources to address consistently underpaid labor.

### **1.5 Integrity and Diversity**

Starr King defines the school’s understanding of and support for diversity in our ECO philosophy statement. SKSM’s approach to diversity is grounded in principles of justice as we prepare leaders for the work of building beloved community. Affirmation of diversity takes the form of the following: first, that people are “free to be fully themselves” and none are rejected because of identity markers such as gender, race, sexuality, or class. Second, we support the religious and social change leadership of women, persons of color, and LGBTQ+ individuals. Third, we counter white supremacy by disrupting cultural patterns and institutional frameworks that have privileged “whiteness.” Finally, we seek the common good through exploring multiple theoretical frameworks, learning histories of oppression and resistance, and collaborating with communities and congregations to engage and effect social transformation through the application of these frameworks.

The people who constitute our community are diverse in terms of race, gender, and religious identity. Over the past several years, our student body has averaged just over three-quarters white, matching the most recent demographic data for the Unitarian Universalist Association. Our second-largest racial group has been African-Americans, generally falling in the range of 8-12% of the student body, followed by Hispanic/Latinx students at around 5%. Female-identified students remain a consistent majority of approximately two-thirds the student body. Starr King is fully welcoming of persons who identify as queer, transgender, or nonbinary, and their share of the student population has been on the rise in recent years. For 2022-2023, such students averaged 12-15% of the population, and then 19% in 2023-2024. In terms of religious affiliations and spiritualities, Unitarian Universalists account for between one half and two-thirds of our students. Our other students identify as interfaith, multi-religious, unaffiliated, or as adherents of other religious traditions such as Buddhism, Judaism, or progressive Christianity.

Of our twenty-six staff and faculty, fourteen are women and nine are persons of color. Our personnel also represent the diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations as well as religious diversity: Unitarian Universalist, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish, Pagan, and more.

President Rosemary Bray McNatt is SKSM's second woman president and our first Black president. Five out of seven core faculty are women.

Starr King demonstrates our commitment to ECO-defined diversity in a variety of ways, beginning with our faculty's focus on centering historically underprivileged identities in the selection of course texts. Our main community events each year - New Student Orientation, Chapel services, Symposium, and Commencement - are intentionally planned to exhibit multi-religious texts, traditions, and practices. Financially, SKSM has sought to address historical disparities through specific scholarships and targeted fundraising in support of BIPOC students, such as the Lewis Scholarship and the Students of the Global Majority Fund.

Starr King has taken steps in recent years to increase accessibility and improve the accommodations process for students with a range of capacities and abilities. In 2021-2022, our rebranding initiative led to the discovery that our previous school colors were not accessible for the visually impaired. Our new branding colors and fonts were selected to correct this deficit.

The following year, the Dean of Students revised our disability accommodations application form and process in response to student feedback and a review of current professional guidance.

#### **1.6 – 1.7: Integrity of Compliance**

Starr King School for the Ministry is compliant with all federal, state, and local regulations, with a continuing exception in which we have made substantial progress, to be detailed below. Since the last report, SKSM has revised the following policies to match federal requirements: our Sexual Misconduct Policy, our Leave of Absence Policy, and our Drug-Free Campus and Workplace Policy. Additionally, Starr King has implemented changes to comply with new cybersecurity stipulations (see [10.9](#)).

In 2023, the California Bureau for Private Postsecondary Education (BPPE) notified Starr King that our standing authorization agreement was not considered valid, and that we needed to apply for a standard approval to operate. SKSM swiftly filed for and received approval and is in the process of conforming our practices to the regulatory requirements stated by BPPE.

The most significant regulatory challenge has been securing approval to conduct online education in individual states, as required by the Department of Education. The patchwork of requirements demands exorbitant staff time and the license fees imposed by some states can be collectively prohibitive. Other states grant a religious exemption or do not require approval for distance learning. Starr King is now approved to operate in multiple states where we have students resident. We have also filed with some states for a religious exemption, which we have received or which is pending. Applications for approval are pending for other states where we regularly enroll residents for distance education. By the time of the ATS site visit, we expect to have approvals from states where we have applied and will have applied to several other states where we expect to enroll students in the future. The current number of states where SKSM is compliant with distance education requirements is twenty-two. Starr King has been accredited by

the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) since 1978. Our two most recent self-studies and site visits resulted in a ten-year accreditation renewal in 2010 and a five-year accreditation renewal in 2020. SKSM maintains practices and policies in accordance with ATS standards and is diligent in providing reports, consulting with ATS representatives, attending ATS conferences, and referencing ATS standards in conversations with constituents about structures and practices for fulfilling the school's mission. As detailed in the [introduction](#), SKSM fulfilled its obligations to ATS in presenting reports on improved budgetary reporting and financial equilibrium as well as a substantial revision to our advising model.

## Conclusion

Starr King benefits from the strong commitment of our constituents to our distinctive mission and identity, which undergird our policies, operations, and academic program. Our diversity is grounded in our quest for a just society where all people have a place. As we seek to live out our values, areas of growth will include rebuilding international connections, improving internal communication flows, strengthening our regulatory compliance, and regularly assessing our mission statement as a living expression of our learning community.

## Recommendations:

- For the SKSM Board of Trustees: implement a plan for the regular review of our mission statement (at the inception of every strategic planning process).
- For the Board and administration: reassess the terminology of “mission statement” itself to consider whether it best represents Starr King’s theological and ECO orientations.



## Standard 2. Planning and Evaluation

### 2.1 – 2.4: Strategic Planning

Starr King School for the Ministry engages in consistent and robust cycles of strategic planning that are mission-guided and developed from focused conversations among constituent groups. During the previous self-study period, the school was in the midst of implementing one strategic plan that centered on ensuring our financial sustainability. We subsequently launched another strategic planning process with the aim not simply of survival, but of expanding SKSM's role in progressive religious and social-change conversations.

#### **New Beginnings**

In our 2019 self-study report, Starr King shared that we had launched the New Beginnings strategic plan with the goal of implementing a “significant transformation” in our operations, prioritizing the school's long-term financial viability. In Spring 2019, the Board of Trustees and administration publicly announced that they were exploring several steps to achieve fiscal sustainability. Three appointed working groups explored various options for the school's future: a Building-Related Options group to identify scenarios for the use, lease, or sale of the SKSM building, a Partnerships/Mergers group to identify potential relationships with other institutions, and an Educational Model group to develop ideas for a more cost-effective academic program. As discussed in the introduction, the two significant outcomes of this process were the decisions to sell the Berkeley property and to initiate our withdrawal from the Graduate Theological Union.

#### **Student-Led Visioning**

The Student Body leaders for the 2019-2020 academic year sought to “take the pulse” of their membership in a structured and deeply dialogical process. The students contracted an external facilitator to lead a pair of visioning sessions in January 2020, which were structured according to the World Cafe format. This process resulted in a [written report](#) submitted to the students and school leadership in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. The report grouped major student hopes and concerns in four categories: collaborative culture creation at Starr King, the development of deep skills in social change, intentional community engagement, and expanded commitments to the school's ECO philosophy and multi-religious identity.

Owing in part to the school's immediate priorities in addressing our relocation, GTU withdrawal, and the COVID-19 pandemic, this visioning report was not directly implicated in administrative or student-led initiatives following its release. Indirectly, aspects of the report's key insights have received attention in our efforts to build a supportive community in a new pedagogical

paradigm, the implementation of new courses, concentrations, and certificates, and the creation of the CMRS. Nevertheless, it is imperative that the school honor the significant investment of time, effort, and funds that the student body leaders made to produce this report. As our planning and evaluation efforts chart a course for SKSM after the acute pandemic, the students' visioning report should be explicitly incorporated into our ongoing discussions.

## Five-Year Roadmap

Having instituted the key decisions that enabled Starr King to reduce its financial burden and weather the pandemic emergency, we recognized that the time was ripe for launching a new strategic planning process that addressed the reality of an emerging, COVID-normalized world. Consequently, in 2021 SKSM began the visioning process to create a five-year strategic Roadmap. The process began with a goal articulated by the President and affirmed by the Board of Trustees for SKSM to become the hub for counter-oppressive theological education in five years. An outside consultant facilitated a series of constituency-based visioning sessions with faculty, staff, students, and trustees between July and October of 2021. The consultant's report, submitted to the Board of Trustees in November of that year, outlined the results of those visioning sessions across the four tracks of activity that emerged: programs and offerings, outward engagement, internal structure and support, and culture and community. These four tracks of activity sought to capture the focal point/intention of the ideas that were shared to codify the scope of our collective vision in a way that could be easily understood.

In the months that followed, the ideas generated from the visioning sessions were analyzed and refined by several staff, faculty, and trustees to become a set of pathways for guiding SKSM initiatives over the course of the next five years. The Roadmap framework included framing ideas for the next five years, guiding questions to enable discernment and prioritization of initiatives, and ways that each framing idea could be executed along the four tracks of activity named above. A written framework for the Five-Year Roadmap was submitted by the consultant to the Board in April 2022 and the [final framework](#) was approved in September 2022.

The following spring, a cross-constituent Roadmap Working Group, with a membership of faculty, staff, students, and trustees, was formed. The Working Group's purpose is to track progress toward the stated goals of the Roadmap, develop specific benchmarks for each upcoming year, and propose revisions to the goals as necessary. Roadmap updates are reported to and evaluated by the Board of Trustees during the main meetings in the spring and fall.

In the spring of 2024, the Working Group identified the need to re-engage various stakeholders in a more comprehensive assessment of progress toward meeting benchmarks. A benchmark reporting form was created in Microsoft SharePoint and staff and faculty responsible for various benchmarks were asked to provide direct input on benchmark progress, challenges and opportunities, and key evaluative questions. This cross-constituency input generated a [robust report](#) to the Board of Trustees in May. As of the submission of this self-study report, a survey inviting student assessments of the strategic plan is being planned.

## Assessment

Starr King has demonstrated a commitment to mission-focused strategic planning that identifies key goals for sustaining our guiding purpose as a Unitarian Universalist and multi-religious center for counter-oppressive theological education. Complex visioning, evaluative, and implementation processes have involved students, faculty, staff, and trustees in collaborative conversations and decision-making about the most appropriate steps that would allow the school to remain not just viable but to thrive as a leading center for training in progressive religious and social change leadership.

As the next section will indicate, there is often a disconnect between our strategic planning and regular evaluation processes. A target area for improvement will be the integration of strategic plans and institutional, operational, and personnel evaluations in a consistent, comprehensive pattern of ongoing and interactive self-reflection.

## 2.5 – 2.8: Evaluation

Starr King is a highly mission-driven organization, such that self-assessment conversations throughout the school are regularly grounded in our commitment to progressive religious leadership and counter-oppressive social change. Evaluation as a process occurs in a variety of ways, being reliably consistent in some contexts and deficiently systematic or inconsistent in others. In many instances, the school leans into our small size and flexibility to practice informal assessment and outcome implementation. We recognize this as an area that can benefit from more formal processes and an institution-wide alignment so that all aspects of the school can sufficiently meet both ATS standards as well as the recommendations stated in our previous and current self-study reports, while continuing to allow space for dynamic and emergent evaluative discussions that are already standard throughout the school's culture.

## Students

Our students comprise the constituent group that engages in the most consistent and robust evaluative processes within SKSM. In alignment with our mission, students encounter regular processes and opportunities for evaluation, both of themselves and of the courses they complete. The guiding framework for student evaluation is SKSM's Eight Thresholds, which informs many of the standard evaluative processes that students experience and engage.

Each student collaborates with their academic advisor to navigate a path that leads through three phases of educational development that we call "Portals." These three portals include formal and informal aspects, though they are benchmarked by three primary standard evaluative processes: the Initial Threshold Assessment, the Mid-degree Portfolio Conference, and the Petition to Graduate.

Within the first year of enrollment, and strongly encouraged in the first semester, students are

required to complete an Initial Threshold Assessment (ITA) and review it directly with their academic advisor. This discernment process provides a baseline for the academic advising relationship, informs the student's learning path while at SKSM, and demarcates their progress in the first Portal. The iterative Threshold Assessment serves as the primary throughline for the student's evaluation in relation to the Eight Thresholds by providing a consistent process for reflecting and demonstrating in writing how they engage these core competencies.

The second Portal is benchmarked by a Mid-degree Portfolio Conference. Portfolio committee members review the student's Portfolio Packet in advance of a synchronous meeting in which each of the attendees discuss the demonstrated strengths and offer suggestions for focused attention on the student's formation, discernment, and vocational goals within the remaining portion of the student's degree pursuit. Portfolio Packets provide consistent and substantive artifacts for evaluation of students, including Narrative Student Evaluations, academic papers and/or projects, transcripts, and an updated Threshold Assessment.

The final phase of educational development is benchmarked by the Petition to Graduate packet, which includes the third and final iteration of the Threshold Assessment and is submitted early in the student's final semester. The Petition to Graduate packet is reviewed by the advisor and sent to the Registrar, who also conducts a degree audit of the petitioning student. If the degree audit is approved, then the Petition to Graduate is sent to the faculty for review, discussion, and approval. After faculty deliberation and decisions, the Petitions are sent to the Board for final review and approval.

Throughout the program, each student receives a written Narrative Student Evaluation from the instructor at the conclusion of a course or completes a Narrative Student Self Evaluation in certain instances, such as independent studies and Advanced Topic courses.

Further information on portal benchmarks and narrative evaluations is provided in [3.5](#).

Students can also directly engage in individual course evaluation through transparent and consistent processes. The midterm and final course evaluations are offered to each student in each class as an optional opportunity to review the course content and delivery/instruction (see [2.8](#)). In addition to these formal evaluation processes, students are also encouraged to engage in emergent, timely feedback processes directly with their peers and instructors, as part of the school's wider mission. Advisors also provide ongoing assessments related to academic progress in each advising meeting with students.

## **Faculty**

Starr King does not have a tenure system and most of our instructors work on an annual or bi-annual contract basis. The Dean of Faculty meets with faculty, after the spring term concludes and prior to the renewal of contracts for the next academic and fiscal year, for an annual performance review. Faculty prepare and submit a self-assessment document in advance. During these meetings, the Dean engages faculty in a collegial and cooperative assessment of

effectiveness, identifying areas of strength or improvement in course management, advising, committee work, research and scholarship and overall contribution to the life of the school.

Assessment of faculty also occurs throughout the academic year as students evaluate the management and delivery of a class via course evaluations at the mid-term and conclusion of each full-semester course (Fall and Spring semesters) or at the conclusion of our one- or two-week intensive courses (Intersession and Summer intensive terms). The course evaluation forms, completed in an online survey format, ask students to rate the course in three areas: overall assessment, pedagogical aspects, and logistical aspects. The forms ask for narrative responses explicitly based on the language of our ECO statement (our Four-C's). Evaluations are submitted to the Dean of Faculty and the curriculum committee for review and discussion. Instructors receive copies of the course evaluations after the submission of final grades.

## **Staff**

Individual staff performance evaluations are conducted by the president. The development of a regular and formal process of evaluation has remained a persistent challenge for Starr King. When practiced, the pattern has been for evaluations to occur around the end of the academic and fiscal year. In 2022, the process was enhanced by the addition of a [written self-evaluation form](#), modeled after the faculty evaluation form, that a staff member was required to complete in advance of a meeting with the president. Formal staff evaluations did not occur in 2023 but have been resumed this year. While the president bears the necessary authority for evaluating staff performance, the responsibility for organizing the process should be delegated to another party.

## **Administrative Teams**

Staff members collaborate in area teams to assess policies and procedures and improve operations in service to the school's mission. Informal but continuous evaluation is a regular feature of each team's functioning as members bring questions, share insights, identify goals, and refine practices. The administrative teams have not established habits of formal evaluation that result in written plans. As will be noted below, this is an aspect where SKSM recognizes the need for improvement.

**The Executive Team** is the highest administrative organ at SKSM, consisting of the President, Vice President of Advancement, the Dean of Faculty and Chief Academic Officer (CAO), and the Dean of Students, and includes the Directors of Communications and Admissions by invitation. The Executive Team meets bi-weekly to share focus updates, foster collegial discussion on priority tasks, and review and approve new institutional policies and procedures.

**The Admissions-Recruitment-Communications (ARC) Team** evaluates the school's cultivation of relationships with prospective students and donors in its target constituencies. Its purpose is defined as improving the funnel that leads individuals from an initial contact with the school to making financial contributions, enrolling in a certificate or degree program, and becoming

volunteers and advocates for the school. ARC is composed of the President, the Vice President of Advancement, the Director of Admissions, the Director of Communications, and the Director of Annual Giving.

**The Education and Student Services Team** integrates academic program and student services management. The “Ed Team” was originally convened by the Dean of Faculty solely for assessment of departmental functions and included the Coordinator of Academic Programs, the Director of Contextual Education/Dean of Students, the Director of Online Education (now Director of Digital Learning), the Associate Dean of Faculty, and the Registrar. In 2021, the previous Registrar formed the Student Services Administrative Team to coordinate the work of the Registrar, Director of Admissions, Student Accounts Manager, and Dean of Students. Last year, this group merged with the Education Team to achieve a more holistic administration of student-facing responsibilities. The current team oversees the annual revision of the Academic Catalog and biannual revision of the Student Handbook and develops and assesses iterative improvements in Student Services and academic program support structures.

### **Community Life and Integrity**

The school engages in various formal and informal assessment of our engagement in right relationships and mutual support within the context of our ECO commitment and progressive educational purposes. Evaluation of our practices has taken the form of temporary task forces and working groups as well as regular conversations to identify areas of concern. Examples of these efforts include the following:

**Team ECO**, previously discussed in [1.4](#), assesses the consistency of school policies and procedures with our stated counter-oppressive values and makes recommendations for improvements. These recommendations are compiled in written documents that are submitted to responsible parties. Results of Team ECO’s work include the creation of Starr King’s [Bias Incident Reporting Policy](#), improvements to our financial aid notification process, and contributions to ongoing efforts to improve communication flows.

**Student Issues** are addressed through a set of regular practices. The Student Body President is invited to each faculty meeting and brings reports about student activities, interests, and concerns. During the same meeting, the Dean of Students leads a conversation among faculty to troubleshoot interventions with individual students with academic concerns as well as identify areas requiring structural redevelopment.

As per the revised advising model, faculty advisors contact the Director of Spiritual Care and/or the Dean of Students for advisee concerns extrinsic to academic performance, such as personal crises, spiritual emergencies, accommodation requests, and discernment of leaves of absence or withdrawal. These staff members periodically confer throughout the academic year to discuss individual cases and to assess the overall emotional and spiritual health of the student body. The Dean of Students may then bring findings from these conversations into meetings of the faculty, Executive Team, or Team ECO to discuss institutional responses.

## *Ad hoc* Evaluations and Opportunities for Greater Structural Consistency

Evaluation in relation to administration, governance, and overall institutional functioning have historically occurred on an *ad hoc* or emergent basis. Following the 2019 ATS Self-Study, the Board committed to engaging in bi-annual evaluations of the Board and President of the school, alternating years in which they would occur. Outside more systematic evaluation, the Board has for many years engaged in the practice of “process observations” at the end of each meeting or each day of a meeting. The purpose of process observations is to provide immediate assessments of the Board’s effectiveness and adherence to the school’s ECO commitments. The Board rotates the process observation responsibility around all the trustees. There is a standard rubric of questions to ask and comment upon. This reflective, evaluative practice is now a simple, sustained, and standard process consistently held by the Board (see Appendix B of the [Board Operating Policies](#) for further details).

In Fall 2019, the Board implemented a self-evaluation in the form of a structured survey sent to all trustees. The results were then compiled by the evaluation committee into [a report](#) with five recommendations. In the Spring 2020, the Board embarked on a review of the President, in which a select Board committee was tasked with leading an evaluation. The Vice Chair of the Board conducted phone interviews with five non-SKSM administrators and religious leaders at other institutions. The interview results were collated into a report that was shared with the President and then with the entire Board. It was the first attempt to evaluate the President since her inauguration in 2014. The intention was to continue to conduct an evaluation in alternating years. However, due to emerging conditions requiring substantive attention, such as COVID-19 and the financial notation, the priorities of the Board shifted. The Board recognizes the need to conduct these evaluations on a regular, recurring cycle.

Another recommendation from the 2019 ATS Self-Study that has not come to fruition is formal annual reviews for the Executive Team. While this recommendation was seriously considered, it diminished as a priority around the start of the pandemic and has not been reprioritized since.

Through discussions with staff, faculty, and the Board, an opportunity arose to better address the gaps in formal evaluative processes and align our evaluative processes with our mission and strategic planning (e.g., the Roadmap). There is shared interest across constituent groups in continuing to align and refine our evaluative processes in simple, systematic, and sustained ways, though the undertaking of such an endeavor can seem overwhelming. The strengths of our educational evaluative processes, in relation to our mission, can support the assessment areas in need of further development and consistency. To meet this recognized need, it is recommended that a formal Evaluation Committee is established as soon as possible, and that this committee is composed of at least one member of each core constituent group (student, staff, faculty, Executive Team, trustee). The recommended charge of this committee is to develop a holistic, replicable evaluation framework and processes that directly link to our purpose statement and strategic plans and can be applied across constituencies, while also being flexible enough to meet the specific evaluative needs within each constituent group and individual that comprises the school. Establishing such a committee can ensure our ATS evaluation needs are sufficiently met

in a timely manner and further support fulfillment of our mission statement.

