

**REPORT OF A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION VISIT FOR
REAFFIRMATION OF ACCREDITATION**

to

Starr King School for the Ministry
Berkeley, California
Septemeber 23 – 26, 2019

for

The Board of Commissioners of
The Commission on Accrediting of the
Association of Theological Schools

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I. INTRODUCTION

Starr King School of Ministry (SKSM) is a graduate theological school committed to educating “people for Unitarian Universalist ministry and for progressive religious leadership in society.” The school was founded in 1904 in response to leadership needs for North American Unitarians and with a desire to educate students of other faiths. For 115 years, Starr King School of Ministry has continued with that commitment, despite significant changes in the school and the communities it serves. These changes include moving from an original location in First Unitarian Church of Oakland to its current small campus in Berkeley. It also includes a relationship with the Graduate Theological Union and its member schools.

SKSM is self-consciously committed to an educational philosophy it calls “Educating to Counter Oppressions and Create Just and Sustainable Communities (ECO).” This philosophy permeates almost all aspects of the school’s life. Evidence of a broad-based acceptance of ECO was found in conversations with students, alumni, faculty, administrators, staff and trustees. A formal statement expressing the values of ECO lists four sections:

1. To be what we want to see
2. To shelter prophetic witness in the world
3. To counter white supremacy
4. To work for the common good

Currently, the student body of the school is two-thirds Unitarian Universalist and one-third “religiously progressive individuals who may or may not adhere to traditional doctrinal or cultural frameworks.” Diversity in the religion of members of the Starr King community, even among those who are Unitarian Universalists, reflects a commitment to religious diversity in the history and leadership of the school. There are among students and faculty of the school those “of established religions, some identify themselves as interfaith or multi-religious, others call themselves “spiritual but not religious,” yet all are called to become religious/spiritual leaders, and all are held together by a commitment to shared liberatory values.”(Self Study p.10.)

The Starr King School of Ministry has a unique position in the Association of Theological Schools, being one of only a few schools whose mission upholds a radical commitment to religious openness. SKSM’s position on one end of a spectrum of theological schools reveals their commitment to Unitarian Universalist values. The Reverend Rosemary Bray-McNatt, SKSM’s president, has said: “the world needs more progressive, savvy, and ethical religious leaders in a way that we have never needed them before.” If this is true, and she is correct that such leadership is an important counter to a “world beset by extremist religion,” then Starr King’s mission is sufficiently important to continue contributing to the enterprise of theological education in the United States.

While SKSM has never been a school with extraordinary financial resources, in recent years it has faced an array of challenging circumstances that have jeopardized its sustainability. These circumstances include: increased cost of living and housing in the Bay area affecting staff and students, insufficient financial support from the denomination, increased operational expenses, lingering effects of internal institutional conflict (2014) that resulted in a significant drop in

charitable donations, and discontinuation of a shared services agreement with the Graduate Theological Union. The school is now looking to strengthen new relationships and enact the necessary changes that could keep them on track toward continued mission fulfillment.

2. Accreditation History

The M.Div. degree was first accredited by the ATS in 1978, for a period of five years and “by virtue of participation in the GTU.” After a second five-year accreditation, SKSM was granted a full ten-year accreditation three times: in 1988, 1998 and 2010. In 2005 it was granted preliminary approval to offer a MA in Religious Leadership for Social Change (MASC), which was confirmed in 2009.

In February 2013, the Commission on Accrediting imposed Notation N9.3: *“The school has sustained a cumulative loss in its operating budget over the last three years, and there is no evidence that the institution is implementing a credible plan to address this issue in a timely and effective manner.”* One year later, February 2014, Notation N9.3 was removed and the school was required to submit a report by November 1, 2014, demonstrating the school’s continued progress toward economic equilibrium, including the FY2014 audit and management’s analysis of its FY2014 operating revenues and expenditures, continued reduction of the accumulated deficit, an enrollment update, and a report on the school’s continued progress toward financial equilibrium. These years generated a crisis in leadership and finances that adversely impacted the institution.

In June 2017, the Commission on Accrediting imposed Notation N8.b: *“The institution’s financial resources are not adequate for long-term institutional vitality and there is no credible plan to address this issue in a timely and effective manner.”* In June 2019, the Commission extended the usual two-year period to respond to a notation for one additional year, until June 2020. Since that time the school has been developing plans to address its financial sustainability. The visiting team reviewed the plans and information concerning this notation and will report on these matters below.

3. Adequacy of the Self-study

The Evaluation Committee received a completed self-study in a timely fashion in advance of its visit. The self-study, and the many supporting appendices were well communicated, clear and candid. Interviews with the self-study director confirmed a participatory process was undertaken in preparation for the self-study. Faculty, staff and trustees had knowledge of the self-study and its findings.