## 2.8 Educational Effectiveness

Starr King utilizes several tools to evaluate the effectiveness of its academic program for achieving student educational and vocational goals. Students complete midterm and final course evaluations during the semesters and final course evaluations during the intersession and summer terms. Midterm course evaluations allow instructors to receive students' assessments on how the course is fulfilling its stated learning goals and their suggestions on potential practices to improve the learning experience. Faculty may accordingly adjust their teaching plan for the second half of the course. Final course evaluations provide students' overall assessment of instructional effectiveness and are included in the annual evaluations conducted by the Dean of Faculty.

School-wide educational effectiveness is assessed by a survey of graduates, who are asked to rate how Starr King has met their expectations and prepared them for their careers in ministry and social-change leadership. Following graduation, we collect data on time to completion, graduation, and placement rates, as well as credentialing results from the UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee. SKSM's [annual statements of educational effectiveness](#) are submitted to ATS and publicly posted on the school website.

## Conclusion

SKSM's capacity for effective strategic planning has been tested by a series of major transitions that we have successfully navigated. Strategic planning will be enhanced by more intentional practices of keeping constituents engaged in the ongoing process. The institution enacts frequent, often informal, habits of collaborative evaluation that have improved our processes in an iterative fashion. However, we acknowledge the importance of finally implementing structured, systematic evaluation.

## Recommendations:

- Task the SKSM human resources consultant with the responsibility of developing and executing a robust, sustainable cycle of formal staff evaluation.
- Establish a formal Evaluation Committee composed of at least one member of each core constituent group to develop a holistic, replicable evaluation framework and processes that directly link to our purpose statement and strategic plans, and can be applied across constituencies, while also being flexible enough to meet the specific evaluative needs within each constituent group and individual that comprises the school.



## Standard 3. Student Learning and Formation

### 3.1 - 3.5: Components of Student Learning and Formation

SKSM takes a holistic, student-centered approach to educating to countering oppressions that considers the multi-faceted nature of preparing students for life in ministry and justice work. Our holistic approach strives to integrate a deep intellectual formation that challenges the traditional and oppressive canons of Western academic education with deep spiritual and personal self-reflection, transformation and growth, and intense interrogation of one's vocational goals in relation to community needs. All facets of the SKSM experience are considered part of formation: critical reflection of who and how one is in the world, and how one is accountable to other people and communities is crucial not only in the classroom and in field work, but also in all the ways we relate within the school.

Faculty, students and staff embrace a collaborative approach to the formation of self-reflective, transformative spiritual leaders devoted to their communities. Faculty and the Curriculum Committee collaborate in shaping the curricula for the MDiv and MASC degrees; the Dean of Faculty facilitates this work in faculty meetings, study times and on the Curriculum Committee, fostering a team-based, collaborative approach, where student feedback is central. The Director of Spiritual Care collaborates with advisors to support student formation and works with faculty in several courses to plan student-ed rituals. Team ECO supports the school's capacity to address justice questions, spiritual formation occurs within courses, advising, internships and in the co-curricular offerings by the Director of Spiritual Care and the CMRS. All of these include oral and written reflective exercises and spiritual grounding meant to instill lifetime practices. Interactions among faculty, staff and students are also seen as important spaces for learning what it means to embrace compassionate, counter-oppressive, interculturally competent and trauma-informed ways to be in community. Faculty meetings, Staff meetings, All School Meetings, and ritual spaces are all containers for engagement and learning.

Many seminaries center around mainstream faith traditions, their theologies, and the voices and identities within them. This can be a deterrent for those who have been marginalized.

SKSM has its foundation in Unitarian Universalism and is inclusive of all those who experience "the call" and who are accountable to their respective community. That means if a student is pagan, spiritual-but-not-religious, in another marginalized spiritual tradition or marginalized within a given tradition, they too can feel at home at SKSM and well served by its approach to ministerial formation.

For students with specific vocational goals in chaplaincy or UU ministry, SKSM offers both a chaplaincy concentration and a UU ministry concentration. The following credentialing bodies recognize the school's chaplaincy program: Unitarian Universalist Association; Order of Universal Interfaith; Sacred Well Congregation; and The Chaplaincy Institute. Students with a strong vocation for community work and activism can enroll in the MA in Social Change, which

we launched in 2005.

Students advance in vocational formation through experiential learning. Active engagement in religious service and justice work is supported by intentional community reflection, meant to enhance one’s self-understanding, professional competence, and critical faculties. SKSM’s field work and internship model guides students to distinguish between the tasks intrinsic to the contextual education site, and the learning of skills relevant to their vocational formation. Students are encouraged to ask themselves “What is new for me in this experience?” and “What is it that I hope to take with me into future religious/social change leadership endeavors?” The student may also assess strengths and weaknesses in conversation with the mentor/supervisor, exploring limits, gaps, hesitations, and openings in one’s personal, spiritual, and professional growth. To evaluate success, the student and mentor/supervisor discuss distinctive tasks that foster these goals and criteria for measuring progress. Detailed guidelines are provided for students in our [Contextual Education Handbook](#).

For over twenty years SKSM has adopted the eight Threshold areas as the "grid" for planning course offerings. The eight Thresholds help us to meet the four programs' goals of our curricula, that we call the FourC's, introduced on p. 2:

Program Goals (Four C's)	Thresholds
1 Cultivating Multireligious Life and Learning (Religious Heritage)	3 Sacred Texts and Interpretations 6 Theo/alogy in Culture and Context
2 Countering oppressions and embracing radical hospitality (Cultural Context)	2 Prophetic Witness and Work 4 History of Dissenting Traditions and Theo/alological Quest
3 Creating just and sustainable communities (Religious and public leadership)	1 Life in Religious Communities and Interfaith Engagement 7 Educating for Wholeness and Liberation
4 Calling forth wholeness, healing and liberation (Spiritual formation)	5 Spiritual Practice and Care of the Soul 8 Embodied Wisdom and Beauty

Additionally, SKSM strives to offer courses in multiple modes (i.e., semester-long courses and intensives, synchronous and asynchronous courses).

To facilitate student planning, [M.Div. and MASC degree matrices](#) describe when courses will take place on an annual or biennial rotation.

The current educational model has been designed to enable greater flexibility for students in low-residency and with complex schedules, and to deepen and strengthen the school's three-fold educational commitments, as articulated in our mission statement.

The Curriculum Committee is a committee of the faculty composed of core and regular faculty members (two), student elected members (two), and the Dean of the Faculty; it supports the work of the faculty in fulfilling SKSM’s educational mission, including assessment of course

offerings and degrees and certificate requirements. Faculty members serve for one academic year while student members are elected for staggered two-year terms. This committee plays a key role by ensuring the courses offered speak to the academic competencies and praxis skills needed, as well as the breadth, depth, and diversity of topics covered.

### **3.2 Academic Rigor**

SKSM students are well served by a group of highly dedicated, trained, and experienced faculty and practitioners. The faculty have diverse strengths: this allows us to model a variety of approaches that foreground a full range of academic frameworks and practical praxis-oriented tools that provide students resources for the expected and unexpected aspects of ministry, be that congregational ministry, chaplaincy, non-profit leadership, or other forms of religious leadership. The SKSM environment promotes engaged and critical spaces for multi-religious dialogue and provides a foundation for respectful learning and coalition building skillsets.

As noted in the faculty section of Standard 8, all of our core faculty, with the exception of the President, have research doctorates from highly respected national and international institutions and continue to develop their research agenda, integrating their work into the classroom. Likewise, the regular faculty and adjunct faculty, publish important research, are active in denominational leadership and/or are deeply engaged in social justice efforts. All SKSM professors hold Doctorates of Philosophy, Doctorates of Ministry, and/or Masters degrees and are all well-regarded spiritual and organizational leaders who help students bridge their academic studies into the lived practices of congregations and communities.

Just as the faculty reflects a diverse set of approaches, their writing ranges from scholarly specializations to hands-on approaches. Some of the faculty have written books and published papers with academic presses and journals, others are public intellectuals who reach a popular audience, and some produce or curate social media content and create community through groups or games. The variety of these approaches furthers our mission towards inclusive community as it acknowledges and models for students that there is not one path towards educating to counter oppressions, but a myriad of ways to be called to share: all valid and effective to reach a variety of audiences. SKSM leads by example and the array of approaches modeled by faculty allow students the opportunity to train in models that best suit their strengths and allow them to hone in and grow comfortable with their growing edges so that they can overcome any intimidation they may feel around certain paths.

Fostering academic rigor under the ECO philosophy involves delving beyond conventional Anglo-Saxon and other Western European paradigms. It calls for a nuanced exploration, promoting diversity and inclusivity that mirrors the varied perspectives within our academic community. This commitment to a rich tapestry of viewpoints enhances the depth of our intellectual discourse and aligns with the core values of ECO, fostering a holistic and comprehensive educational experience.

SKSM manifests academic rigor by centering both scholarship and praxis in a non-competitive student environment and a variety of dialogic teaching approaches that seek to model counter-oppressive discourse and leadership. SKSM strives to define academic rigor in a way that not only meets the criteria of the academy but also integrates counter-oppressive educational lenses, and concerns for the ever more urgent state of the planet. In other words, at SKSM, we ask ourselves, in a moment of extreme crisis concerning the survival of our species and natural environment, what kind of spiritual leaders do we need to form, and what are the most important criteria to prioritize? Questions like these help us remain true to SKSM's mission and attuned to global concerns which shape the changing needs of those in ministry.

Faculty meet our [credit-hour policy](#) on "time spent on task" in diverse ways, from a more traditional reading assignment to a combination of reading, practices, and skill-building exercises. While SKSM faculty are united in our pedagogical focus on ECO, each relies on their own expertise to construct how that mission is best pursued in their courses. Some courses focus on spiritual practices and praxis more than on reading and writing; not to privilege one style over another but rather to view this diversity as integral to creating a vibrant academic community.

### **3.3 – 3.4: Intercultural Competency and Global Awareness**

To meet our counter-oppressive and multi-religious commitments in theological education and ministerial formation we necessarily place intercultural competency and global awareness at the center of all our teaching, learning and school interactions. Once again, this is an ongoing process of learning and unlearning, and especially so for people that have been socialized in privileged settings and have learned to favor certain understandings, values and practices as normative and preferable.

Our classes consistently strive to challenge the supposed universality of monocultural understandings and place them in their historical context where their history and relation to power agenda are analyzed. We remind our students that all learning is contextual and socially located. In our syllabi and reading choices we strive to highlight voices and perspectives traditionally underrepresented and marginalized within the Western academy, while avoiding simply "inclusive" approaches: engaging different perspectives is not only about knowing and appreciating diversity, but also about thinking critically about our core beliefs and practices, and especially about what traditional assumptions in ministry and ministerial formation. For instance, it is important to learn that the very concept of "religion" is a Western construction, that constricts and/or erases different approaches to spiritual beliefs and practices. In our classes, faculty and students need to be able to engage with multiple ways of thinking and knowing located in different communities, and therefore reconsider their traditional understanding of what constitutes faith, justice, ethical standards, rituals, trauma, healing practices and so on. A chaplain that wants to be prepared to meet the needs of multi-religious people in a culturally competent way needs to be able to interrogate their own assumptions and let the truths and questions of the person and communities they encounter emerge.

Global awareness includes intercultural competencies while also promoting a historical and contemporary understanding of the effects of coloniality and capitalism on different communities. It is not enough to understand that all humans and beings are interrelated, we need to be able to see the power dynamics embedded in these relationships and being willing to subvert and transform them. For instance, to study Queer global religious perspectives entails understanding the concept of “queering” in the context of the history of coloniality and globalization, while also learning about longstanding indigenous worldviews and traditions. We invite our students and faculty to consider the ways problematic mission paradigms can still be embedded in Western liberalism even within progressive circles. Understanding trauma, moral injury and trauma informed or healing centered practices must also include a critique and decentering of White Western frameworks and practices, acknowledging the past and ongoing damage of coloniality and capitalism, and lifting up multiple indigenous practices in ways that are not culturally appropriative. In our courses, faculty strives to engage in this work with deep humility, in the understanding that we are often re-learning as we teach, and we are all in a process of reimagining a different way to be with each other. While pre-pandemic we have engaged in regular immersive learning centered on counter-oppressive values and practices, having courses abroad or within the US, global awareness and engagement do not necessarily entail traveling, something that can be environmentally problematic, financially inaccessible, and disruptive of the communities we hope to engage with. Our syllabi include reading material and videos from different parts of the world, and we regularly invite scholars and practitioners to visit our courses and to lecture for the CMRS or at Symposium. We also consider it an asset to have in our midst faculty, staff and students that are not born, raised and formed in the US, and that may reside abroad. Our increased ability to teach and meet online has rendered global exchanges more accessible, frequent and sustainable. Our faculty and students have the practice of challenging faculty, syllabi and readings when they perceive problematic issues or silences: this generates a climate of ongoing reflection, conversation and learning. The course evaluations also ask for reflections on these topics. On occasion, issues are brought to the academic dean, faculty meetings, the Curriculum Committee and/or team ECO for further conversation. The flow of communication between these entities allows us to promptly discuss the necessity of change or additional study. We are mindful of embracing this ongoing process as a necessary element for everyone's learning, trying to avoid patterns of shaming and virtue signaling. Our classroom principles support this form of engagement.

### **3.5 Lifelong Learning**

Faculty strive to model learning as a lifetime habit. We tell our students that we cannot possibly teach them all they need to know for every context and future situations, but we can teach them practices that sustain them and empower them to seek new learning. We also convey this through many of our educational practices, including our narrative evaluations and the iterative process of the Threshold Assessment.

SKSM's Narrative Evaluation system entails a Pass/No Pass grading system accompanied by extensive constructive feedback on student work which reinforces its mission to educate to

counter oppressions by creating and supporting a non-competitive work environment. Our Narrative Evaluation rubric assesses a student's academic effort, ECO goals, and participation by proving three specific subcategory questions which faculty assess by using a pass, middle, and fail scale in addition to a more detailed feedback section focused on a student's strengths and growing edges. We believe a grading kyriarchy would distract students from directing their full attention to the course's subject matter. Students can focus energy, on how to fully engage the material in a dialogic that reflects their understanding and integration of the content to faculty. This system reflects the awareness that learning happens in different ways for different students, and our pedagogical commitment promotes experimentation, and discourages competitiveness. SKSM continues to adapt and hone this assessment approach so that it too can grow to reflect a more nuanced and accurate reflection of student engagement and performance. Having a system such as this invites continued discussion, refining, and openness to adjustments. A mature spiritual leader is someone prepared to give and receive feedback, understanding the importance of developing their skills and knowledge for the community they serve. Communities evaluate their spiritual leaders by their words and deeds. SKSM provides future leaders education and training that will guide those words and actions to be carried out with intention, reflection, and an openness to feedback and continued growth. Faculty model this process of introspection, showing that ECO/CJSC are continual processes for all faculty.

Another element of this educational model which encourages lifelong learning is the Threshold Self-Assessment (TSA). This TSA is iterative and evolves throughout the SKSM student's education. The first draft, the "Initial Self-Assessment" (ITA) is submitted in the student's first semester at SKSM. This demystifies the process of reflecting on a student's engagement with the different competencies delineated by the eight Thresholds and reminds them to honor the experience and learning that they carry with them to SKSM. The TSA's second draft is submitted with a portfolio of the student's work, narrative evaluations and a transcript, for the mid-degree formation event, the Portfolio Conference. At this juncture, the student receives detailed feedback and suggestions from their advisor, a second member of the faculty, a member of the student's community who is frequently a field education supervisor or religious leader, and a student peer chosen by the student. The final incarnation of the TSA is submitted to the Faculty and the SKSM Board of Trustees with the student's Petition to Graduate, demonstrating satisfactory educational attainment, through both "learning" and "unlearning."

One important pedagogical feature of ECO is to learn about religious and spiritual traditions from within their own contexts. This approach requires making space for voices steeped within those traditions, and learning how they want their traditions to be represented, not just what we think we should know about them. For example, the Introduction to Islam course has a specific and clearly articulated approach to learning Islamic traditions with careful respect for approaches to detangle the study of religion from colonialist, Orientalist, and Islamophobic interpretations.

Formation transcends the mere impartation of content; it encompasses the creation of an environment that not only delivers information but also imparts essential tools and molds students' perspectives. Adopting a Freirean perspective, this liberative pedagogical approach establishes conditions for students to acquire not only skills but also situated knowledge. It seeks

to go beyond the conventional, encouraging critical thinking, active engagement and curiosity. By doing so, it fosters a comprehensive educational experience that prepares students not just for academic success but also to navigate a complex and dynamic world. This approach reflects our commitment to nurturing individuals capable of contributing meaningfully to society, equipped with both the practical skills and the critical consciousness necessary for addressing the challenges of the contemporary global landscape.

### 3.6 – 3.10: Educational Modalities Supporting Student Learning and Formation

SKSM's educational modalities are rooted in relational, constructive pedagogies and emergent educational design that are interdependent with SKSM's ECO-CJSC philosophy and school mission. While most of the current courses are offered synchronously and asynchronously online, the catalog also includes immersion classes, independent research, field work, and hybrid courses.

From our beginning, SKSM emphasized practical arts of religious leadership alongside traditional academic disciplines. SKSM was an early adapter of technology: its first online course was offered in 1997 and in the 1990s courses supporting intern ministers were offered in hybrid modality, in person or through email. From the early days of online teaching, SKSM understood the importance of having a well-trained educational leader supporting the faculty, hiring a Director of Online Education (now renamed as Director of Digital Learning.) Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, SKSM courses have been offered online, including Intensive courses, with some place-based exceptions (UU Polity and Symposium), which are offered as hybrid courses with in-person and online participants.



Our Director of Spiritual Care, Pastor Jacqueline Duhart, leads a group spiritual formation session during the 2023 Symposium

SKSM has regularly adapted its modalities and refined the technologies utilized to support them to meet the dynamic needs of our students, faculty, and mission in a world of constant change: returning to our programmatic learning outcomes with an intention towards expanding

accessibility, capacity, equity, and integrity in our pedagogical approaches to student learning and formation.

### **Learning Management System for Digital Learning**

SKSM's LMS, Populi, has been essential for supporting a robust online educational program. Within Populi, every facet of our courses is meticulously managed. The platform serves as a comprehensive system, housing instances of all courses, past and present. Even after a course concludes, interactions and materials are securely preserved, ensuring continued accessibility for students until their graduation. Faculty benefit from an internal repository that archives their work, providing valuable insights for future course iterations. Additionally, to maintain transparency, homework, papers, and projects are submitted exclusively through the platform, further streamlining and enhancing the educational process. This strategic approach within Populi reflects our commitment to a seamless, accessible, and transparent educational experience at SKSM.

Populi not only serves as our Learning Management System but also plays a role in providing a portal to our digital library, increasing accessibility for students to the Digital Theological Library 2 (DTL 2; see [Standard 6](#)). This additional integration significantly enriches the resources available to the academic community, creating a vibrant and dynamic learning environment. To further support this, faculty members submit their semester's lists of required books, enabling the library to ensure timely access for students. Additionally, dedicated staff members at the DTL 2 assist patrons in their research endeavors, providing valuable support and guidance as they explore and utilize scholarly sources for academic pursuits. This collaboration fosters a well-supported and resourceful educational journey at SKSM.

To further optimize the online educational experience, SKSM has implemented a template for course design in Populi, ensuring a standardized structure across various formats, such as in-residence, hybrid, or online. This systematic approach empowers faculty to consistently organize course components (such as syllabi, lessons, requirements, and resources), not only simplifying the learning process for students but also offering clarity on tasks, readings, assignments, and other educational activities. In essence, adopting Populi as our Learning Management System represents a strategic step toward cultivating a more connected, accessible, and user-friendly educational ecosystem at SKSM.

### **Cohesive and Holistic Curriculum**

SKSM has very few courses that are required for all M<sub>2</sub> Div. students: the ECO Core course, one of two Multi-religious Core Intensive courses, and a choice of two Leadership courses. The Multi-religious Core Intensive courses are consistently offered in the August and January terms. One focuses on “theory and method,” providing a more academic approach, whereas the other, “Amidst the Blessing of the Ancestors,” focuses more on praxis. Both instances include theory and praxis, differing primarily on the unique expertise of the instructor, the resources and



activities involved, and the emergent conditions that arise for each cohort of students. Students can, and do, take both instances.

The two Leadership courses also vary in terms of instruction and contextual application. One of the Leadership courses (UU Ministerial Leadership Core Intensive) is expressly tailored for UUs, and conveys information relevant to UU contexts, such as the UU Trauma Ministry, as well as UU resources on topics such as inclusion for people with disabilities or policies on sexual misconduct. The other Leadership course (Leadership Along the Way) applies to all students, focusing on cultivating the skills, techniques, and dispositions to guide groups collaboratively and equitably, in alignment with ECO values. Some students take both courses.

It is important to emphasize the importance of the ECO course, first offered in 1997, to the SKSM M.Div. and MASC degree programs. It is a requirement for all degree candidates in their first semester at SKSM. As presented in the SKSM Academic Catalog:

*Educating to Counter Oppressions (ECO) is a core goal of Starr King's M.Div. and M.A.S.C. degree programs. In this required core synchronous online course, M.Div. and M.A.S.C. students work together to form a framework for counter-oppressive spiritual leadership. We will ask: how can spirituality, ministry, and religious activism respond to the multiple and intersecting realities of injustice, suffering, and oppression in our lives and our world? What models of justice and sustainable community invite our commitment? Drawing on Unitarian Universalist and multi-religious sources, we will explore how in the midst of a world marked by tragedy, sorrow and injustice there remain abiding resources of beauty and grace that nourish resistance, offer healing and call us to accountability and community building.*

Before the pandemic, the ECO course had been offered as an in-person week-long intensive, including field trips to San Francisco where students participated in urban ministries such as [The Faithful Fools](#). It became clear that the course material required more time for reflection, as in its original iteration, and so it was already decided to make it a semester-long course before the acute COVID-19 pandemic. This change fulfilled that and provided more time to build relationships among the students, as they evolved into a cohort for mutual support and challenge.

After their first year, students are eligible to enroll in Starr King Individualized Learning (SKIL) courses, in partnership with a specific faculty member, with the support of their advisor. To make the SKIL load more sustainable for faculty, and for students to get a predictable sense of when to work with specific faculty around certain topics, SKSM established the Advanced Topics courses. These function like group SKILs, where students partner with faculty on their individualized foci within the designated topic and collaborate with peers through faculty facilitated conversations around the topics. SKILs, Advanced Topics, and Chaplaincy Formation courses utilize Student Narrative Self-Evaluations, in addition to the faculty written Student Narrative Evaluations. This allows for a more holistic approach to student evaluation for advanced courses of study.

Since our last Self Study, SKSM has implemented numerous changes to our overall curriculum

design and delivery with an intention towards greater cohesion across a holistic learning environment which prioritizes creating just and sustainable communities that educate to counter oppression. SKSM has navigated a dynamic and adaptive path that honors the diversity of positionalities, viewpoints, and pedagogies within the school and beyond the classroom, while cultivating consistent processes throughout the learning environment to foster deliberate connection to vocational competencies as well as greater ease and accessibility. Recognizing and affirming that each constituent is unique, this education continually seeks balance between structure and agency within the institution.

Curricular cohesion occurs most directly through different organizational groups that try to cross-pollinate between constituencies as much as possible. Primarily, this occurs through the Curriculum Committee, Faculty Meetings & Study Times, Education Team, and Team ECO.

The Curriculum Committee includes current students and faculty, and its work includes both academic planning and academic policies. It is also a vector for communication about courses and pedagogy between the Dean, the Faculty, and the students. The students on the committee proactively solicit student feedback on current courses, desired courses, and pedagogical concerns including, but not limited to, evaluation methods. Students serve two-year terms, in alternating years, so there is consistency and memory carried over year to year.

Curriculum Committee and Faculty Meetings (including Study Times) are interdependent agents in ensuring the cohesive and holistic nature of SKSM's educational philosophy and pedagogical approaches. Often, student suggestions and concerns that are presented to one are threaded with the other: whether it be the Student Body representative at the Faculty Meeting, or the student members on the Curriculum Committee. Ideas that arise in one container carry over into conversations in the other context.

For example, one of our core recommendations from the last Self-Study focused on adapting the advising model to be more sustainable, allowing faculty more capacity for writing and research. A task force was established within the Curriculum Committee to assess the current model and generate alternative models. Student members conferred with the wider Student Body and brought in insights from previous student body efforts at the school (e.g., [\*Student Body Mental Health Task Force Report & Recommendations 2017-2018\*](#)). Faculty members sought input from advising faculty, researched other institutional models, and discussed findings in Faculty Meetings. Through this collaborative discovery process, a proposal was developed and presented to the President that recommended hiring a Director of Spiritual Care, so that advising faculty could focus on tending to student's academic advancement towards graduation, while SKSM could continue to provide support for student's spiritual struggles and growth beyond the classroom context.

Another outcome of this collaborative endeavor was the development of our Degree Matrices for different degree programs. Through the leadership of our Dean of Faculty, a task force of two advisors and one student initially drafted early versions of three different degree matrices (M.Div. for UU track, M.Div. for non-UU track, MASC), consulting both students and faculty in the process. This development supported both the shift to a new advising model and cultivated a

recurring schedule of classes over a two-year cycle that create structure and predictability. While different constituents continued the work of refining the matrices over the years, the documents provide a dynamic map for administrative, faculty, advising, and student decisions each academic year and term—co-powering the emergent educational design embedded within SKSM.

Similar collaborative processes occurred around other aspects of our holistic approach to curriculum, such as with the revision of the Narrative Student Evaluations, the creation of Narrative Student Self-Evaluations, and the development and implementation of SKSM's *Communal Classroom Guiding Principles*.

Another effort to make SKSM courses more cohesive was the introduction of "[Communal Classroom Guiding Principles](#)." In the past each instructor developed their own expectations for classroom engagement; now Faculty begin courses with a common set of four Classroom Principles that express the hope for "deep, transformative, and/or interpersonal work" "as they continually clarify the terrain in which distinct people from various social locations will be working together within a shared learning environment. Clear, consistent agreements that guide the ways in which participants will be interacting with one another, especially in a recurring context, allows space for just and regenerative learning moments to arise while minimizing the possible impacts of harmful actions. With such a shared foundation, new rhythms and patterns of behavior emerge from interdependent interactions that, over time, can cultivate a communal culture."

The four principles are:

1. Prioritize inquiry, community, and learning
2. Encourage generosity and grace for mistakes, while acknowledging impact
3. Embrace complexity, contextualize wisdom, interrupt binaries, and avoid assumptions
4. Your presence is important. Practice personal agency and personal responsibility

*At SKSM, we welcome and encourage all participants to practice and embody these four communal classroom principles in our various learning environments and everyday interactions. Our communal classroom principles reflect our priorities with flexibility, generosity, complexity, and responsibility. Our shared foundation for collaboration transforms the culture we create: calling forth wholeness, healing, and liberation; cultivating multi-religious life and learning; countering oppressions and embracing radical hospitality; and creating just and sustainable communities. We are here to learn to nurture the emerging worldview through our presence, our actions, and our commitment to engage with one another.*

In each emergent adaptation of these components the students, faculty, and administration collaborated within and across constituent groups to develop a cohesive and holistic curriculum experience that provided consistent structure as well as dynamic flexibility for both students and faculty.

This flexible consistency of components also includes primary and supplemental resources such as the handbooks that are revised each year (e.g., Student, Contextual Education, Faculty,

Advising, Populi), or different faculty guides (e.g., for working with the *Guiding Principles* in class or with the myriad intricacies of Populi). Each iteration of these resources is directly and indirectly informed by various feedback loops, discussions, and deliberations on changes, often in response to students' stated needs or requests. Sometimes responses occur quickly, when possible and simple to address, other times it involves an intentional process integrating educational philosophy, positionalities, experiences, and insights into a collaboratively developed standard, policy, and/or procedure.

### **Shifts in Standards, Policies, and Procedures**

While SKSM's emphasis on creating just and sustainable communities that educate to counter oppressions can be easily experienced through our curricular and programmatic offerings, the approach also exists within the administrative components that support the student and the community of learning they co-create with faculty and other students. ECO-CJSC informs and influences the standards and protocols that emerge and endure in our efforts to live into that educational philosophy in all aspects of the school. As such, SKSM endeavors to effectively document and disseminate shifts that arise in relation to these standards, policies, and procedures in a timely manner to all constituents, while emphasizing the importance of direct discourse whenever things arise that may complexify or challenge the values and norms of the institution. These latter exceptions tend to then shape and inform the adaptation and evolution of standards and norms at SKSM, thereby strengthening a relational and regenerative process of change through regular and substantive interactions.

The handbooks and guides for students, staff, and faculty are developed and revised to reflect the dynamic and adaptive nature of the school's commitment to "being the world we wish to see". These resources articulate different accommodations, expectations, guidelines, and procedures embedded within SKSM. These convey cohesive and holistic standards for how we will be with each other and what to expect from instructors and advisors and students, covering material as vast as navigating the Populi LMS, to the responsibilities of both students and faculty in the advising relationship, to details such as asynchronous communication practices and response time expectations.

The Student Handbook is collaboratively revised twice per year: thoroughly through the summer in preparation for the start of the new school year; and adaptively in January for the Spring term, updating any changes and clarifications to different standards, policies, and procedures that may have arisen since the summer. Our Student Handbook serves a vital reference role for all constituents within the school. Changes to it can range from small points of information to significant shifts in a policy or procedure. The responsiveness to students' stated needs or requests by the Dean of Faculty, Dean of Students, and faculty as a group occurs relatively quickly, considering the deliberative values faculty practice. The various dedicated feedback venues for students (e.g., cross-constituent committees, course evaluations, and All School meetings) provide opportunities to notice nuance and possible patterns emerging in relation to the nature of our learning community. Faculty meetings create space to share such insights and

assess urgency, as well as perceptual accuracy.

For example, when we updated our plagiarism policy to include the use of “Artificial Intelligence” (AI) tools, the process started with a conversation at Faculty Meeting, which led to a quick shift in the policy and a determination to explore the issue further. We then dedicated a Faculty Study Time to the topic, integrating different positionalities on “AI” in the classroom from the faculty, student, and ECO perspectives. This led to the adoption of our current policy, and alignment amongst faculty on ways to discuss its use with students, including space to learn further with students through a dedicated All School meeting or stand-alone event on the topic in the future.

Another example is the adoption of SKSM’s Communal Classroom Guiding Principles, already introduced under “Cohesive and Holistic Curriculum”. The idea emerged in a faculty meeting, which led to a few different faculty and student discussions over the span of a year, leading to a collaboratively crafted document detailing the four principles and what is intended by their integration into the classroom. Additional resources were produced to support instructors presenting these new standards in their courses, such as PowerPoint slides a Faculty Guide that provides “possible practices for faculty to utilize for introducing and embedding the Communal Classroom Guiding Principles (CCGP) into the classroom contexts at Starr King School for the Ministry.” While it is now standard for each class to utilize these principles from the start of the semester, the process and approach to get there was flexible and adaptable enough for different forms of adoption to occur, much like our ECO approach.

The Dean of the Faculty and the Director of Digital Learning pay close attention to the students’ ability to access the curricula. In Spring Semester 2024 they implemented a new “Course Template” for all SKSM courses, to standardize the appearance of SKSM courses and make it easier for students to find and navigate course content in Populi. In the past, different instructors had divergent styles on SKSM’s LMS, ranging from a spare outline to accompany a synchronous course, to what one instructor called their asynchronous course a “Las Vegas-style buffet” complete with GIFs, videos, and a variety of files. Now, each course instance in Populi shares a similar flow and design, while still retaining space for nuances in instructors’ aesthetic and pedagogical decisions. The Syllabus page contains Zoom information for synchronous classes, and the most recent Syllabi for all classes, as well as any other important links to materials such as the DTL 2, Populi Student Guide, and SKSM Policies and Compliance Statements. Each Lesson in Populi includes a brief overview and demarcate required and recommended work, including assignments, practices, and readings, among other curricular components. This flexible consistency alleviates some of the stress students expressed in finding materials, while also honoring the diversity of our faculty’s pedagogical approaches and related aspects. Faculty and students know where to locate certain curricular components in Populi (such as Zoom links or required reading for a course) without the expectation of absolute conformity through unnecessarily limiting language and aesthetic choices.

Additional approaches to cultivating accessibility throughout our policies and procedures include integrating Closed Captioning for synchronous class meetings, school meetings, and

VoiceThread videos of asynchronous lectures or assignments, providing PDFs of readings, as well as resources for how to use Text-to-Speech with PDF and web-based readings, and offering extra time on assignments upon request. The Coordinator of Academic Programs and Dean of Faculty strive to ensure classes that need Student Assistants, sometimes affectionately called “Tech Ministers,” for technological requirements receive them, and the process for recruiting and onboarding sufficiently skilled students in this role has improved considerably in the past two years. The Registrar provides registration guidance in writing to all students and by appointment for those that request it during early, general, and late enrollment periods. The Dean of Students serves as the Disabilities Resource Officer (DRO) for SKSM. In consultation with faculty and students, the DRO developed general and specific standards, policies, and procedures to formalize “reasonable” accommodations for students with disabilities as a holistic approach to accessibility. An accommodation is not “reasonable” if it will necessitate modifications of the essential nature of a program or activity or would place undue financial or administrative burdens on the institution. The formal process covers student advising, SKSM classroom activities and requirements, program exams, and capstone experiences or projects. Students with an identified need work with both the DRO and their instructors to determine specific accommodation conditions (e.g., duration, flexibility, resourcing, culture, consistency, equity, etc.). The DRO works with the student and appropriate faculty to make sure recommended accommodations can be implemented and do not compromise the academic rigor and integrity of the educational opportunity.

Since our last ATS Study, we have refined our Portal process formation benchmarks (i.e. Initial Threshold Assessment, Portfolio Conference, and Petition to Graduate) for students to succeed in a more timely and consistent manner. In partnership with their advisor, students are now expected to complete these different components of their degree within a certain span of time. Not doing so can result in a lock on their ability to register in the future. This shift has cultivated a greater respect for the importance of these procedures, as well as reduced the instances in which a student doesn’t complete them in a timely manner. To support these academic and formation benchmarks, faculty and staff developed shared and distributed responsibilities, such as particular faculty serving as point-of-contact for a specific portal process, offering regular Q&A sessions for students engaging them, and recording detailed talks on each for students to review in addition to the Student Handbook. Tailored messages are sent to students that registered for a specific portal process near the start of the semester, and recurring reminders are included in Starr King This Week. This allows multiple opportunities for students to engage our primary portal benchmarks toward a degree and receive support through each procedure.

Improvements in communication over the past few years enhanced the value of these resources and encouraged ease of adoption to more impactful changes in policies or procedures. While SKSM communications standards are imperfect, especially around announcing new or changing conditions, SKSM continues to refine and streamline communication methods. Faculty and All School Meetings, as well as Starr King This Week (a weekly newsletter sent to all active constituents) provide regular opportunities to share news and emerging processes. Through these venues, as well as in the classrooms and other group meetings, SKSM tries to be both proactive

and strategic by communicating news about all aspects of the school. One of the historical barriers to communication flow is the dynamic tension between different silos within the school, as identified in our Roadmap process. These “silos” tend to be more perceptual than structural, likely complicated by the distributed nature of our mostly online school and the wider context of uncertainty amidst accelerating collapse (ecological, social, political, economic, etc.). Internal communications can continue to be refined and regularized to cultivate new standards for how information flows and decisions are made. Organizational habits are not easy to change, though significant progress has been made over the past few years, especially regarding shifts in standards, policies, and procedures. The Deans, Faculty, and Staff consistently demonstrate how effective they are together whenever there is proactive communication and cooperation. The continued commitment to reflecting, relating, deliberating, adapting, and improving amid uncertainty and emergence is the greatest strength and standard for SKSM to live into. This commitment is one of many consistent conditions at SKSM that cultivate a viable community of learning.

### **Cultivating a Viable Community of Learning**

A relationship of mutuality exists between constituent groups, committees, teams, meetings, and classroom contexts. This mutuality arises from different interdependencies within and between groups, as well as the myriad opportunities for collaboration and connection within the school, which contribute to the cultivation of a viable, emergent, and dynamic community of learners.

Regular interactions between faculty and students, and among students, are embedded within the curriculum and classroom containers through various methods. In synchronous courses, the use of breakout rooms for peer learning and discussion is a standard practice, along with full group discussions facilitated by faculty with students. Asynchronous discussion assignments in Populi encourage and require personal reflections and replies to peers’ posts in relation to prompts provided by instructors, and sometimes by students. Many courses ask students to collaboratively produce presentations and/or projects as integrative practice opportunities to demonstrate understanding of the material as well as their ability to work together towards shared learning outcomes. For example, in Leadership Along the Way students must work in small groups to develop and deliver an interactive shared learning experience for all other class members, including the instructor and student assistant. The “Communal Classroom Guiding Principles,” a core part of each classroom environment, further support and enhance the collaborative capacity to work, learn, create, and relate with each other and the faculty. Advanced Topics courses provide spaces for students to cultivate their own independent learning outcomes within an interdependent container of learning with other students and faculty around a shared topic.

Each year, students that have completed the ECO core requirement can apply for the Hilda Mason Teaching Fellowship (HMTF), in partnership with their academic advisor. Hilda Mason Fellows serve as instructors to students for one course, which can be offered synchronously or asynchronously. The Curriculum committee annually reviews the application process and refines

the process in response to regular feedback received from students. Up to two students are selected as Fellows for the following academic year after each curriculum committee member, faculty and students, assess the individual proposals using a structured rubric and then deliberate the merits of the different applications accordingly. The Fellows work with a faculty advisor and may receive credit to develop their curriculum in accordance with SKSM policies and practices. The HMTF is another intentional aspect of our dynamic, collaborative, cross-constituent, and adaptive learning community.

Midterm and final course evaluations are important opportunities for students to provide timely feedback to faculty that can shape current and future curriculum development. Written self-evaluations and instructor evaluations of students are consistent forms of feedback that cultivate personal and interpersonal learning connected to the specific context of the class, as well as the wider context of SKSM's educational philosophy and pedagogies. Students are regularly encouraged to provide feedback in the form of direct address to instructors and peers, in accordance with our communication policies detailed in the Student Handbook. If direct address does not work, there are additional pathways for feedback and input available to students, such as meeting with the relevant Dean, or connecting with Team ECO. Bimonthly All School meetings provide an open space for students to learn from, and provide feedback to, the President of the school.

Our contextual education offerings are all rooted in a relational approach to learning, connected to both a student's personal vocational goals and communities they seek to serve beyond SKSM. Congregational and community internships depend on learning agreements developed with the Director of Contextual Education in relationship with their site supervisor and personal learning goals. The agreements also inform their learning outcomes in the associated reflection seminars, which provide structured, faculty facilitated space for students to engage their personal goals and peers in the process. The interactive seminars serve as key components in the cultivation of vocational skills, competencies, and ways of being, enhanced through a community of learning, experience, and leadership.

Students are encouraged to engage each other, as well as faculty and staff, beyond formal class time through different structures and events such as student government, various cross-constituent committees, special interest and affinity groups, monthly Chapel services, annual Symposia, and cornerstone rituals such as the Threshold Ceremony, a part of Orientation, and Commencement. Students who serve on committees are asked to discuss relevant topics with peers outside of the committees and are provided with space to share feedback and insights from students in each cross-constituent meeting (e.g., Curriculum Committee and Faculty Meetings have standing space on every meeting's agenda for student feedback, concerns, and input). The Student Government regularly conduct surveys of the student body, often in partnership with faculty and staff, that lead to reports that are shared with all stakeholders in the school (e.g. Mental Health Report, Visioning Report, Student Needs Surveys, etc.) and these inform discussions and decisions within the institution, especially curricular considerations, faculty conversations, and resource allocations.



A viable learning community emerges amidst the various offerings and opportunities available to SKSM students. It is dynamic, relational, and adaptive. Students are regularly encouraged to practice, embody, and experiment in becoming active agents for sacred social change within the many contexts they engage in and beyond the school. From crossing the initial Threshold during orientation, to walking out the door following commencement, students interact with shared ECO values as well as their unique vocational goals and formational experiences. The relational intentionality, perseverance, experiences, and commitment that faculty, staff, and students bring to the community of learners—interdependent of their abilities, theologies, identities, experiences, and positionalities—shape the educational modalities supporting student learning and formation in the present and the future.

### 3.11 – 3.13: Educational Policies Supporting Student Learning and Formation

Academic program policies are listed in the Student and Faculty Handbooks and Academic Catalog. Our Student and Faculty Handbooks and school policies are reviewed annually by the Dean of Students and Dean of Faculty and the Education Team. Any items that necessitate additional discussion are brought to the attention of the constituency or committee that needs to review it and decide on any necessary updates. Any changes are communicated to faculty, staff, and students. Our policies are also available on our website, and great care is taken to ensure that the website exactly mirrors the SKSM handbooks and catalog.

Recent revisions have included additions to our tuition refund policy to match requirements of various states where students are resident and updates to our leave of absence and satisfactory absence policies to meet federal regulations.

The recently revised [transfer of credit policy](#) is stated clearly in the admissions application and on SKSM’s website, showing that care is taken in reviewing that course work is relevant to the degree, and it respected the credit hour policies and SKSM educational standards

### 3.14: Technology and Research Resources Policies

Faculty follow ethical use of resources including “fair use” of materials in copyright. Faculty are encouraged to use texts available through the DTL 2 to promote accessibility for geographically distributed students as well as accessible formats for students with disabilities such as dyslexia or vision. Captions and transcripts are available for lectures and discussions on Zoom, and typically recordings are posted to the LMS after the event.