II. GENERAL INSTITUTIONAL STANDARDS

1. Purpose, Planning and Evaluation

SKSM's mission statement appropriately reflects its heritage and aspirations for the future. The school is committed to a form of broad-based engagement with the many stakeholders of the school in its planning processes. It is currently involved in a strategic planning process that has been delegated to three teams of heterogeneous participants, that is, students, faculty, staff, and trustees are represented in each team. The teams are called working groups. They are:

- Group 1. Finances Related to Building Alternatives, addressing options for sale or lease of property.
- Group 2. Long-term Partnership with Educational Institution, looking at possible collaborations or mergers.
- Group 3. Continue Separate Identity as a Theological School with likely congregational partners, looking at shared facilities or programming with congregations.

The Evaluation Committee was impressed by the commitment to a style of participation by many stakeholders in planning and with the apparent transparency of exploring options. At the same time, it was clear that planning was being driven by financial exigency, and that the processes were too slow in moving the school to respond with the urgency needed. In particular, the Evaluation Committee found that although nearly everyone was aware of the financial problems plaguing the school, and nearly everyone was willing to move toward needed change, however, the proposed actions remained at a theoretical stage and therefore were not credible. This "lack of a credible plan" was particularly concerning to the Evaluation Committee, given the length of time SKSM has been operating with a notation concerning finances and sustainability, and given the rate of continued erosion of financial assets (see, report section on Standard 8). The Evaluation Committee was made aware of the various options for fiscal solvency being considered and sincere efforts were made to support the school in moving toward a decision regarding a "credible plan." At the time, however, there was neither a consensus on which options were most likely to succeed nor a clear process for evaluating options. The movement to a clear process for evidence-based decision making, particularly as it relates to addressing a financially sustainable future for the school, remains one of the most important needs for SKSM.

The Evaluation Committee reviewed the processes of institution-wide evaluation as well as student learning outcome assessment. Student learning outcome assessment is reported below. For institution-wide evaluation, there was significant evidence in the self-study and appendices, as well as in interviews and further reports, that the school gathers data. The data gathered appears reliable and accurate. There was some evidence that the data gathered was not always timely, that is, formal appraisals of the property were not yet available, despite the consideration of sale or lease as an option, nor were full financial reports available in a timely fashion. However, given the small size of the school and the limited staffing resources, there is enough data to inform important decisions. Despite available data, the Evaluation Committee did not observe a culture of evidence driven decision making. For instance, the various plans discussed as options for responding to financial strain did not have evidence on the likelihood an option

would sufficiently address the long-term viability of the school.

2. Institutional Integrity

Starr King School for Ministry is making every effort to recover from a substantial institutional crisis that it faced in 2014, which negatively impacted several areas of its operation. This incident presented the institution with an undesirable high rate of turnover in the membership of the board of trustees, faculty, and staff as well as the financial instability that resulted in notation N8.b. However, this crisis had no deleterious impact on the institution's missional integrity. Moreover, the Evaluation Committee found that the school's commitment to its mission of Educating to Counter Oppression (ECO) which is emphasized and interwoven throughout the institution's culture, to be one of its greatest strengths. This was affirmed by our interviews with administration, faculty, students, and recent graduates of both the Master of Arts in Social Change and the Master of Divinity degree programs as well as by the documentation reviewed by the members of the Evaluation Committee. The school should also be commended for its forthrightness with the Evaluating Committee and the thoroughness and transparency of the self-study and its supporting documentation.

Starr King School of Ministry complies with all laws and regulations demanded by state and federal regulators. As part of their compliance, all students, faculty, and staff complete sexual harassment and assault prevention training. All published materials, such as printed handbooks, brochures, and website, convey accurate information to its constituencies and the general public. These materials are also revised on a continuous basis and student handbooks are updated and published at the beginning of the academic year after extensive review by administration, faculty, and staff each summer. Due to the post- 2014 high level of turnover of human resources personnel, the Employee Handbook requires updating. The school is aware of this need and is adequately responding to this deficiency.

In fidelity to its mission of educating to counter oppression, the school adheres to high ethical standards. Policies and practices are shaped, reviewed, and amended not only to adhere to the ethical standards required by its accreditor and applicable governmental statutes, but also to increase equitable access, counter historical oppressions, and foster a more just and empowering environment.

Commendably, the school's mission also drives its institutional and educational practices as they relate to the promotion of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Among other indicators, this commitment is exemplified in welcoming students from an array of non-traditional religious backgrounds and inclusion in the course syllabi of the scholarship of those who are underrepresented in theological learned societies in North America. Across the curriculum, students are required to engage African American, womanist, feminist, Latinx, and Asian-American theologies that promote ministerial competence in culturally and racially diverse settings.