For research with human participants, SKSM encourages students to follow the [Graduate Theological Union’s Human Subject Protocols](#).

### 3.15: Educational Policies for Non-Degree Programs

SKSM offers non-degree certificates in the following areas: Unitarian Universalist Studies, Multi-Religious Studies, Chaplaincy Studies, and our newest certificate: [Psychedelic Justice and Companionship](#). The certificate in Unitarian Universalist Studies is especially attractive to UU students studying at theological schools without a UU identity, as well as ordained ministers in other traditions who seek credentialing with the UUA. It allows them to obtain graduate level training in a variety of UU identity courses such as UU History, UU Polity, UU Theologies, and UU Religious Education.

Interested students may take a class as a Special Student (see [How to Register for a Starr King Course](#)). Certificate students pay tuition (see [Tuition and Fees](#)) on a course-by-course basis.

Note that SKSM is in the process of making all SKSM certificate programs eligible for federal financial aid, as not all SKSM certificates are currently eligible. Currently, our certificates in Unitarian Universalist Studies and Multi-Religious Studies have been approved by the Department of Education. SKSM M.Div. and MASC students may pursue the Multi-Religious Studies and Psychedelic Justice and Companionship certificates as part of their degree program. SKSM M.Div. and MASC students interested in Chaplaincy may add the [Chaplaincy Concentration](#) and those preparing for credentialing with the UUA may enroll in the [UU Concentration](#).

With these certificate programs, Starr King aspires to open the doors of progressive/UU theological education to more students. This is in devotion to our mission to educate people for Unitarian Universalist ministry and for progressive religious leadership in society grounded in the values of countering oppressions, creating just and sustainable community, and cultivating multi-religious life and learning. The majority of special students at SKSM are enrolled in other theological schools or have already completed an advanced degree. All applications are reviewed by the Director of Admissions and applications to the various certificate programs are reviewed by their respective Directors. Because of our commitment to countering oppressions, SKSM also seeks to ensure that each student has taken a course or has education in countering oppressions. In some cases, we may require that the student register for ECO in their first semester, as this both gives a gauge to their commitment to countering oppressions and provides experience with their preparation for graduate-level work. Prior to acceptance of a non-degree student that has not previously taken courses at Starr King, if there are any questions about preparation for graduate-level work or any other concerns, the Director of Admissions will schedule a one-on-one to assess the applicant in addition to their application. In addition, if an issue arises after a special student has registered for a course, faculty are encouraged to express any concerns about that student to the Dean of the Faculty. In rare cases, a special student may be removed from a course.

## Conclusion

Faculty collaborate with each other and with staff to sustain a holistic, integrative model of formation focused on ECO values and practices. Courses and syllabi strive to center ECO and embrace multi-religiosity, integrating diverse voices and paradigms of inquiry, asking questions of justice and accountability, addressing historical trauma, fostering intercultural competency and global awareness. An established and engrained culture of ongoing informal and formal assessment promotes students' learning and amplifies faculty and degree effectiveness. The faculty know that SKSM's ECO commitment will always entail ongoing learning and unlearning processes, in dialogue with cutting-edge scholarship and grassroots wisdom. As part of our ECO commitment, we want to make the school more financially accessible and more able to meet the needs of our neurodivergent students and faculty. We also hope to improve our ability to communicate with each other across constituencies and departments in a sustainable way.

### Recommendations:

- Enhance Communication – SKSM should continue to refine its internal communication processes to ensure timely dissemination of information, especially for policies, news and events. SKSM can exclusively utilize Populi for internal communications, instead of various emails and social media platforms.
- Expand Support for Accessibility – Building on existing efforts, SKSM can continue to prioritize accessibility initiatives to ensure equitable access to educational resources and opportunities. Additional training for faculty on accessibility tools and techniques can be combined with promoting awareness of various accessibility issues for the whole school community.
- Focus on global awareness and engagement for contextually responsive care for individuals and communities while countering oppressive structures, especially in regard to resources, climate and power.

## Standard 4. Master's Degree Programs

### 4.1 – 4.5: Master of Divinity

#### Overview and Primary Goals of the M.Div. Program

The M.Div. degree at SKSM is designed to prepare students for vocations in parish ministry; community ministry; religious education ministry; hospital, prison or hospice chaplaincy; or related forms of religious leadership with congregations and the wider community. The M.Div. meets the educational requirement for fellowship as a Unitarian Universalist minister, as well as the educational requirement for ordination in a variety of other denominations. At SKSM, each student's M.Div. program of study is individually designed by the student and advisor to respond to that person's gifts, challenges, life experience and calling. The program's overall goal is to prepare each individual holistically for ministry through attainment of competency in eight threshold areas that integrate the arts of ministry with the disciplines of theological and religious studies. This goal also includes the development of personal qualities and habits for a successful ministry, such as collaborative leadership, mature judgment, self-awareness, spiritual practice, integrity, responsibility, sensitivity and ethical discernment. The degree is currently 90 credit hours but consideration for fewer hours is under review.

SKSM arranges its courses into eight unique thresholds. Each threshold corresponds to the traditional disciplines and fields of religious study, noted in historically Christian language. In 2014-2015 Starr King faculty created a series of learning outcomes for each threshold as part of its ATS self-assessment. These learning outcomes are used to support and document students' progress in each threshold area (see pp. 11-14 of the SKSM Academic Catalog). Students consult and then work with their advisors to ensure they meet these learning outcomes.

In their first semester, they conduct an Initial Threshold Assessment (ITA) with their advisor to identify areas where they already have some experience and those that will require more of their attention. In their second year, students will work with their advisor as they write an in- depth Threshold Self-Assessment (TSA) that reflects their work to date in each of the threshold areas. This assessment becomes an essential part of their Portfolio Conference and Packet. In their final year, students prepare a final TSA, again in conversation with their advisor, as part of their Petition to Graduate.

Thresholds are aligned with syllabi; this structure allows students to tailor their own educational programs to meet all thresholds during their degree progression.

#### Degree Requirements

Students matriculated in the M.Div. program must successfully complete the following requirements to be eligible to petition to graduate:

- A minimum of 90 units of credit distributed among the eight threshold areas
- Three required core courses:
  - Educating to Create Just and Sustainable Communities that Counter Oppression core course (ECO), which must be taken within six months of matriculation
  - The Multi-Religious Core Course
  - An Intensive in UU Ministry for candidates for UU ministry; or one of two options  
“Spiritual Leadership” or “Leadership Along the Way”
- Participation in at least two Starr King Symposia
- 5 or More Units of Contextual Education
- Midpoint Portfolio Conference

#### **4.4 Supervised Practical Experiences**

All M.Div. students are requested to fulfill at least five credit units of contextual education during their program of studies. They can choose between CPE and Congregational or Community work, depending on their vocational goals. Students on the UUA ordination path have the option of completing their congregational internship as part of their degree program or after graduation. This flexibility gives people the option to relocate for their internship after they complete their studies.

M.Div. students who matriculate beginning in Fall 2024 will be required to complete a minimum of five contextual education units.

#### **4.5 M.Div. Program Evaluation**

SKSM employs various assessment measures and practices, both direct and indirect, to evaluate the M.Div. program's effectiveness and impact. These include but are not limited to:

- narrative course evaluations by faculty
- student evaluations of courses
- threshold student self-assessments
- student Portfolio Conferences
- evaluations by community and field site supervisors
- regular meetings with advisors
- petitions to graduate reviewed by faculty and ratified by the board

External review of student work was somewhat disrupted by leaving the GTU and the acute COVID-19 pandemic. Papers submitted for consideration for the Earl Morse Wilbur Scholarship are judged by an external committee. The Portfolio Conference, a mid-degree formation event which reviews a portfolio of the student's work at SKSM, always includes at least one committee member who is not from the current SKSM community.

### *UU and Chaplaincy Concentration*

Our last MDiv degree review led us to create degree concentrations that could better support particular vocational goals. We created the Chaplaincy Concentration first, which we described earlier, and later the UU Concentration, with the goal of offering additional support to Unitarian Universalist M.Div. students who seek fellowship with the UUA's MFC. While the SKSM Curriculum Committee and faculty had always reviewed course offerings so that they were aligned with the MFC requirements, it became clear that many students did not take the UU identity courses they needed early enough in their program, as they were advised to do; some even took them after graduating. The opt-in concentration aims to correct this issue.

Additionally, the MFC is in a period of transition, with new leadership and new requirements, including two new resource reading lists, one tailored to parish ministry and one for community ministries, as well as additional emphasis on theology with a new competency in Theology. A subcommittee of all the UU Faculty met with the Director of Spiritual Care and SKSM President for a year to develop a list of SKSM courses, field education and spiritual direction to satisfy the requirements of the MFC. Currently the MFC requires graduate-level course work in eight areas of competency, and these roughly correspond to SKSM's eight thresholds.

Students enroll themselves in the UU Concentration in Populi and track their own progress toward completion on a fillable PDF form. The UU Concentration has a course shell on our LMS and the students meet, as a group, regularly with the Director for discussion and to share resources and information about the denomination. The 2024 Commencement awarded this distinction for the first time.

### *Evaluating Appropriate Program Length*

Another important concern that has emerged during the review of the MDiv program is the amount of debt students incur in completing the 90 required credits. Therefore, the faculty has discussed ways to fulfill the same curricular goal within 72 credits, and the finance committee has started studying the school financial ability to make this change.

## 4.6 – 4.9: Master of Arts

### **Overview of the MASC Degree**

Launched in August 2005 to meet the specific needs of the large number of our MDiv students interested in community justice work, Starr King's Master of Arts in Social Change program prepares students to become spiritually grounded, transformative leaders of social change. SKSM was among the first institutions of higher learning to formalize a counter-oppressive pedagogical focus in the form of a two-year professional master's degree, and the first theological school in the United States to do so. The overall aim of the degree is to establish an appropriate theological foundation and skill base for religious leadership in society, organizations, and institutions.

## Primary Goals of the Program

Graduates of Starr King's MASC degree program demonstrate skills in promoting goals of justice, equity and compassion in society through religious or secular institutions; providing an ethical grounding in ministerial and theological education to pursue students' passions; and improving professional competency in religious and social change. These skills are developed through the four primary goals of the school tied directly to its ECO mission. The MASC degree program aims to prepare spiritually grounded agents of social change and transformative leaders with the knowledge, professional skill, and personal capacities to:

1. *Cultivate multi-religious life and learning (Religious heritage)*
2. *Counter Oppressions and embracing radical hospitality (Cultural context)*
3. *Create just and sustainable/regenerative communities (Leadership)*
4. *Call forth compassion, wholeness, healing and liberation (Personal and spiritual formation)*

## Degree Requirements

Students matriculated in the MASC program must successfully complete the following requirements to be eligible to petition to graduate:

- A minimum of 48 units of credit distributed among the eight threshold Areas
- Educating to Create Just and Sustainable Communities that Counter Oppression core course (ECO), which must be taken within six months of matriculation
- Participation in at least one Starr King Symposium (including online participation)
- Community Internship (5 credits minimum) and Integrative Reflection Course (1 credit)
- Portfolio Conference at the midpoint of their program
- Final Project representative of the student's learning during the program (3 credits)

## Graduates' Vocational Roles

Graduates of the MASC program typically work as professionals in a wide variety of social-change settings centered on environmental, racial, economic, political and/or social justice. Their specific roles include, but are not limited to: community organizers, filmmakers, non-profit managers, researchers, activists, artists, teachers, youth ministers, storytellers, and church staff coordinating justice initiatives. These positions may be situated in secular, congregational, and/or interfaith settings. A few MASC graduates continued their integration of academic and justice work by successfully completing Ph.Ds. at institutions including the GTU, Union Theological Seminary in NYC and Claremont School of Theology.

## 4.8 MASC Learning Outcomes

### *Starr King's Model of Theological Education*

SKSM requires its MASC students to engage in in-depth and experiential learning through courses, individualized learning projects, advising, immersion experiences, supervised internships and field education, community gatherings and school chapels, symposia, spiritual practice and formation. These learning opportunities – both direct and indirect – are linked to Starr King's primary goals (the Four C's noted above) and its eight threshold areas. The articulation between program goals, thresholds, and learning outcomes is outlined below.

### *Learning Outcomes for MASC Students*

SKSM uses and follows the same Educational Standard (ES) in the MASC program as it does in the M.Div. program. SKSM's MASC degree programs are individually designed to integrate theology, spiritual practice, and professional development in response to students' particular interests and gifts. The MASC emphasizes not only theological knowledge, but practical experience in engaging SKSM's eight thresholds through a multi-religious, counter-oppressive lens, inspiring new insights and generating new forms of ministry and spiritual leadership to support and lead institutions and organizations that work for progressive social change.

Engaging with each threshold also requires students to deepen personal qualities and habits for successful spiritual leadership and/or ministry. The thresholds overlap and intersect with one another, and the primary goals of the program, in multiple ways. As students work with the thresholds, in dynamic interaction with one another, they develop a matrix of knowledge and skill that will enable them to move forward in the world equipped to offer ministry, serve as a chaplain or spiritual leader in ways that will demonstrate the primary goals of the program.

### Program Goal 1: Cultivating Multi-Religious Life and Learning (Heritage)

Learning Outcomes: Graduates have read and are able to utilize sacred texts from different religious traditions in their historical and cultural context. They are able to apply sacred texts to contemporary social change issues.

*(Threshold 3: Sacred Text and Interpretation)*

Learning Outcomes: Graduates are able to articulate their own theology and integrate theological language in their social change work. They value differing and conflicting theological ideas from a cultural and interreligious perspective.

*(Threshold 6: Thea/ology in Culture and Context)*

### Program Goal 2: Countering Oppressions and Embracing Radical Hospitality (Context)

Learning Outcomes: Graduates demonstrate an understanding of theological and ethical issues inherent in life and work, and the practice of social transformation. They have engaged critical issues of our time in a contextually sensitive manner that promotes radical hospitality.

*(Threshold 2: Prophetic Witness & Work)*



Learning Outcomes: Graduates understand their own religious practices within the historical context of religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, and social dissent. They demonstrate knowledge of the faith foundations of historical movements for social justice and transformation.  
*(Threshold 4: History of Dissenting Traditions & Theological Quest)*

#### Program Goal 3: Creating Just and Sustainable Communities (Leadership)

Learning Outcomes: Graduates have demonstrated capacity to work collaboratively in interfaith and secular communities to address local and global problems of inequity, conflict, and injustice.  
*(Threshold 1: Life in Religious Community & Interfaith Engagement)*

Learning Outcomes: Graduates are able to design and/or facilitate teaching and learning that is alert to cultural contexts, learning styles, and social locations. They have demonstrated the power of cultivating relationships in the development of wholeness, healing, and liberation of others and the earth.

*(Threshold: 7 Educating for Wholeness and Liberation)*

#### Program Goal 4: Calling Forth Wholeness, Healing, and Liberation (Formation)

Learning Outcomes: Graduates have personally sustaining spiritual practices. Students graduating with the MASC degree can integrate their sustaining spiritual practices, personal growth, and pastoral care into social change work.

*(Threshold 3: Spiritual Practice and Care of the Soul)*

Learning Outcome: Graduates demonstrate an understanding of embodiment, relationality, and the role of ritual and the arts in transformative social movements.

*(Threshold 8: Embodied Wisdom and Beauty)*

### **Coherent and Integrated Curriculum**

To meet the learning outcomes specified above, SKSM has intentionally consulted with students, staff, faculty, board, and community members to design, and continuously assess and revise, a strong, coherent, and integrated curriculum for its MASC students.

Graduates of the program have demonstrated meeting the learning outcomes of the eight thresholds directly through their threshold assessments and coursework in partnership with their advisor. In addition to the thresholds assessment and courses passed, graduates demonstrate competency in the learning outcomes through a mid-degree portfolio conference, and a combination of coursework, fieldwork with a required internship, independent study, experiential learning, and special projects.

## 4.9 MASC Program Evaluation

### *Assessment Measures and Practices*

SKSM employs a variety of assessment measures and practices, both direct and indirect, to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of its MASC program. These include but are not limited to:

- narrative course evaluations by faculty
- student evaluations of courses
- threshold student self-assessments
- student Portfolio Conferences
- evaluations by community and field site supervisors
- regular meetings with advisors
- petitions to graduate reviewed by faculty and decided upon by the board.

The Portfolio Conference, a mid-degree formation event which reviews a portfolio of the student's work at SKSM, always includes at least one external committee member who is a seasoned practitioner in the vocational field the student is interested in specialization.

### *Meeting Student Needs and Program Goals*

SKSM has developed and refined its assessment tools for data collection on how the MASC degree program is meeting the needs of MASC students and the school's program goals. This includes documentation of student learning outcomes by individual and by year; exit surveys with graduating students; and collecting data on the percentage of graduates who find appropriate placement, in alignment with their vocational goals, within one and sometimes two years after graduation. Additionally, in 2020 we started to ask an independent panel of outside scholars and practitioners to review the MASC projects completed by students, in addition to their portfolio reviews, internship evaluation and petitions to graduate, to verify achievement of degree goals and learning outcomes.

In the last five years, our review of the MASC program brought us to make changes that encountered the needs and vocational goals of the students. For instance, originally, we required a minimum of ten credits of internship work but changed it to five credits. We heard that the original demand burdened excessively the MASC students, as often their internships were unpaid or minimally paid. Additionally, we noticed that our students already came with consistent field experience, often carrying what many would describe as "burn out," and wanted to take coursework to gain better tools for sustainability, trauma informed approaches, and multi-religious organizing. We also learned that students valued their final MASC project as a laboratory where to test ideas and practices they hope would constitute a bridge to their future or ongoing community work, and we allow for even greater flexibility and creativity in the choice of projects, while requiring a structured project proposal to deepen their thinking and planning. Recent MASC project have included a counter-oppressive spiritual care handbook for people with breast cancer, a multimedia exhibit on the variety of experiences within the Jewish diaspora, a presentation on chaplaincy and neurodivergences, a collection of original spiritual resources by

and for sex workers, a curriculum for somatic approaches to unlearn white supremacy, and a grieving ritual for African descendants.

Since our last ATS Visit in 2019, a total of 29 students have graduated with the MASC program, including two who also graduated with the MDiv program. Currently, ten students are enrolled in the MASC program, and half of them also pursue the MDiv. In the first decade of the program, MASC students met regularly (weekly, then monthly) with the director of the program and each other, to support the creation of a MASC culture within the school. Currently, MASC students seem to be so integrated within the school (and maybe also so busy) not to want a dedicated space for reflection, networking and socializing, even an online forum. As we prepare to plan MASC twenty-year anniversary celebration in 2025, we will creatively think together about what our next steps will be.

## Conclusion

Our informal and formal processes of assessment and the work and witnesses of our graduates in their communities show us that the SKSM MDiv and MASC degrees are effective in forming skilled, compassionate, resourceful and courageous spiritual leaders for a world in constant change and undergoing significant challenges. Our students understand that, paraphrasing Joanna Macy, at different moments they may be called to be death doulas to our old world and birth doulas to new realities. They know that lifelong learning is absolutely necessary to be adaptive in an uncertain future. Threshold Assessments, Portfolio conferences, and Petitions to graduates are not only tools of student evaluation and degree assessment, but also deeply moving spiritual moments that witness to great transformation and growth. The faculty are committed to keep strengthening Starr King's formal processes of educational effectiveness and degree assessment while also making them more sustainable. Faculty is also committed to support the students by offering additional degree concentrations, to prepare students for emerging and uncommon vocational paths, and to consider all the ways we can collaborate with staff in easing student debt.

## Recommendations:

- Consider reduction of the M.Div. degree to 72 credits, to accelerate students' path to their vocations and potentially decrease their student debt. This will need to be reviewed to ensure that the curriculum aligns with vocational goals and denominational requirements.
- Fortify External Review Processes – SKSM may further enhance its degree assessment practices by increasing the number of external reviewers for student work, providing comprehensive feedback from seasoned practitioners and scholars in relevant fields.
- Create new concentrations to support students on other vocational paths including entrepreneurial ministry, justice work like community organizing, and spiritual direction.

# Standard 6. Library and Information Services

## 6.1 – 6.2: Library Purpose and Role

Starr King is served by an online library conducive to the online delivery of our academic programs: the Digital Theological Library 2. We began our transition from the use of the GTU Library with an initial subscription to DTL 2 in the months preceding the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, this aspect of transition to fully online learning was not disruptive to faculty and students.

While our departure from the GTU meant that students and faculty lost access to the vast resources of a large and established research library as a consequence, our students were already predominately low-residence prior to the pandemic and were not well-served by a physical collection. Even when students were present in Berkeley for week-long intensives, library hours coincided with classroom hours. The cost of maintaining a doctoral level research library had also become unsustainable for SKSM. Today it is still possible for SKSM to purchase GTU library cards for local students, faculty and research scholars that need them, yet overall we are satisfied with the collection that is available through DTL 2.

### 6.1 Library Purpose Statement

Since the spring of 2020, SKSM has subscribed to the DTL 2, “a co-owned, born-digital library of religious and theological studies” with the mission “to provide its co-owning institutions with the highest quality digital resources...at the lowest possible costs.”

*Use of the DTL 2's leased and purchased information resources is restricted to the DTL 2's co-owning institutions. Co-ownership is restricted to nonprofit graduate schools in religious and theological institutions without regard for religious affiliation. The DTL 2 is an independently incorporated 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation. The DTL 2 is governed by an executive committee elected by the co-owning institutions.*

### [About the DTL 2](#)

### 6.2 Library as Central Academic Resource

SKSM joined the second cohort of twenty graduate schools to utilize a database “that offers tens of thousands of journals and hundreds of thousands of books across multiple disciplines, extending beyond religious studies to include other fields in the humanities as well as the sciences.”

The Dean of the Faculty and the Coordinator of Academic Programs, in consultation with the rest of the faculty and in dialogue with student representatives, curate the relationship with the DTL 2 leadership and staff, including the research librarian and the acquisition director. A portion of the fee SKSM pays to the DTL 2 is used to buy books for the DTL 2 as directed by the SKSM faculty and supervised by the academic dean.

During the time that SKSM has participated in the DTL 2, it has improved its collection of Protestant and dissenting church history, as well as other texts required for SKSM courses. Requests are managed by the Coordinator of Academic Programs and priority is given to required texts, to ensure timely access for students.

The UUA's MFC traditionally maintains a reading list which is required of seminarians seeking fellowship as a UU minister. A new MFC resource list emerged in June 2024 and Starr King staff will work with DTL 2 to ensure their acquisition.

Students, faculty and staff can access the DTL 2 by using a single log in from Populi, our LMS. The interface feels similar to a physical library's search engine, and like them, has LibGuides, subject-specific bibliographies with active links to library materials. Access to the DTL 2 is now provided to current members of the SKSM community. However, SKSM is exploring expanding access to alumni of the school. As an online resource, the DTL 2 is available to students, staff, and faculty around the world, at any time.

## 6.1 – 6.10: Library Resources, Personnel, and Evaluation

The DTL 2 has a staff of three credentialed librarians, and a research librarian is available to consult with students or faculty. Students, faculty, research scholars and staff have access by email to the services of the DTL 2 Reference Librarian, from 8 am to noon Pacific, Monday through Friday. In addition, members of the SKSM community can schedule Zoom meetings to consult with the Reference Librarian, providing valuable support and guidance to explore and utilize scholarly sources for academic pursuits. This collaboration fosters a well-supported and resourceful educational journey at SKSM

Students are asked to assess their use of the DTL 2 in all course evaluations. There is more information for students about the DTL 2 in the Student Handbook and on the [SKSM website](#).

Although SKSM donated most of its books to the GTU library when it joined that consortium, it has retained ownership of its [Wilbur Rare Book Collection](#), a capsule collection curated by the first President of our institution. This is a 1300-volume library from the early sixteenth century through the nineteenth century, and more recent books published posthumously by Earl Morse Wilbur in 1957. The books trace the history and theology of Unitarianism as well as the refutations of Unitarianism. They are now stored securely in climate-controlled storage in Livermore, CA. Currently SKSM is exploring options to determine how best to take care of the rare books while providing access for scholars and digitizing the collection.

In addition to the Wilbur Rare Book Collection, a collection of papers belonging to SKSM's namesake, the Rev. Thomas Starr King, remains at the GTU library, on permanent loan by SKSM. It consists of seven boxes and four folios, including photographs and a scrapbook about King compiled by the Rev. Charles Wendte.

### **6.5 Adequacy and Use of Services**

It is hard to compare DTL Library statistics those from the GTU, as until the pandemic the GTU had extremely limited digital resources and SKSM students, mostly located outside the Bay area, had learned to use alternative options. Students have been invited to make use of the DTL2, and in the future we will be able to assess the success of the program compared with current statistics ([Starr King School for the Ministry DTL2 Usage Statistics.pdf](#), through May 2024). Already the culture has shifted to use the DTL 2 instead of buying books, which is environmentally responsible as well as more financially sustainable for students.

During faculty meetings, the Dean of the Faculty has checked regularly about faculty experiences with the DTL2. A questionnaire for a more formal evaluation will be developed and a formal review will take place in Spring 2026, marking three years of exclusive use of the digital library.

### **6.7 Library Resources**

SKSM has outsourced its library to the DTL 2, an entity accepted by the ATS for this purpose. The DTL 2 assumes responsibility for the collection, access to it, as well as all technology and other resources to support SKSM's degree programs. A portion of the subscription fee that SKSM pays to the DTL 2 funds acquisitions directed by SKSM faculty, supporting the curricular goals of SKSM degree programs and faculty research efforts.

[DTL FactSheet Accreditation.pdf](#)

### **6.8 Collection Development**

Members of the DTL are given a "selector" account for ebooks and can help direct acquisitions. Ebooks and journals are acquired content through ProQuest Ebook Central, Browns books (UK) & more than 30 other vendor contracts.

SKSM has been prioritizing the acquisition of texts for courses, texts necessary to the formation of Unitarian Universalist students preparing to be reviewed by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, and texts needed for faculty research. The Dean of Faculty determines how many copies to require for each new acquisition, making sure multiple people can have simultaneous access to books necessary for coursework.

## Conclusion

The difficult choice to leave the GTU and lose the use of its doctoral research library has enabled us to be more financially sustainable. The subscription to the Digital Theological Library 2 has enabled our geographically distributed faculty and students to have access to more extensive digital resources than in the past. The faculty continue to suggest acquisitions each term, enabling students to have digital access to course and research material. Consultation with a reference librarian is available to all users. Most faculty members use additional local and national library resources for their research, as the DTL 2 has limitations compared to when we had access to the GTU and UC Berkeley system in Berkeley. The DTL 2 has recently made us aware that we can increase the annual sum of our acquisition; financial planning for this is needed. Currently, the CAO/Dean of Faculty and the Coordinator of Academic Programs maintain relations with the DTL 2 staff and leadership, but this is a time-consuming additional responsibility.

### Recommendations:

- Develop and implement a plan for the permanent disposition of The Wilbur Rare Book Collection. Given the significance of SKSM's Wilbur Collection, SKSM should prioritize its preservation, digitization, and access to this valuable resource.
- Updates from the DTL 2 – Information and updates from the DTL 2 about new acquisitions would facilitate their use by the SKSM community
- Offer alumni access to the DTL 2 to foster lifelong learning and encourage their continued engagement with SKSM. Alumni access will benefit their ongoing public scholarship and professional development.

## Standard 7. Student Services

In a tumultuous time when there have been many changes to SKSM, including two new locations, there has been less turnover of Student Services staff than in previous years. A welcome addition to the Student Services team has been the new role of Director of Spiritual Care

Leaving the GTU created an opportunity to reimagine the software systems serving students. When SKSM prepared to transition from the GTU, a team comprised of faculty and staff studied a variety of LMS systems and evaluated them for SKSM's needs. SKSM already used Populi for registration management, and it had capabilities for financial aid and course management and delivery that SKSM was not utilizing. In choosing Populi, SKSM consolidated access to registration, financial aid, academic courses and the library for students.

### 7.1 Student Services Personnel

The Student Services personnel at SKSM include the Dean of Students, the Director of Admissions and Recruitment, the Registrar, the Director of Digital Learning, the Director of Spiritual Care, and the Student Accounts Manager. Four of these individuals have held their positions since before the previous Self-Study, and the remaining two were hired early in the COVID-19 pandemic. This stability has ensured steady collaboration and continual improvement of processes and policies.

These individuals meet regularly in different constellations to coordinate delivery of services, solve issues, and engage in advance planning. The Dean of Students attends all Faculty Meetings, where student concerns and issues pertaining to the academic program are discussed. The Dean of Students addresses student needs through oversight of Title IX procedures, disability accommodations, emergency financial relief, and collaborates with other faculty and staff on specific cases.

Individual staff undertake professional development by attending trainings and webinars conducted by organizations such as ATS, the American Academy of Religion, and NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education).

### 7.2 – 7.4: Student Recruitment and Admissions

SKSM attracts and accepts students into our programs from a broad variety of academic backgrounds and with diverse professional and personal interests and life experiences. SKSM's admissions requirements do not call for specific undergraduate coursework, but instead consider the whole person. SKSM students include those with Ph.Ds., or those who have completed



careers and now want to “give back” to the community, as well as those who have experienced a long-delayed spiritual call to seminary. The SKSM application process anticipates this diversity among our applicants.

SKSM’s student recruitment policies and practices are outlined on the website under the heading entitled [“Admissions,”](#) and its subheadings: Why Starr King, Tuition Connect With Us, Financial Aid, How to Apply, Take a Class, Transferring to SKSM, FAQ. Admissions requirements for each program are listed in the program descriptions under the heading entitled [“Academics.”](#)

Examples of SKSM’s student recruitment practices and policies align with the purpose of the institution introduced in [“Why Starr King,”](#) a warm welcome to prospective students with information about our identity as a flagship institution of prophetic Unitarian Universalist and multi-religious theological education. This prologue appeals to the type of students SKSM seeks by anchoring student recruitment in SKSM’s purpose and mission.

Prospective students are guided by our website to explore their call to spiritual leadership by:

- Arranging an Admissions Information Session by filling out a “Prospective Student Form”
- Contacting the Admissions Office by phone or email to [admissions@sksm.edu](mailto:admissions@sksm.edu) for more information
- Scheduling a one-one-one conversation with the Admissions Office through Calendly
- Attending an SKSM event, such as monthly chapel, an Open House, or an event by the Center for Multi-Religious Studies
- Watching a recorded Open House video on demand

The website, through subheadings under the Admissions heading, allows the prospective student an opportunity to explore our educational programs and recruitment process. SKSM supports prospective students and their spiritual discernment process in ways important to each applicant, responsive to their queries. The following student recruitment practices attract students:

In order to widen the funnel of prospective students and donors, Starr King must enter new markets using new tools. But the addition of these marketing efforts into our work alone would be impossible and unsustainable. Using leftover marketing dollars from the previous fiscal year, we have covered the start-up fees – as well as three months of service fees – for additional services with our Google Ad Grant marketing company, Cause Inspired Media. In the coming months, they will help us with social media advertising (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn), Facebook and Google remarketing, and search engine optimization (SEO). We feel confident that these efforts will be successful.

## **Outreach**

SKSM plans and participates in outreach events that will reach those applicants whose interests align with our mission, principles and programs of study, such as the UUA General Assembly,

Regional Assemblies, Parliament of World Religions, Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, faith-inspired social justice events such as the Wild Goose Festival, Green the Church, Rise-Climate, Jobs with Justice and other similar events. SKSM is also exploring other potential avenues, such as Idealist Grad School Fairs. In addition, SKSM recruits from historically marginalized communities, such as Black colleges and organizations and LGBTQIA+ community events. SKSM strives to invite students of all races, ethnicity, faith, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and/or disability to join us. All marketing efforts and language reflect this commitment.



Director of Admissions Matthew Waterman with the SKSM display booth at the UUA Pacific Western Regional Assembly in April 2024

## Digital Marketing

SKSM designed its website to support the interests of prospective students and applicants. Prospective students are encouraged to request information by filling out a “Prospective Student” form and then they are prompted to complete an online application. The website provides accessible, comprehensive and accurate information regarding SKSM’s mission, values, history, educational philosophy, affiliations, academic programs, admissions practices, policy and compliance, faculty and staff, news and events. Marketing strategies such as search engine optimization (SEO), e.g., keywords, ensure that SKSM reaches prospective students who are curious about our mission and programs. The website’s language evokes the call to religious leadership, Unitarian Universalism, sacred activism, multi-religious life and learning, radical education, sacred path, and “the life of spirit, sacrifice and service.”

Videos with student testimonials about their experiences feature on the website, which links to various social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. These social media platforms provide versatile cost-effective ways to reach prospective students who may be interested in SKSM. All posts and videos align with our mission and values, encouraging participation in social justice actions, upcoming events, spotlighting student testimonials. SKSM social media posts link to the website which encourages prospective students to click through to our website and explore the school.

After prospective students' introduction to SKSM, one-on-one meetings with the Director of Admissions and Recruitment are a significant connection with conversations that become much more than a tool for admissions. In addition to answering questions, the Director of Admissions helps each prospective student with their discernment. This helps applicants articulate their call to ministry and explore where their passions intersect with the needs of the world.

When SKSM transitioned to a new website and updated the logo and branding in 2022, counterintuitively inquiries were down more than 65 percent year-over-year from the previous August and 85 percent in September. An investigation established that this was in part due to our lack of search engine optimization (SEO) on the website, as well as some unavoidable changes imposed by Google. SKSM staff quickly and effectively worked through each page of the website to add SEO to each page, lowering the year-over-year decline to under 10 percent in January 2024.

SKSM also recently changed Google Ads marketing companies to Cause Inspired, which has a history of working with UU congregations. In part, financial reasons drove this decision: however, after a short time of working with the new company, the positive impact includes not only more searches and clickthrough, but higher quality leads. The last twelve months of data show increased clicks from our Google Ad grant by 74.27 percent, impressions by 12.8 percent, clickthrough rate by 54.5 percent, conversion rate by 369 percent, all while decreasing our average cost per click by 58.7 percent, and overall cost by \$2781.62. This transition has brought overall cost savings and improved lead generation both quantitatively and qualitatively. SKSM continues to work directly with Cause Inspired monthly to brainstorm campaigns, keywords, and other strategies to improve search results.

In order to widen the funnel of prospective students and donors, Starr King must enter new markets using new tools. But the addition of these marketing efforts into our work alone would be impossible and unsustainable. Using leftover marketing dollars from the previous fiscal year, we have covered the start-up fees – as well as three months of service fees – for additional services with our Google Ad Grant marketing company, Cause Inspired Media. In the coming months, they will help us with social media advertising (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn), Facebook and Google remarketing, and search engine optimization (SEO). We feel confident that these efforts will be successful.

### **Campus Visits and Tours**

While campus visits paused during the acute pandemic, recently they have resumed. For students wanting to connect in-person, Admissions staff offer in-person visits in the Bay Area – either on campus in Oakland or another public location. Other opportunities for students to connect include a menu of options including Open Houses, Open Houses on Demand, worshipping with us at Chapel, in person or online, and invitations to events at SKSM throughout the year.

Because courses are offered online, prospective students may sit in on a SKSM class, with the

consent by the class, and experience the power of SKSM pedagogy.

### **Print Marketing Materials**

SKSM's print materials include brochures and promotional items that we call "swag." The print materials provide condensed information similar in content and design to the website. The brochures advertise SKSM's UU heritage and philosophy, its programs of study, and the mission to counter oppression and create just and sustainable communities. These materials direct students to the website or SKSM for additional information, including potential career opportunities for graduates. The promotional swag such as bags, wrist bands, or stickers imprinted with the school's name and logo, attract attention and function as branding. The updated logo and branding signal the future, emphasizing the perennial relevance of SKSM's mission and purpose.

Over the past year, SKSM has also experimented with other print and digital advertising, including *Jacobin Magazine*. Future options for print advertising include Pagan publications *Sage Woman*, and *Witches & Pagans*, Buddhist publication *Lions Roar*, and others that appeal to those with aligned mission and vision.

Because SKSM is one of the only accredited schools that trains Pagan Chaplains, especially for the United States Military, SKSM has searched for new ways to identify these prospective students, including through print materials.

### **Scholarships**

SKSM collaborates with the UUA to offer the UU President's Scholarship on an annual basis. This scholarship is used to recruit students of color and covers full tuition and defrays living expenses in the first year of study. Several additional scholarships support minorities and women, including the Lewis Scholarships, which provide full tuition for up to three years, to widen the path to ministry by supporting students who might otherwise be excluded by the expense of a seminary education. Furthermore, Starr King offers smaller scholarships to minimize student debt.

Last year, to supplement the decrease in endowment dollars, the Board of Trustees donated personal funds to create the Ted Fetter Scholarship, to honor the service of the Board President who shepherded SKSM through recent challenges including leaving the GTU, selling the building, and navigating the pandemic. This new scholarship is already providing additional scholarship dollars to SKSM students.

Scholarships attract new students and supplement support for our current students. Advertising the number of students that receive institutional support has increased admissions applications.

In addition to the recruitment practices listed above, SKSM provides clear information on the potential vocational opportunities available to graduates of our programs on the [website](#):

*SKSM's M.Div. prepares people for vocations in*

- *Congregational ministry*
- *Community ministry*
- *Religious Education ministry*
- *Chaplaincy*
- *Related forms of religious leadership in diverse religious traditions*

The description of the Master of Arts in Social Change program is designed to attract students who wish to prepare for leadership in society through institutions and vocations that serve the common good by working for justice, equity and compassion and develop skills in:

- *Promoting goals of justice, equity and compassion in society, through religious or secular institutions*
- *Providing an ethical grounding in ministerial and theological education to pursue individual passions*
- *Improving professional competency in religion and social change*

Additionally, SKSM's social media platforms offer prospective students insight into the careers of recent alumni, for example, a video by a member of the class of 2020, who talks about her calling and formation through her [education at SKSM](#). Opportunities for employment for alumni are also promoted in a weekly newsletter, Starr King This Week, and through social media.

### **Admissions Policies**

SKSM admissions policies and practices are adhered to by the Admissions staff and the Admissions committee in their work to review applications and accept candidates. The Admissions committee traditionally consists of the President, two members of faculty, two students, and the Director of Admissions and Recruitment. While the Director of Admissions and Recruitment convenes and attends the committee meetings, the Director is not a voting member of the committee.

### **Admissions Requirements**

All students admitted to SKSM possess the requisite undergraduate degree for the program to which they are admitted or demonstrate equivalency, if applicable. The established admissions criteria for each degree program includes the following: applicant's academic background, personal and spiritual experience, a commitment to social justice, and countering oppressions, and the potential to serve diverse multi-faith communities and the world. The admissions application process is designed to ensure the criteria are met for each degree program. The following is an overview of the process:

1. The applicant is required to submit an online application on the SKSM website.

The requirements for the Master of Divinity and the Master of Arts in Social Change include

official transcripts from all institutions of higher education attended, seven essays addressing Admissions criteria, an autobiographical statement that reveals the applicant's personal and/or professional experience, three letters of recommendation, an admissions interview and a \$65.00 application fee. [Essay Application example](#). Admission to the [Chaplaincy Concentration requires supplemental essays](#).

Once the application is complete, an Admissions staff member schedules an interview with the applicant to discuss their application and interest in SKSM. The Admissions staff member uses an Applicant Interview Guide as a rubric to guide the meeting and to support the application process for acceptance. The Admissions staff member next recommends acceptance, provisional acceptance, or denial, which is shared with the committee during the Admissions Committee meeting for final determination.

2. The Admissions Committee members review the application in its entirety using the Applicant Evaluation as a rubric to discern the applicant's qualifications for acceptance. [Applicant Evaluation form](#). The committee makes the final decision on each applicant.

SKSM's admission policies and process meet the essential standards required for admission into post-baccalaureate level programs. The candidate's capacity to meet the admissions criteria for each master's program is evaluated by verifying the educational background of each prospective student through the review of official transcripts, assessment of written essays that address the admissions criteria, three letters of recommendation, and an interview. The committee's evaluation is the final step in the process, which applies to all student applicants. Because it is a standardized process, the criteria for acceptance are the same for all students. In this way, the Admissions Committee upholds the mission and purpose of the institution.

## 7.5 – 7.7: Student Support Services

During each New Student Orientation, the Dean of Students and the Director of Spiritual Care introduce matriculants to an overall vision of student support at SKSM, in which all parties collaborate to build a “braver and safer” community where all identities are valued, all voices are heard, and all willingly share our truths with one another.

Student services personnel address student safety by ensuring a learning environment that prevents and, when necessary, addresses instances of bias, harassment, or sexual misconduct. The Dean of Students serves as the Title IX Coordinator and, alongside the Associate Dean of Faculty as Deputy Title IX Coordinator, maintain an up-to-date and legally compliant Sexual Misconduct Policy. All entering students complete mandated sexual harassment training online. Faculty and staff complete mandated sexual harassment training biannually.

Accountability for upholding Starr King's standards of behavior and stated ECO commitments is addressed through our Academic or Personal Dispute Policy and the Bias Incident Reporting process. Additionally, the advisory body known as [Team ECO](#) monitors the school's enactment

of its stated counter-oppressive vision and makes recommendations.

The Dean of Students oversees the disability accommodation process and recently completed a review and revision of SKSM policy as well as a new application form based on current best practices in higher education. The Dean is pursuing additional training with the goal of enhancing inclusive practices.

The Director of Spiritual Care provides robust pastoral care and support for students' spiritual lives. This program includes our monthly online Chapel as well as a "drop-in" spiritual practice session held during the intervening weeks. The Director also conducts group spiritual direction and one-on-one pastoral counseling.

Student retention has been strengthened through the employment of emergency financial grants. During the pandemic, these included the HEERF monies that SKSM received through the federal stimulus acts. The ongoing, donor-supported SKSM Relief Fund allows SKSM to support community members when acute financial crises arise.

## **7.6 Conduct Policies and Procedures**

Policies stipulating students' rights and responsibilities are published in the [Student Handbook](#), which is subject to annual review and revision. The Student Handbook is available on the SKSM website where it may be downloaded.

Program requirements, tuition and fees and academic policies are all clearly stated in the Student Handbook and on the school website. Student financial aid is distributed according to the ATS Policy Guidelines, with oversight provided by FA Solutions, a service vendor.

The Student Handbook clearly states policies regarding students' rights and responsibilities, as well as SKSM's "code of discipline," especially in the Community Policies section. The Handbook includes processes to address formal student complaints of an academic nature and regarding personal character.

## **7.7 Student Records**

SKSM maintains permanent physical and digital files for all matriculated students, including coursework evaluations, Threshold Self-Assessments, Portfolio Conference records, and signed institutional forms. The physical files are stored in locked, fireproof file cabinets in the Registrar's office. The digital versions are uploaded to Populi. The Registrar holds primary responsibility for filing and maintaining these records in both formats. Inquiries and applications for admission are all conducted through Populi and automatically saved there.

Student Files from Spring 2020 back to Spring 2015 are stored in paper format in locked filing cabinets in the locked Registrar's Office onsite. Some of these more recent files are also in digital format on former student's Populi pages. Paper files older than 2015 are stored off site around the

corner from the office at a fireproof storage facility. They are stored in locked waterproof, fireproof archival cases.

Current and future Student Files are kept exclusively in password protected and access-limited digital format. The files are kept in two separate systems.

The primary storage is in the Student Information System (SIS) Populi. This is backed up daily by Populi. Populi users have roles and permissions that restrict access. The only roles that have access to the student files are the Registrar, and the Academic Admins in Populi (these include the Dean of Faculty, the Registrar, the Student Accounts Manager, the Associate Dean of Faculty, the Dean of Students, the Director of Admissions, the Director of Digital Learning, and the President). The secondary storage is in the SKSM SharePoint in the Dean of Faculty's folder and subfolders. The only people with access to this folder are the Dean of Faculty, the Registrar, and the Assistant to the Dean of Faculty. The SKSM SharePoint is maintained by our technology provider Endsight. They have confirmed to us our data is backed up by them via Skykick on a daily basis.

## 7.8 – 7.9: Student Financial Aid and Borrowing

SKSM believes that anyone who has the desire to better their community should have the opportunity to pursue that honorable goal. Thus, financial aid and scholarships are offered to those who qualify. To qualify for financial aid, students must fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) online and the SKSM Institutional Tuition Scholarship Application. The SKSM Financial Aid Office is available to students to counsel them about loan debt and borrowing as they begin their spiritual journeys. All students are required to undergo entrance counseling on loan debt and borrowing. The online Financial Aid Portal, operated by our service vendor, FA Solutions, requires students to acknowledge loan conditions and available resources before accepting a loan. Information about financial aid is reviewed and updated annually and included in the Student Handbook and on the SKSM website.

### 7.9 Debt Relief

All students are required to undergo entrance counseling on loan debt and borrowing. The online Financial Aid Portal, operated by the service vendor, FA Solutions, requires students to acknowledge loan conditions and available resources before accepting a loan. Students may lower the total award via the Portal. Students receive exit counseling upon withdrawal from the program or during their last semester of registration.



## 7.10 – 7.11: Student Career and Placement Services

SKSM employs a variety of tools to assist students to find relevant and meaningful employment after graduation. Academic advisors frequently play a crucial role through direct coaching in methods and opportunities pertaining to networking, searching for position announcements, and interviewing, as well as writing letters of recommendation. Faculty also closely advise students who are applying to doctoral programs. The Director of Contextual Education and the Director of the Chaplaincy Concentration advise interested students regarding the requirements to become certified chaplains. Students in the MASC degree program are encouraged to develop internship experiences in fields where they wish to fulfill their calling, while their MASC capstone projects assist them in gaining additional clarity about their vocation after graduation. The SKSM Graduate Association and a new “connections” page for alumni on the SKSM website both provide ongoing opportunities for networking and announcements of job opportunities. In addition, job openings are posted in the SKSM newsletter, Starr King This Week, and on SKSM social media platforms.

SKSM works to ensure that students who seek employment as fellowshipped UU ministers are well prepared to meet the UUA’s credentialing body, the MFC. To this end, SKSM has created the UU Concentration, to support students preparing for the MFC. During new students’ Orientation, interested students are invited to meet with the UUA’s Ministerial Credentialing Director, while a parallel vocational program is offered for students who do not plan to become UU ministers.

SKSM is blessed with faculty who have served, and who still serve, in a variety of leadership roles within the UUA and other UU organizations. Through their networks and their teaching, students are assisted in exploring a wide variety of ministries – parish ministries, chaplaincy (hospital, military, campus, hospice), social justice and entrepreneurial.

As the process of finding internships, initial employment, and ongoing success in UU ministry is supported by a strong network of collegial relationships, SKSM actively collaborates with the UU Ministers Association (UUMA) to help interested students participate in the UU Ministerial Formation Network (MFN) retreats and discernment groups. SKSM has its own online MFN discernment group under the supervision of the Director of Spiritual Care.

SKSM actively encourages UU students to attend meetings of UU organizations through which they can learn more about the larger landscape of UU ministry and expand their network of collegial relationships. Travel stipends through SKSM’s Personal Growth and Learning fund help students attend the annual UUA General Assembly and the UUMA’s Ministry Days. UU students of color are encouraged to attend the annual “Finding Our Way Home” retreat for UU religious professionals of color. Black UU students are encouraged to participate in convenings offered by [Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism](#).

In the past, SKSM managed an email list serve “UU Formation” to provide UU students with additional information about employment, scholarships, and other opportunities of special interest.

Now this information is available to students through the Starr King This Week newsletter, the UU Concentration, and across SKSM’s social media platforms.

SKSM’s Director of the UU Concentration was ordained 35 years ago and is SKSM’s primary point of contact with the UUA Ministerial Credentialing Office and various other UU institutions. The UU Concentration serves as an additional source of support and guidance for UU students as they navigate the fellowship process, and the transition from seminarian to employment.

### 7.11 Placement Monitoring

Postgraduate Placement (ATS categories)		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of graduating students		17	18	22	19	18
Vocational placement		65%	45%	86%	95%	89%
Further study (includes CPE/internship)		12%	28%	5%	0	11%
Total “Positive Placement”		77%	73%	91%	95%	100%

Historically, the tracking of the placement of graduates was managed by the Dean of Students, but when this position was temporarily cut, it lost an official functional home at SKSM. It has been the Assessment Co-Directors and the Dean of Faculty/CAO’s responsibility, in consultation with the Director of Admissions and Recruitment. Although this process has been adequate to track graduate employment, there are discussions about the creation of a more robust system, perhaps through the new alumni networking page on the SKSM website, or through the records of the Vice President of Advancement, in coordination with the graduate surveys.

### Conclusion

If SKSM’s mission is the beating heart of our institution, student services might be the muscles and skeleton, the infrastructure that supports students as they pursue their vocation. Low turnover in staff with the addition of the Director of Spiritual Care have fortified SKSM’s vision of braver and safer community. In addition, disability services and accessibility measures have improved. However, as admissions numbers have declined, SKSM seeks new strategies for recruiting students, and new strategies for career placement and networking opportunities for students who are not UUs. Students would appreciate additional resources for financial planning during their degree program, including an initial package of aid available for the entire degree, upon admission, so they can forecast expenses.

## Recommendations:

- Develop a comprehensive system to monitor alumni placement data to provide more accurate and detailed insights into alumni vocational outcomes. This might involve utilizing the new alumni networking page on the SKSM website or collaborating with the Vice President of Advancement to streamline data collection and analysis.
- Expand Outreach and Recruitment through continuing to diversify recruitment efforts by exploring additional avenues for outreach, such as Pagan publications and Buddhist organizations. Invest in targeted marketing strategies to reach underrepresented communities and promote SKSM's unique programs and values.
- Strengthen Financial Aid and Debt Counseling – by providing additional support to students navigating loan debt and borrowing through workshops and curated resources to help students make informed decisions about their options and manage debt sustainably.
- Offer more complete financial aid packages to successful applicants to facilitate their planning for their SKSM education
- Conduct a comprehensive review of all Student Services.

## Standard 8. Faculty

Starr King's unique educational vision has continued to be carried on faithfully by a group of committed and gifted faculty. SKSM faculty are mainly comprised of people traditionally underrepresented in the academy: women, queer people, and people of color. White women are the largest represented group. For the 2024-2025 academic year, Starr King employs a total of twenty-six faculty members for a full-time equivalency (FTE) of 14. Faculty have responsibilities in teaching, advising, formation, administration and other areas of the school's programs and departments.

### 8.1 Responsibilities

Faculty have responsibilities in teaching, advising, formation, administration and other areas of the school's programs and departments.

#### **Faculty Meetings**

All core and advising faculty to attend regular monthly meetings where they make decisions about degrees, the implementation of our curricula, academic practices, advising, formation questions and students' readiness to graduate. The faculty meetings are also an opportunity for faculty to consult one another regarding urgent student concerns and to receive reports from faculty committee representatives as well as staff and student leaders.

#### **Faculty Study Times**

Faculty gather monthly for study time, which focuses mainly on issues that require deeper dialogue among colleagues, particularly as pertains to the mission and vision of the school. These are monthly two and a half hour meetings to work on professional development topics, or to share and discuss faculty scholarship and other work. For example, a recent Faculty Study Time featured a presentation on Ethics and AI from a panel of five members of faculty.

#### **Matriculation and Orientation**

Faculty advisors are one of the first points of contact for new students when they matriculate. Many faculty members also play a role in planning the worship services and workshops included in Orientation, a multi-day online introduction to the school. This includes zero-credit course modules pertaining to seminary education, the history and culture of SKSM, and spiritual care. Entering students also have their first 1:1 advising meeting, and complete their initial TSA, an

iterative inventory of distributed formation learning, in their first semester at SKSM.

## **Graduation**

Faculty advisors support students through the graduation process by working with them to determine their readiness to graduate. When a student petitions to graduate, their petition is reviewed and discussed by the whole faculty body during faculty meeting times. Students are asked to submit a revised TSA that articulates their readiness to graduate. This serves as an important component of our assessment plan.

Faculty also play a significant programmatic and ceremonial role in Commencement exercises, which have been online or hybrid since the pandemic.

## **Faculty Representation on School-wide Committees**

Faculty are active on all committees of the school, depending on the time allotted by their particular contracts.

### *Admissions/Recruitment*

The faculty representatives on the admissions committee provide the faculty perspective in deliberations and vote on completed applications for degree programs at the school. The Director of Admissions and Recruitment relies on their experience with teaching and learning at the school and their insight into the relationship between an applicant's materials and the mission and programs of the school.

### *Curriculum Committee*

Two faculty representatives serve on the Curriculum Committee, in addition to the Dean of Faculty/CAO, who chairs the committee. This committee collaborates on all items related to pedagogy and curriculum to support the work of the Dean of the Faculty and the Academic Affairs Committee, from evaluations and their rubrics to the two-year matrix for course offerings, as well as serving on the selection committee for the Hilda Mason Teaching Fellowship. Recent endeavors include the development of classroom principles and a statement on anonymity and course evaluations.

## **8.2 Composition**

Starr King's faculty have been selected because their knowledge and gifts provide diverse and important voices that challenge and enrich theological education. Additionally, their work resonates with the school's commitment to transformative pedagogies and to educate to counter oppressions and build just, sustainable communities. The current composition of the faculty reflects a diversity of genders, races, ethnicities, and religious traditions. Particular attention is placed on fostering diversity within academic leadership. Since its adoption of its ECO

commitment in 1998, SKSM has focused on hiring faculty who have been historically underrepresented within the academy. For example, the last four academic deans and CAOs of the school have included two Black men, two white women, three queer people, and three people living with chronic disabilities. The core faculty is currently composed of one Black woman, one white American man, one white Italian woman, three white American women, and one Iranian American man. The advising faculty is currently composed of two Jewish women, three people of color, five white women, and one white man. Three people on faculty are from other countries (Argentina, Egypt, and Italy). SKSM's multi-religious commitment is also reflected in the religious diversity of the faculty. Currently the faculty (not including adjuncts) is composed of:

Unitarian Universalist – 5

Jewish – 2 (one secular)

Christian (Baptist, Lutheran, Old Catholic, Waldensian) – 4

Muslim – 1

Buddhist – 1

Pagan – 1

It's important to note that several members of SKSM's faculty identify as multi-religious and belong to more than one religious tradition (e.g., Christian-UU, Christian-Buddhist, Muslim-Buddhist).

As typical in academic institutions, the faculty categories are compatible with traditional graduate education standards: full professor, associate, assistant, visiting, adjunct and Research Scholars. Of our fifteen faculty members, four teach full-time, double the number from our last report. Two more faculty work full time but also hold substantial part-time administrative responsibilities (CAO Dean of Faculty and Associate Dean/ATS Co-Director of Assessment).

Five of the faculty advising students are permanent Core Faculty, with one additional full-time faculty, and the rest are part-time faculty with two-year contracts. The titles of advising faculty appropriately reflect their rank as assistant, associate and full professor, depending on experience. In 2019, only two of the faculty advisors were full time and now there are six.

### 8.3 Qualifications

Currently there are eleven members of faculty who have completed an earned doctorate. Other members of faculty serve as professors of practice, qualified by their extensive experience in their area of teaching, such as transformative rituals, homiletics, community organizing, leadership development, interfaith chaplaincy and social justice activism. This faculty composition allows SKSM to tend to the different formation needs of a diverse student body.

We are proud of our faculty members with academic credentials, organizational and professional

affiliations, with expertise in multiple disciplines connected to the curriculum and our thresholds, or standards, based on knowledge and vocational experience. Together, they hold expertise and knowledge in areas compelling attention for twenty-first century ministers and religious leaders, to counter oppression, engage in trauma response, dismantle white supremacy and support democracy and repair to build just communities.

With the exception of the President, who is a Professor of the Practice, six of the seven members of Core Faculty have earned doctorates. Two teach full time, one teaches half-time and serves as Chief Academic Officer and the Dean of Faculty, one is the Associate Dean who teaches three-quarter time with administrative responsibilities including Co-Director of Assessment. The Dean of Students has limited teaching responsibilities, while the President teaches one course a year. At the time SKSM left the GTU in 2020, some of the faculty served as GTU Consortial faculty, with one member of the GTU Core Doctoral Faculty (still serving in this role in a limited way as a volunteer).

The core faculty are supported by an advising faculty body that mediates the educational practices of the school through advising degree candidates, teaching courses, and supporting SKILs (Starr King Individualized Learning courses, or independent research courses), as well as serving on school committees. In 2019, in response to ATS guidance, SKSM transformed our advising model to be less demanding of faculty time and more sustainable for the institution.

In addition to the changes in the advising report, SKSM hired a Director of Spiritual Care . This is a part-time position, filled by an experienced UU minister who is also a credentialed clinical social worker and a military veteran. The Director of Spiritual Care acts as chaplain, spiritual director and a resource to students, faculty and staff; this allows advisors to focus on students' academic goals for formation and progress in their vocation.

Currently SKSM has ten faculty serving as advisors, for an FTE of 7.5. A full-time advising load is currently between eight and twelve students. All advisors are invited to the faculty meetings and always have speaking rights.

Our core and advising faculty are joined each year by adjunct faculty who add an array of talents to our course offerings. Some of our adjunct faculty members are Starr King or Graduate Theological Union graduates who return to the school with broad expertise in progressive religious issues.

In addition to the regular faculty, each year up to two SKSM students are selected by the Curriculum Committee to teach a three-credit course as a Hilda Mason Teaching Fellow. This is a highly competitive process, and the [Hilda Mason Fellowship](#) proposals must satisfy criteria including originality, multi-religiosity, and support the counter-oppressive mission of SKSM. This fellowship was named for the Honorable Hilda Mason (1916-2007), a teacher, civil rights activist, city council member, and a prominent leader in Washington, DC. A member of All Souls Unitarian Church, Hilda Mason was the recipient of an honorary doctorate from Starr King School for the Ministry and served as a former trustee of SKSM.

All members of faculty, including the Hilda Mason Fellows, are [listed on the SKSM website](#) with brief biographical descriptions and links to their course descriptions.

## 8.4 Faculty Support

The work of the faculty and the Dean of Faculty/Chief Academic Officer is supported by the Coordinator of Academic Programs. There has been no turnover in this role since the last ATS report and the significantly high skills and experience have been a major contribution to the efficiency of the academic office.

Another change for faculty has eliminated annual contracts and replaced them with two-year contracts. This provides more stability for faculty and facilitates longer term planning for the Dean of Faculty/Chief Academic Officer. Because of the variety of part-time positions offered to our faculty, these letters of appointment and understanding include important information about the specific responsibilities for each faculty member. Faculty are compensated according to their role and percentage worked. The Dean of the Faculty/CAO works in collaboration with the President and the interim Chief Financial Officer to determine the appropriate compensation for faculty, to reward their commitment to the excellence and uniqueness of the school.

### Faculty Compensation

Fair compensation has been an area of constant challenge and growth for the school, and it has been regularly reported to and discussed by the Board of Trustees. One of the school's key challenges is how to fulfill our educational mission in a sustainable way, while also respecting SKSM's ECO commitments to fair salaries. Three years ago, the Academic Affairs Committee of the Board and members of the Finance Committee reviewed SKSM salary compensation and determined that all faculty (and staff) salaries should be aligned with ATS median salaries. This has not yet happened for all faculty and staff members. Adjustment of the salaries to the cost of living is also an issue. The Board of Trustees and the administration continue to explore different options, in dialogue with the Dean of Faculty/CAO.

### Workload

A full-time teaching load includes teaching at least 12 credits, guiding one to three independent studies (SKIL) each term, advising eight to twelve master-level students, serving on at least one faculty committee, participating in the ritual, academic and social life of the school, on campus or in online/hybrid mode. Our holistic advising model is one of the most appreciated features of our educational model, and changes made since our last ATS visit have made this less time-consuming. A large percentage of our students struggle with financial and vocational issues, with micro and macro aggressions within and outside their faith communities, and with mental and physical health challenges. Our faculty is careful to respect the boundaries of their roles, yet



committed to advising the whole person, addressing the impact of all the different issues affecting students' learning and formation to spiritual leadership. Many of our students are at the fringes of their religious movements, and/or involved in creating cutting-edge entrepreneurial ministries and forms of activism. This guidance accompanying our students has changed as our students are now almost entirely online. More students attend part-time, and part-time students may take longer to become familiar with the educational practices and may be stretched by other commitments for their work, activism, and family lives. SKSM faculty and administration are committed to find and model more sustainable work practices so that future leaders can learn from this lived praxis.

The work of part-time faculty is carefully negotiated with the Dean of Faculty/CAO each year and discussed and revised during the year as necessary, as a work in progress.

### **Retention**

SKSM does not offer tenure but has long-term contracts for core faculty hired through national searches or promoted from within after recommendation of the Dean of Faculty and review by the Academic Affairs Committee of the SKSM Board of Trustees, with a subsequent vote by the Board. The faculty handbook indicates that serving as permanent core faculty implies no further evaluations for contracts, though it may involve periodic qualitative evaluations for promotion in professorial rank. The Bylaws of the school state that members of the faculty holding the rank of professor hold office until resignation or removal by the Board of Trustees by a two-thirds vote unless otherwise provided in the letter of employment. The personnel policies specify that the contract can be terminated by the school if the faculty member has failed to perform the duties for which they have been hired, or if the faculty member has engaged in grievous misconduct, or if financial exigency forces a reduction of employees. Traditionally the work of core faculty is reviewed annually by the Dean of Faculty/CAO, and by the whole Board of Trustees when a faculty member is nominated by the Dean of Faculty/CAO for a change in rank.

Core faculty retention has also been assured by the offer of regular sabbaticals, one semester after 3 and a half years, or a full year after seven years of service. The sustainability of core faculty positions has often been discussed: traditionally, new duties have tended to fall on their shoulders as they were the only faculty working full time. They have fulfilled a number of roles including administrative responsibilities, such as Dean or Director of certificate programs or concentrations, participating in committee meetings and ad hoc duties.

During the acute COVID-19 pandemic, SKSM received HEERF monies and some of these were used to purchase equipment for Faculty working from home, including laptops, ring lights, headphones, external DVD drives, and Wi-Fi mesh networks as extenders to provide more stable internet service. Although some faculty were already working from home before the acute pandemic, as of the second week in March 2020 everyone was working remotely. Now although some members of staff have returned to working in-person, the faculty are still working from home.

## 8.5 Policies and Procedures

At the time of hiring and again at the beginning of each academic year, faculty members receive an updated copy of the Faculty Handbook, Part 1 and Part 2, and additional handbooks relevant to their roles and responsibilities, such as advising. The handbooks' purpose is to outline faculty members' professional responsibilities and guide them in their work. One section of the handbook supports the Bylaws and the personnel policy of the school which provide directives regarding the appointment, compensation, support and evaluation of the President and the faculty. This portion of the handbook was outsourced to a professional Human Resources team, due to the complexity of legal issues for faculty who live in different states and countries. In most cases, the state of California's employment laws are more stringent than others and dictate a common standard that is adopted for all faculty. A second section of the handbook offers detailed support for the teaching responsibilities of all faculty members, including topics such as registration, grading, and use of educational technologies. The particular rights and responsibilities for advising faculty members are outlined in the advising faculty handbook. All of these handbooks are updated by the office of the Dean of Faculty/CAO. Changes in the initial policy section need to be revised by the Academic Affairs Committee and voted on by the Board of Trustees. As such, they are not revised annually. The teaching support sections of the handbook are revised annually and occasionally each term, depending on changing practices. The review process is initiated by the Dean of the Faculty/CAO in consultation with subject experts such as SKSM's legal counsel, human resources consultants, as well as stakeholders within SKSM, including the Associate Dean of the Faculty, the Coordinator of Academic Affairs, the Academic Affairs Committee of the SKSM Board, faculty and students.

Although previously SKSM exclusively used national searches to recruit and hire full-time faculty, since 2019 some of the part time faculty were promoted to full-time, a decision that honors their contributions to the school while encouraging retention of talented faculty. Since 2019 SKSM has conducted one national search for a full-time professor at the assistant professor level, for Practical Theology and/or Trauma and Healing studies, with a specialization in one of these four areas: Womanist theologies, Black Studies, African Indigenous Traditions, Indigenous Traditions. This search failed; although seven talented, experienced finalists were identified, none had expertise in the areas specified.

The Dean of Faculty/CAO engages faculty in annual performance reviews. Specific areas in which faculty are evaluated include teaching effectiveness, committee work, faculty meetings and study times participation, worship and community life of the school, denominational service, publications and research projects, and contributions to the ECO mission of the school. Faculty members are required to set goals for the following academic year and suggest future course offerings to complement the curricula. Annual reviews are documented through forms signed by both the Dean of Faculty/CAO and the faculty member.

## 8.6 Freedom of Inquiry

SKSM's UU context includes the principle of "[a free and responsible search for truth and meaning](#)," which grounds our theological commitment to academic freedom. Faculty, staff and students come to SKSM because of its commitment to, and lived record of, freedom of faith, inquiry and expression. The Faculty Handbook (see in appendices) includes both an academic freedom statement and freedom of inquiry statement.

## 8.7 Faculty Development

The Dean of the Faculty proactively shares information about professional development, including grant opportunities and webinars.

Faculty have many opportunities for professional development, including:

- Faculty Meetings and Faculty Study Times  
Faculty meetings focus on degrees, curricula, best practices, advising, and urgent student concerns. Faculty Study Times are two-hour meetings monthly with a focus on professional development topics, such as the ethics of AI, as well as an opportunity to share and discuss faculty scholarship and other work.
- Annual Reviews and Consultation with the Dean of the Faculty/CAO  
The Dean of the Faculty is available for 1:1 meetings to discuss long-term professional development and this is always a part of Faculty annual reviews.
- Sabbaticals for Core Faculty
- Course release time for Faculty finishing dissertations
- Symposia
- Book Allowances
- When possible, funding or subsidies for Faculty presenting at Conferences

SKSM honors a framework to approach professional development dynamically and holistically, to honor the energy that Faculty brings to diverse areas: not just publishing books and articles, but also podcasts, advocacy and activism in movement-based spaces as well as faith-oriented spaces. This is the relational work of emergence, future forecasting, birthing the leaders the world needs now.

## 8.8 Faculty Role in Teaching and Learning

### Faculty Role in Teaching

The SKSM educational model puts integrative learning at its core. While the aim of each course is to foster integrative learning, some courses and experiences are particularly focused on it:

- Integrative Theological Reflection Courses: to be taken by students in congregational or community internships
- Educating to Create Just and Sustainable Communities that Counter Oppressions (ECO): a required course modeling a synthesis of theological reflection, spiritual practices and justice making
- Advising: co-creating context and the vocabulary of theological reflection related to the advising relationship, particularly to highlight the TSA's iterative questions regarding formation and vocation
- Contextual Education: in addition to integrative seminars for interns, integrative learning takes place with internship supervisors and during the January Congregational Intern Gathering.
- Relational-Constructive Learning: theological reflection transpires in other aspects of the school, whether in ritual, chapel, milestones such as Threshold Self-Assessments and mid-degree Portfolio reviews, and committee work.

Teaching is an embodiment of SKSM's theological values and educational commitment. Faculty are chosen for their educational philosophy and for their attention to pedagogical concerns. Additionally, faculty regularly reflect on their teaching during faculty meetings and study times, annual reviews and 1:1 meetings with the Dean of Faculty/CAO, who is always available to troubleshoot issues or for long-term professional development planning. When students' course evaluations present problematic issues or questions, these are promptly addressed with the Dean of Faculty/CAO and brought to the whole faculty if they concern systemic issues.

New faculty members receive training and tutorials on how to use educational technologies upon which our synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning depend, including Populi, VoiceThread and Zoom. When new or updated technology is implemented, staff train faculty and support the application integration into their teaching and advising work with students.

### Faculty Academic Oversight of Programs of Study

SKSM faculty teach "by who we are and what we do" in order to educate the whole person. Each faculty member's pedagogical practice is expected to express the school's educational philosophy, described in the faculty handbook. We seek to educate in ways that:

- *Trust in an empowering and liberating grace that is larger than ourselves*
- *Call forth the full authentic presence of people*
- *Welcome silenced knowledge, feeling and experience*
- *Ungird human wholeness, integrity, interdependence, and agency*
- *Foster self-awareness and self-respect*
- *Strengthen relational capacities and the ethics of community*
- *Deepen knowledge and wisdom arising from engagement with primary texts and primary experience*
- *Embody an ongoing practice of inquiry, study, action and reflection*

Faculty also have important responsibilities included in the Starr King Covenant, included in the student and faculty handbooks: “May we nurture a teaching and learning environment with integrity and compassion, as we take time to develop our academic strengths and support the unfolding power of those we are entrusted to guide.”

## 8.9 Faculty Role in Scholarship

The DTL 2 is available to faculty as well as students for their research and scholarship. In addition to library resources, SKSM has a range of worship-related resources for various liturgical arts and worship space design, which may be accessed on campus in Oakland during most regular business hours.

### Faculty Research

Faculty are expected to participate in the scholarly communities of their areas of expertise, in relation to their different professional background and contracts. Each year the annual faculty self-assessment and review with the Dean of Faculty/CAO include a question about publishing. Advising faculty working less than 25% of full time, or working as professor of the practice, are not expected to produce academic work, but are certainly encouraged to write in their area of expertise.

While SKSM encourages faculty research, our community values scholarly contributions outside the academy. In response to the last ATS self-study report, the Academic Affairs Committee discussed how to establish clear quantitative criteria for publication, initially settling for the GTU standard request of one monograph or two peer-reviewed articles every two years.

Subsequent discussion decided not to make specific requests, as faculty serve the scholarly and larger community also with their activism, preaching, conference leading, committee service: it is hard to compare the different forms of expression and service. Full-time faculty are encouraged to devote one-fifth of their time to research and writing, usually on Fridays. The greatest obstacle in respecting this commitment is related to the heavy teaching, advising and committee workloads.

A spreadsheet of faculty publications is maintained by the office of the Dean of Faculty/CAO and new publications are shared on the agenda and minutes of the faculty meetings.

### Evaluation of Faculty Research

Similarly to how the faculty defines academic integrity in student work (see the [Statement on Academic Integrity](#)), it is dedicated to the intentional and honest practice of inquiry and reflection on faculty’s own reading, thinking, and writing. SKSM considers the conduct of

research and academic scholarship to be moral and political work. Since the beginning of the term's use in the West, "research" has always been connected to European colonialism as scientists and colonial powers sought to define, appropriate, commodify and disseminate knowledge about indigenous communities as well as exploit nature. Academic research has also been marred by the intersection of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia and Christian supremacist ideas. Thus, SKSM faculty are committed to understanding the history of academic inquiry and knowledge production that depends upon and perpetuates colonialism, white supremacy, systemic violence, and multiple forms of oppressions. They are encouraged to dispute ideas of neutrality or objectivity in the creation of scholarly discourse and the categorization of sources of knowledge as "academic," "logical," or "original." SKSM's mission and educational vision embraces the notion that what is acceptable or unacceptable knowledge is better determined by a community than by a Western neoliberal framework.

With these commitments in mind, SKSM is enhanced by faculty members whose research is engaged in critical approaches to research and praxis, as well as the history and methodologies of indigenous and emancipatory scholarship across disciplines. The above is amended from the statement on academic integrity, which could be used to describe how SKSM defines "research." Currently the faculty has the following opportunities for research:

- Sabbaticals for core faculty
- Course release for full-time faculty finishing their dissertations
- Faculty study times
- Focused group work with consultants
- Symposia
- Scheduling classes and meetings Monday through Thursday only, to promote Friday as a day for research

Recent faculty publications include work on moral injury, queer theologies, Womanist theologies, UU History, active compassion, Hellenistic Judaism, COVID-19, and decolonizing interreligious education.

## 8.10 Faculty Relationship to Faith Communities

Our faculty serve faith communities as leaders in ways that enhance the effectiveness of the school's teaching and student learning. For instance, while serving at SKSM, two of our core faculty have also held significant leadership positions in their denominations. Our faculty serve in important denominational committees and taskforces, as worship and program leaders, ministers, and even as a bishop or rabbi in their respective faith communities. Our faculty's faith commitments extend to secular justice work as well as on the streets or in public schools.

SKSM's leadership encourages individual faculty members to become an integral part of the school community, both inside and outside the classroom, in relation to their own modalities of teaching, synchronous or asynchronous or in-person. The Dean of Faculty/CAO welcomes and

encourages participation in all aspects of our community life, including rituals, celebrations, special lectures and events. Faculty have specific roles in regular key parts of the academic year.

### 8.11 Defined Expectations

SKSM continues to move aggressively toward a process to rectify what theologian Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite defines as “the ethical deficits” of theological schools: unfair faculty compensations, workloads, and terms of employment and excessive use of contingent faculty. SKSM realizes that the instruction budget is crucial to the nature of the school, the quality of its offerings, and the breadth of its mission.

### Conclusion

The revised Advising Model has been successfully integrated. It is still collaborative across the advisors yet more sustainable, as significant spiritual care needs are now the purview of the Director of Spiritual Care. Faculty are passionate about the ECO and multi-religious commitments of the school and engage in substantive discussions with each other amid ongoing learning. The number of core faculty increased from two to five, and remuneration equity has been improved. We need to increase racial and ethnic diversity in full-time faculty after losing the late Ibrahim Farajajé and the departure of our Womanist theoethicist. We established a greater culture of respecting faculty time for research, writing and creative community projects, and in the last years the number of faculty publications has increased. The school will still need to pay attention to issues of remuneration equity, and to very limited representation on the board of trustees.

### Recommendations:

- Prioritize aligning faculty compensation with ATS median salaries. Regular reviews and adjustments should be made to ensure equitable compensation.
- Continue the discussion to increase faculty representation on the board of trustees, to be at least equitable with student representation.

## Standard 9. Governance and Administration

### 9.1 – 9.2: Governance Authority and Qualifications

Starr King School for the Ministry derives its authority to establish educational programs; hold, maintain, and dispose of property for the benefit of the seminary; and confer certificates, diplomas, or degrees from its [Articles of Incorporation](#), originally filed with the Secretary of the State of California on May 12, 1906, and amended May 23, 1991. The Articles of Incorporation vest authority to manage the assets of Starr King and ensure Starr King's institutional integrity and quality in the Board of Trustees. The authority delegated to the Board, faculty, and administration to fulfill their responsibilities is further defined in the [Bylaws of Starr King School for the Ministry](#).

Starr King is a Unitarian Universalist-identified seminary as per its Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws. The Unitarian Universalist Association is the denomination's national organization, but it does not exercise authority over Starr King or Meadville-Lombard Theological School, both UU-identified seminaries. Accordingly, Starr King exercises its authority independently of the UUA. However, Starr King does have a formal relationship with the UUA's Panel on Theological Education (POTE), which financially supports Starr King through a fund it administers. Pursuant to a Memorandum of Understanding with the Panel, Starr King prepares regular reports for the Panel and the President meets with the UUA Panel twice yearly, during October and April.

The trustees offer a range of qualifications in the areas of ministerial leadership, financial and business acumen, social change activism, and academic scholarship and administration. The school places special emphasis on recruiting individuals with demonstrated commitment to and leadership within Unitarian Universalism in order to maintain robust connections with the school's primary religious constituency. The Board exhibits diversity according to race and gender. Of the twelve current members, nine are women and two are queer or nonbinary. Three trustees are persons of color.

The Board consists of trustees recruited and elected by the existing membership and *ex officio* members who are appointed by virtue of their office or by external election. The *ex officio* positions are the Starr King President and Dean of Faculty, the Chair of the SKSM Graduates Association, and two student trustees elected by their peers to overlapping two-year terms.

The Board exercises its authority as a group, through decisions made by the body as a whole and by responsibilities assigned to its committees.



### 9.3 – 9.5: Governance Responsibilities and Processes

Since 2014, and as noted in the previous self-study report, the Board has consistently functioned with fewer trustees than the twenty authorized by the Bylaws (15 elected and 5 *ex officio*). The Board formed a special committee for recruitment, consisting of four trustees, in 2020-2021, resulting in the selection of five new members. Due to varying circumstances, three of the five trustees have already left the Board. Currently, the Board is reactivating the Trustee Development Committee, which will be charged with renewed recruitment efforts. The committee will also be responsible for crafting and implementing a robust new member orientation process. This goal was a key recommendation of the 2019 self-study report, which is presently restated as being of critical importance.

The authority, membership, and responsibilities of the Board are established in the SKSM Bylaws, which were most recently amended in November 2022. The Board is responsible for selecting and evaluating the President, approving faculty appointments, overseeing budgets, investments, and other financial affairs, and conferring degrees. Management of school operations is appropriately delegated to the President and administrative staff. The Board requires the development of strategic plans at a minimum of five-year intervals and is currently overseeing the Five-Year Roadmap.

While the Board has conducted an evaluation of the President's job effectiveness during the past five years, it has been recognized that this process must be regularized rather than conducted at *ad hoc* intervals (as discussed in [Standard 2](#)).

The Board implements overall governance through the committee structure stated in the Bylaws, principally overseeing finances and academic affairs. Progress has been made since the 2019 report in revitalizing committee work and now nearly all committees are meeting regularly and submitting summary reports to the whole membership. Each trustee serves on at least one committee and several committees include representatives of Starr King constituencies. The Board holds two principal, biannual meetings during the fall and spring, with additional shorter meetings occurring twice per year. While the Board met exclusively online for more than two years during the pandemic, it is now shifting to a pattern of conducting the spring meeting in a hybrid in-person/online format and all other meetings exclusively online. The spring meeting allows in-person Board members to participate in the ritual life of the school, through ceremonial roles in Commencement. Every Board meeting is open to the public, except for executive sessions, and shared through the Zoom video conferencing platform.

The Board is accountable to the SKSM Conflict of Interest Policy, which applies to all “directors, officers, and employees.” The policy requires such personnel to conduct their duties objectively without regard to personal or financial interest. Trustees do not receive material compensation from the school or conduct any business relationships with it. Procedural fairness and freedom of inquiry are protected by regular practices during Board meetings.



The hybrid May 2024 meeting of the Board of Trustees was hosted from the multi-purpose room in the SKSM offices

Specifically, the Board routinely invites questions and comments from constituents and members of the public attending open sessions. The Board also conducts several process observation reviews by individual trustees during its meetings. Finally, the agenda for each board meeting includes a session devoted to trustees’ development in the ECO values and practices at the core of Starr King’s mission and identity.

Two further areas of improvement have been noted in our self-study review. First, the Board must develop a routine communication strategy for disseminating the major outcomes of its meetings to the wider Starr King community (principally, students, faculty, and staff). Second, the Board has yet to implement a standardized process for self-evaluation of effectiveness in meeting its stated responsibilities. A robust self-evaluation was conducted in the fall of 2019 and another evaluation occurred during the spring of 2021, although this was limited to a discussion among trustees during one session. The Board has not conducted a standalone evaluation since that time, but the focused conversations during the self-study process have been critical in identifying focus areas of improvement in relation to ATS requirements. The Board has consequently reiterated its intent to execute alternating biannual self-evaluations and presidential evaluations and is aware of the importance of implementing its stated assessment objectives in a rigorous and structured manner (see previous discussion in [Standard 2](#)).

## 9.6 – 9.8: Shared Governance

Starr King School for the Ministry aims to enact practices of shared governance in keeping with its ECO/CJSC commitment. The school seeks the collective wisdom of its various constituencies through multiple forums of engagement and collaboration. Starr King alumni, faculty, and students are represented on the Board through their *ex officio* trustees. The students elect members of the school's Admissions and Curriculum committees. Faculty are also appointed to both committees by the academic dean, assisting with the evaluation of applicants and admissions processes and with the development of macroscale curricular structures. Team ECO, a cross-constituent advisory body (previously discussed [here](#) and [here](#)), serves as the Bias Incident Response Team to investigate cases of alleged bias or prejudice that occur in school settings.

Each of the last two strategic plans began with facilitated visioning sessions held with constituents and the progress of the current plan is evaluated by the representational Working Group. The Board receives biannual assessments of progress toward the strategic plan based on the Working Group's evaluation and consults with the administration on resetting priorities as needed.

The Board fully delegates operational responsibility, policy implementation, and resource management to the President and administrative staff. The faculty have direct oversight of academic affairs, which include curriculum development, degree requirements, recommendation of candidates for graduation, and procedures for faculty recruitment, development, and resourcing.

## 9.9: Administration

Principal responsibility for school administration resides in the SKSM Executive Team, which consists of the following personnel: the President, the Vice President of Advancement, the Dean of Faculty and Chief Academic Officer, the Dean of Students, the Director of Admissions and Recruitment, and the Director of Communications. The Executive Team meets biweekly throughout the year, except during July, to review departmental operations, identify institutional priorities, and collaborate on critical initiatives.

In 2021, Starr King released its Vice President of Finance and Administration and contracted with Dakin Ventures Consulting Group for the provision of financial management and human resources services (see [10.1 – 10.2](#)).

The administrative personnel are diverse and representative of the school's constituencies, including three women, one person of color, three Unitarian Universalists, and others of various religious and spiritual identities. One member of the Executive Team is also a graduate of Starr King.

Each member of the Executive Team has a defined area of responsibility. Due to the small size of our school, personnel frequently overlap and collaborate on an informal basis for various efforts, while respecting appropriate demarcations of tasks.

The President typically conducts annual evaluations with Executive Team members, which consists of a written self-evaluation followed by a one-on-one review conversation. The evaluation identifies accomplishments and growing edges and concludes by naming goals for the coming year. As stated above, however, this rhythm of evaluations has not been consistently maintained.

## Conclusion

The SKSM Board has become increasingly active and has revitalized its committee work and other responsibilities while working cooperatively with other stakeholders. To move the Board forward into the future, it requires full membership, improved processes of communication, and regular evaluation – both of the president and of its own effectiveness.

### **Recommendations:**

- For the Board: finalize and implement its new Trustee orientation process
- For the Board: enact its stated goal of biannual presidential and self-evaluations.
- For the Board: develop a communication protocol for timely dissemination of information from recently concluded meetings.

## Standard 10. Institutional Resources

### 10.1 – 10.2: Human Resources

Starr King currently has twenty-six faculty and staff. Eleven persons are solely administrative staff, seven are exclusively faculty, and five have combined roles. The number of personnel is comparable to schools of a similar size, albeit toward the lower end of the range. This is partly due to the outsourcing of several functions: namely, library services, IT services and cybersecurity, financial aid, and human resources. It is more cost-effective to hire consultants and external contractors on a part-time basis than to hire specialized internal staff for these roles. At the same time, the outsourcing of these responsibilities can have a qualitatively negative impact in that vital functions are performed by personnel who may not be familiar with Starr King's mission and ethos. Internal staff who liaise with consultants and contractors therefore have a responsibility to ensure that the provision of these services aligns with the school's commitments. A recent example of this form of intervention occurred in the spring of 2024 as the Coordinator of Academic Programs addressed accessibility concerns raised by students with personnel at the Digital Theological Library.

During meetings dedicated to the self-study review of ATS standards, our staff affirmed support from school leadership and collaborative camaraderie in fulfilling the mission of the school. It is no secret that appropriate monetary compensation remains a persistent challenge, which the Board of Trustees has attempted to address through an *ad hoc* working group on revenue streams. The administration has taken steps to support staff and avoid "burnout," and for the past three years the entire school has paused operations during the semester reading weeks so that personnel can enjoy periods of extended rest.

Starr King publishes and enforces personnel policies to ensure a safe, equitable, and productive environment for our employees. These include policies regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion, harassment, disability accommodations, dispute resolutions, and leaves of absence. An extensively revised employee handbook was developed by our human resources consultant and approved by the Board of Trustees in May 2023.

The high rate of turnover noted in our previous report has dissipated and more than two-thirds of staff have served the school for five years or more. Despite this stability, SKSM has not made sufficient progress in creating updated and consistent job descriptions for every position. It is imperative that Starr King immediately begins the process of reviewing and updating all employee job descriptions. As the school standardizes staff evaluation (see "[Staff](#)" in Chapter 2), these descriptions must then be incorporated into the process in keeping with the ATS standard.

10.3 – 10.7: Financial Resources

10.3 Financial Resources and Budgeting

After several years of difficulty in maintaining stable financial information and oversight at the senior levels of the school, Starr King contracted with [Dakin Ventures Consulting Group](#) (DVCG), a Bay Area non-profit-focused finance consultancy, to partner with the school in the areas of finance, accounting, operations, and human resources. Across four consecutive fiscal years, Starr King has had a consistent financial track record that has been strengthened by effective financial management, especially in the area of cost containment. A level of emphasis and priority are given to this side of the budgeting equation, per the below trend of coming below (or slightly above) our expenses budgets:

EXPENSES	FYE 21	FYE 22	FYE 23	FYE 24 (proj.)
Budgeted (Forecasted)	3,335,218	3,202,541	3,136,217	3,224,697
Actual (Audited)	3,153,329	3,234,852	3,247,425	3,028,367
Variance	(181,889)	32,311	27,538	(196,323)

As we addressed the concerns identified by ATS in the financial notation, the consultants focused on the following:

- The school Instituted Blackbaud’s [Financial Edge](#) accounting, finance and general ledger management program as our complete financial database and aligned it with Blackbaud’s [Raiser’s Edge](#), already in use by Starr King as our donor management database. This coordination between two proprietary and interlinked platforms has allowed for improved fund accounting and better general control and managerial oversight of revenue and expenses, as well as giving the school ease in producing timely financial reporting and preparing for annual audits. This implementation has aided the school in closing managing and monitoring monthly (and yearly) financials and comparing them regularly with the school’s budget projections.
- The school has engaged with [Windes Tax Audit & Advisory Services](#) as the long-term auditors producing timely audited financial statements since FY21. We have had 3 straight “clean audits” and have received numerous comments and accolades from our audit partners on how much the school’s processes have improved and been optimized during these last several years.
- Starr King has fine-tuned the collaboration between the consultants and the administration on a three-year forward-looking strategic budget, thereby stabilizing spending awareness, revenue management and cost containment. Department heads provide advance input on financial needs during the planning process. For the last three

years, this budget has been presented for review and approval at the May meeting of the Board.

- Starr King has consolidated the allocation of responsibilities in accordance with our planned expense reduction. We have optimized the workflow of the current Vice President of Advancement and hired a dedicated Director of Annual Giving to increase overall contributions/donations/grants/foundational gifts. This was a planned focus area to increase the school’s revenue in the coming years, as it faces enrollment and registration challenges in the current economic environment.
- The school has increased per-credit tuition (over two years) from \$775 to \$925 to bring prices up to industry standard.

While implementing overall cost reductions, our highest priority has been to preserve the integrity of expenditures for the academic program. As we implement our Five-Year Roadmap to make SKSM a hub of counter-oppressive education in the COVID-normalized world, our budgeting has also focused on enhancing strategic spending areas. One example is an increase in the allocations for our annual Symposium and Commencement, bolstering the resources to successfully implement these events as hybrid in-person and online events that bring together the school’s various constituencies as well as new and potential partners and donors.

For the last two budget cycles, the school has utilized a 3-year forward-looking budget and projections process. This enables the SKSM to have a realistic and specific set of expectations. The first year of this three-year budget submission projects a \$254,608 deficit, due to headwinds in student enrollment across all higher education institutions. The second year’s projection sees an improvement, to a mild deficit of \$22,040, followed by a projected profit of \$119,305 in the third projected year. Please refer to the current 3-year budget in the appendices.

Revenue projections are rooted in historical performance of both tuition as well as contributions to the school. They are heavily scrutinized and optimized by the Finance Team, the Finance Committee of the Board of Trustees, and the Executive Team. We look at unit economics of registration for classes, as well as the patterns of enrolled students at our school and at peer institutions. For contributions, we pay close attention to our donor base, as well as to the larger macro-economic circumstances of the domestic economy and the rates of philanthropic giving to non-profit and/or religious institutions. Revenue is roughly divided in half between tuition receipts and contributions, with the addition of approximately 2% from endowment draws and alternative revenues. We expect this balance to continue into the foreseeable future.

#### 10.4 Tuition and Scholarships Strategy

The school’s tuition revenue figures have been rather stable over the previous four fiscal years:

	FYE 20	FYE 21	FYE 22	FYE 23
Tuition and Fees	1,412,197.00	1,399,069.00	1,351,675.00	1,484,163.00
Scholarships/TA	(112,681.00)	(487,862.00)	(395,475.00)	(325,039.00)

Net Tuition Revenue	1,299,516.00	911,207.00	956,200.00	1,159,124.00
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In anticipation of the need to drive revenue, the school has been increasing per-credit tuition rates. For FY 2022-2023, tuition increased from \$775 per credit to \$875 per credit; followed by an additional increase to \$925 per credit in 2023-2024. It is possible that a recessionary environment will drive more students towards graduate programs; part of our recruiting challenge is keeping those figures up.

Our scholarship strategy has two foci: 1) awarding aid in proportion to need and 2) addressing historical disparities through BIPOC-targeted funds. SKSM is attentive to the high debt that students incur for theological education and aware of the need for expanding scholarship aid beyond current low levels. Now that endowments are better managed and tracked, we have turned our attention to developing new funds to increase support for our students. Two recent endowments have been launched, one in honor of our former, long-serving chair of the Board and one in honor of our departing President. Two additional endowed scholarships are in the process of completion, both from alumni wishing to honor beloved friends.

### 10.5 Investment Strategy

Starr King has multiple large endowments that are currently managed by the ESG-focused investment firm [Boston Common Asset Management](#). In addition, SKSM has a Board Investment Committee that oversees Boston Common and ensures that our investment strategy serves the best interests of SKSM in the short, medium, and long term.

The school has an established investment policy that guides the management of assets. The overall investment objective is to increase the endowment’s asset value to maintain real purchasing power and enable regular endowment distributions. SKSM’s investment practices align with our stated mission by not only seeking consistent returns with a moderate long-term risk tolerance, but also by incorporating environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria in the selection of funds. Starr King seeks investment returns from company portfolios that contribute to and benefit from sustainable, global growth. We intend to use our shareholder voice to advance the global dialogue toward a sustainable economy.

According to our policy, distribution percentages are calculated by the average fair market value of assets over a trailing 13-quarter period, with a budgeting lead of one-half year. The payout rate is set at 5% for the scholarship endowment and 4% for the general endowment. The Investment Committee reviews and recommends changes to distributions on an as-needed basis. Payouts are not allowed to reach a level that would erode real assets over time, with a “safe harbor” threshold set at 110% of the corpus.



## 10.6 Advancement

The Institutional Advancement program supports the mission of Starr King by raising funds to support operating expenses, student scholarships and auxiliary aid, and designated endowments. The program cultivates donors for comprehensive campaigns, annual fund (operating expenses), planned giving, and regular, recurrent contributions. The latter giving program is known as Starr King Sustainers, which recruits and retains monthly contributors. The Advancement program is shaped by three major goals: 1) to increase annual operating revenue, 2) to raise \$9 million for the comprehensive campaign, and 3) to grow the Starr King Sustainers program in both total revenue and number of donors.

The school continues to increase its goal for annual operating revenue, with a FY25 fundraising goal of \$1.2 million. Despite significant strides, reaching our operating fund targets is still a struggle and takes up the vast majority of Advancement staff time. Our current focus is on raising funds for the completion of the comprehensive campaign as well as annual operational expenses. We continue to recalibrate the Advancement program to shift the focus to major donor cultivation and securing five and six-figure gifts. As we enter FY25, we are better prepared than ever before, with a strong gift pyramid with donors assigned to most levels that should make it possible to fulfill the expectations

Our \$9 million comprehensive campaign, [“Sowing Seeds: The Campaign for Starr King,”](#) launched publicly at the UUA General Assembly in June 2023. This was preceded by the “silent phase” of the campaign, during which we raised more than \$6 million. As of the filing of this report, we are over \$6.38 million into the campaign. While that progress was slower than expected, we are optimistic about our next fiscal year and what we will be able to accomplish now that the Advancement department is fully staffed and stable.

We hope to grow the total number of Sustainers from 100 as of June 2024 to 150 by the end of fiscal year 2025. Expansion of the Starr King Sustainers program will contribute to the overall sustainability of fundraising for operations over time, allowing a small staff to do more with less. During FY23 we grew the program from 64 to 98 Sustainers. The revenue from the Sustainers program now represents nearly \$70,000 annually, compared to approximately \$52,000 in FY22.

The school experienced a wave of income during FY20 that has been attributed to support gained during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. A record 436 donors contributed, with 111 of those being first-time donors. Since that time, we have seen our first-time donor numbers and overall donor numbers decrease. We have begun to host in-person fundraising events in UU congregations to expand our reach. We also began to optimize our scheduled in-person school events, especially Commencement and Symposium, to bring in new donors. For our next fiscal year, we have a goal of hosting 12 or more congregational events or house parties in addition to a large fundraising event at the UUA’s in-person General Assembly in June of 2025. We also plan to make congregational outreach a priority, not only for new individual donors but to cultivate the congregations as organizational donors.

The Advancement and Communications team is also working closely with the Director of our

Center for Multi-Religious Studies to design a plan for integrating the new prospects from events hosted by CMRS into our work. This work will help broaden our donor base beyond Unitarian Universalism, making the school more secure in the long term by diversifying our base of support.

We have identified two areas of operational improvement. The first concerns processes for scholarships and fund management. We have seen a vast improvement in our data clean-up over the last four years. Advancement efforts are evaluated monthly at our “numbers” meeting of ARC, allowing us to make quick strategic changes. The Advancement Committee of the Board of Trustees also reviews results quarterly and the entire Board evaluates efforts semi-annually at their in-person meetings in April and November.

Second, Starr King needs to make greater strides in grant development. The school has applied for and received certain significant grants in recent years. These include a William and Alice Hinckley Fund grant that supported the development of our first hybrid Symposium in 2023, grants from the Community Foundation of Arizona to support our SKSM Relief Fund for emergency assistance to constituents facing acute crisis, and a grant from the Lilly Foundation and the Hinckley Fund in 2021 to create the WEAV curriculum. But the school should not only find more opportunities to apply for grants, but also develop a systematic, institution-wide grants strategy. Grant-based revenue is often dependent upon individual faculty or staff efforts conducted in a relatively *ad hoc* manner. While faculty should be encouraged to pursue grants for research, an integrative and sustainable process should be crafted that will channel resources in a consistently effective manner that is subject to regular evaluation.

### **10.7 Appropriate Staff, Records, and Accounting**

SKSM’s financial consultants with DVCG are seasoned industry veterans with extensive experience specifically focused on the education field in support of both for-profit and non-profit institutions. Internally, the school has full-time staff that are dedicated to student-related accounting activities, internal bookkeeping, bill payments, collections services, database administration as it relates to contributions and annual giving and other finance, accounting and development work. These personnel are the Vice President of Advancement, the Director of Annual Giving, the Student Accounts Manager and Finance Assistant, and the Advancement Data Coordinator, all of whom have education and/or extensive experience in their areas of competence.

For integrity of records and audits, SKSM has partnered with the aforementioned Windes Services. Windes has extensive experience with higher education clients and their guidance is constantly used, as far as best-practices of records integrity and retention. Windes has facilitated the last three years’ worth of audits and analyses of our financials, including the mandated single audit requirement of organizations of our size and funding levels. Windes has completed full independent audit reports and tax returns. All audits have been in accordance with Government Auditing Standards (and GAAP) without any notices, deficiencies or incidents.

## 10.8 Physical Resources

Our office suite at 414 13<sup>th</sup> Street in downtown Oakland is a clean and well-maintained space consisting of seven offices, two bathrooms, a multipurpose room, a conference room, and a kitchen. The offices serve as workspace for the local staff. The multipurpose room functions as the host location for online chapel services and includes additional desks for visiting faculty and staff. Both this room and the conference room are adequate for hosting hybrid personnel meetings and class sessions (as needed) in accordance with our size and the geographic dispersion of our constituencies. We do not anticipate a need for permanent access to larger spaces as the majority of our academic program and staff collaboration will continue to be conducted online. As we always have, we continue to rent facilities for special events such as Commencement and Symposium.



SKSM staff meeting with then-ATS liaison Elise Miranda in our conference room during the October 2022 site visit

Our facility is safeguarded by alarm and sprinkler systems. The building has an external fire escape and receives regular inspections by the Oakland Fire Department. With classes conducted online and staff frequently working from home, the school has yet to institute detailed emergency preparedness plans in case of earthquakes or other potential hazards.

The seventh floor is accessible both by elevator and stairway. Public transit to Starr King's location is convenient, as the building is just around the corner from the 12th Street Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station. Persons traveling by car may utilize metered street parking or several parking garages within walking distance, including a garage adjacent to our building.

Starr King leases storage boxes in a nearby fireproof facility to maintain historical student record files. One unresolved aspect of our relocation is determining a permanent location for our rare books collection. These items are currently kept in a secure, climate-controlled storage facility in the nearby city of Livermore. SKSM also retains other materials in storage and staff regularly comb through the boxes to identify what should be preserved and what may be discarded.

## 10.9 Technological Resources

The school utilizes a range of information and educational technology platforms to connect faculty, staff, and students across the country in service of its institutional and academic objectives. The Starr King office suite maintains broadband Internet service provided by AT&T and wi-fi coverage throughout the space. The school continues to use the cloud-based services and applications of Microsoft 365 for the creation, sharing, and storage of content and for communications. Starr King uses the Zoom video conferencing platform to hold meetings, conduct synchronous class sessions, host webinars, and support hybrid online/in-person events, such as our post-pandemic Commencement ceremonies. Populi serves as the school's institutional and learning management system, functioning as an integrated portal for admissions, course registration, course delivery and management, transcript generation, financial aid and payment services, and data generation for demographic, enrollment, and financial balances. The school uses CRM software Raiser's Edge to store and update constituent information related to advancement, such as donor and non-donor contact information, giving records, meeting and contact notes, and all other relevant information. Lists of constituents with selected information can also be pulled from Raiser's Edge to send communications or perform comparisons.

As stated in the [introduction](#), an *ad hoc* LMS team guided our transition from Moodle, which had been the shared system used across the GTU, to Populi. Our departure from the GTU created an opportunity to change, integrate, and enhance our LMS of choice. The Dean of Faculty and Director of Digital Learning formed a team of faculty and administrators who collaborated to assess our needs and desires for an LMS and explore the available options. The group engaged and deliberated with different stakeholders to decide on the best LMS for our context and capacity. The transition to Populi has marked a significant enhancement in the connectivity and accessibility of our academic community at SKSM, as it increasingly serves as a "one stop shop" for many academic and institutional functions. By way of example, Populi facilitates seamless interactions among students, faculty, and staff, consolidating communication within a unified space. The integration with our email system ensures that all members receive timely notifications directly in their SKSM email addresses, streamlining communication channels. Additionally, Populi has become a hub for students to access and complete various forms and applications, including annual scholarships.

The school website is both external facing as a tool for public relations, recruitment, and advancement, and internal facing as a hub for students and employees to access key academic, student services, and administrative forms. Starr King hired State Creative to redevelop the website in 2021. The new website, which features a more modern design, a more dynamic administrative user interface, and improved accessibility for persons with varying abilities, was launched in January 2022.

For all these applications and platforms, staff and faculty have received training for their operational responsibilities. School personnel have utilized customer support services from the companies originating these technological resources as well as from our IT services vendor. A

fully consistent and effective deployment of Microsoft 365 tools, however, was hampered by the sudden loss in 2018 of the staff responsible for the school's adoption of the platform.

Starr King directed a portion of its grants received through HEERF to procure vital hardware in support of institutional operations and academic programs as defined by the multi-locational character of our community. Our employees were equipped with web cameras, microphones, mesh wi-fi routers, and other important tools for working from home. The school has purchased large-screen televisions, remote-controlled pan-tilt-zoom cameras, and microphones for use in the office suite in support of hybrid meetings, courses, and chapel services, as well as portable audiovisual equipment that can be transported to various locations as needed.

The school contracts with Endsight for information technology support and computer deployment and management. Endsight ensures that equipment is kept up to date and secured by anti-virus protection. Endsight technicians may be contacted by email and phone during business hours. The Director of Communications manages the school website, the Registrar is the principal administrator for Populi, and the Dean of Students provides immediate oversight of the school's audiovisual equipment.

The school has taken steps to ensure its compliance with federal cybersecurity regulations as stipulated by the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act as well as the Federal Trade Commission's Safeguards Rule that came into effect in June 2023. All platforms that may involve the storage or transmission of financial data - Populi, Raiser's Edge and Financial Edge, and Microsoft 365 - are protected by multi-factor authentication for all users. Access to digital records is restricted within the parameters set by FERPA. Starr King has additionally contracted Endsight to manage cybersecurity compliance. With Endsight support, the school crafted a new set of information security policies in Fall 2023, which have since been disseminated to all employees. The school has also instituted regular employee training in cybersecurity protocols.

## Conclusion

SKSM's dedicated and experienced staff are a true strength, and perhaps SKSM's greatest resource. A commitment to improve budgeting processes and a well-structured advancement program have already impacted SKSM's financial sustainability and we are optimistic for the current fundraising effort. There are adequate technological and physical resources for the institution, although there is untapped potential in some of the software and information technology resources used.

## Recommendations:

- Develop updated job descriptions for every staff member and utilize them as a basis for performance evaluations by the end of FY 2025.
- Initiate an effort under the leadership of Advancement and in coordination with other departments, to develop and implement an institutional grants strategy.
- Review and update emergency preparedness plans that are appropriate for our new location.

- Establish a regular process for aligning contact record data between Populi and Raiser's Edge.
- Work with Endsight and different internal constituent groups to develop and deploy effective, collaborative workflows through our content management system (Microsoft SharePoint).

## Conclusion

We are grateful for the journey that SKSM has had in the last five years. In the midst of so many challenges, we were reminded of the power of community and of engaging creatively together in finding adaptive solutions to big problems, many of which are related to larger systemic issues that also affect our national and international communities.

We endured a pandemic together. While our previous experience teaching online and working remotely greatly facilitated our success, we also were quickly transformed into a fully online community in ways that were not anticipated. We are discerning how we want to be an intentionally online educational institution that can offer the formation that our students need.

Two beloved faculty members retired, including our first ever Director of Assessment, and one left to become the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Four more faculty were promoted to the Core faculty.

During this time, we had to leave the building that hosted us for decades: although we found a new home that seemed ideal, we soon had to find a second new space for our school. This served as a crash course in adaptation and led us to deeper reflection and learning about our identity and core mission.

Despite the disappointments, sadness and fatigue, our commitment to educate to create just and sustainable communities that counter oppressions never waned. Not only that, but we also tried to focus learning more about what it means and what it takes to embody such commitments in our communities and the world. Through a generous Lilly Pathways Grant, we assessed our counter-oppressive curriculum (ECO) and created a related curriculum to offer in local congregations (WEAV). We did not only try to survive, but we also tried to learn, create, and be a resource to others, in the ways we could.

At SKSM, we know that to be the school we want to be is an ongoing journey of learning to meet the challenges of a constantly changing world, and to prepare spiritual leaders that can have the flexibility, adaptability, and creativity to meet such challenges.

In this context, while we are aware of many areas of growth and amelioration in our institution, we plan to focus on the following priorities:

- Commit to achieve and maintain long-term financial sustainability, through diverse revenue strategies that enhance our ability to offer accessible programming, compensation alignment, and additional forms of financial aid.
- Establish a formal Evaluation Committee composed of at least one member of each core constituent group to develop a holistic, replicable evaluation framework and processes that connect to our mission statement and strategic plans and can be applied across constituencies on a regular basis (i.e. annually or bi-annually).
- Deepen our local and global relationships to cultivate strong partnerships that expand

our capacity to integrate global and community-based engagement in our courses, even in a primarily digital environment.

- Update our internal structures and processes to better align with our purpose, vision, and values as we become the hub for counter-oppressive theological education, while ensuring a smooth presidential transition.

This self-study of our school has done more than show us the ways in which we can streamline and improve our processes. It has done more than reinforce the need for continued work of the Board and Administration to improve compensation for employees and find additional scholarship dollars for our students. In reviewing all that we have done, the self-study serves to remind us why we all do what we do.

In this present moment, we at Starr King are well aware that values sacred to us are under attack; we know that marginalized people and communities are in danger from forces in the larger world. Yet we are determined to hold fast to the mission that inspires each of us, a mission that, in fact, has held us amid a pandemic and a hostile political climate. Our Unitarian Universalist foundation places love at the center of the work we do; a love for the Holy, a love for all humanity and love for our fragile planet. It embraces the multi-religious identities that sustain so many and inspires our consistent actions for justice and community. Starr King School for the Ministry is committed to our role as a force-multiplier, sending out into the world progressive religious leaders who are prepared to support congregations and communities committed to change our world. The work of this self-study helps us to know that it continues to be a privilege to serve at SKSM at this moment in history.