Unitarian Universalists have a tradition of supporting women's ministry, and this characteristic of the school's sponsoring denomination is deeply embedded in SKSM's ethos. Currently, 70 percent of the staff and 80 percent of the faculty and administration are women. Moreover, in alignment with their ECO commitments, coursework at SKSM prioritizes the participation, scholarship, and leadership of women, while addressing diversity across gender complexities.

Starr King School of Ministry complies with all guidelines that are required by the federal government as they apply to financial aid and student loans. The school also complies with the standard for the transfer of credits as noted in their Student Handbook and on their website.

The curriculum at SKSM is increasingly dependent on the use of instructional technology. While many of the faculty adhere to the Unitarian Universalist Ministers' Association's social media and online ministry guideline, not all do. The school has identified the need to develop its own set of policies regarding appropriate conduct for faculty and students on social media, Moodle, and other platforms to ensure appropriate and ethical use of these instructional technologies.

The Evaluation Committee concludes that Starr King School of Ministry meets the expectations set forth in Commission Standard 2, Institutional Integrity. It found that the institution's mission integrity, as lived out in their Educating to Counter Oppression, is one of the school's utmost strengths. As noted above, the Evaluation Committee concurred with the self-study's assessment of the need for growth in the development of explicit guidelines for the use of instructional technology. The committee is satisfied that such policies will be established and enforced in the near future.

3. The Theological Curriculum: Learning, Teaching, and Research

Starr King School of Ministry's theological curriculum effectively embodies its 4-C's: 1) cultivating multi-religious life and learning; 2) countering oppressions and embracing radical hospitality; 3) creating just and sustainable communities; and 4) calling forth wholeness, healing, and liberation. Informed by the 4-C's, course offerings, use diverse teaching methodologies to cultivate opportunities for deepening spiritual awareness, moral sensibility, and character development, while gaining an intellectual grasp of multi-religious faith traditions and ministry. These goals and the processes that lead to their attainment are effectively interwoven throughout the curriculum. The curriculum is a cohesive framework within which students find the resources to develop intellectual, spiritual, moral, vocational, and professional capacities. This is further enhanced by SKSM's relationship with the Graduate Theological Union, which provides access to courses that allow students to broaden their intellectual formation as foundations for attaining skills for ministry.

SKSM's mission as a Unitarian Universalist institution presents a unique personalized pedagogical opportunity in graduate theological education. Students come from various religious and spiritual contexts, to interact with program advisors within a humanistic construction of study, designed to expand intellectual formation beyond theistic reference points.

This “high-touch” method of student-driven curriculum design poses a critical challenge to the institution’s identity, given that this method both foundational to SKSM’s teaching and learning ethos is also financially burdensome. While the educational objectives writ large reflect the goals of the program and programmatic assessments suggest that the curriculum cultivates scholarly discourse that results in the student’s readiness to demonstrate knowledge, think critically, cultivate emotional and spiritual maturity, and minister effectively, the unique, highly personalized dimensions of the program may present a challenge to long term viability of the program.

The degree program offerings at SKSM require a core faculty as well as a diverse cadre of adjunct professors and practitioners, librarians, and students who work together in an environment of mutual learning, respect, and engagement. The spirit of mutuality is alive and serves to manifest an expression of SKSM’s anti-oppression commitments throughout the diverse programs of study. Course syllabi indicate supportive agreements between students and teachers that encourage theological discourse while expanding awareness of the diversity of global contextual realities among varied disciplines. The faculty’s teaching, learning, and advising practices reveal a strong commitment to the educational enterprise, yet this strength also represents a strain on the faculty’s capacity to do research and publish.

Starr King School of Ministry’s curricular commitment to the 4-C’s begins with *cultivating multi-religious life and learning*. This commitment organically grafts students, faculty, and SKSM constituents into scholarly practices that extend beyond the theological school’s immediate environment. While this cultivation generates rich and textured experiences and insights, there are structural challenges that inhibit faculty research and writing within their given specialties. The second “C” *countering oppressions and embracing racial hospitality* presupposes methodologies that address racial, ethnic, gender, and global diversities in theological scholarship. Members of the school’s own community are intentional about living into this grounding commitment to diversity in race, age, ethnic origin, gender, however in the composition of the faculty reveals that there is room for improvement. The third “C”, creating just and sustainable communities, allows SKSM to attend to cross-cultural issues through the study of culture, religion, science, and anthropologies, such that global awareness and responsiveness is encouraged as foundational to the school’s identity. The school also demonstrates its ongoing efforts to ensure the ethical character of learning, teaching, and scholarship on the part of all members of the academic community, including appropriate guidelines for research with human participants. The fourth “C” *calling forth wholeness, healing and liberation*, compels SKSM to engage a manifold set of publics. Its pluralistic heritage affirms the multiple contexts within which education, worship, and ministry take place, as an action that calls forth healing and wholeness. Through access to the GTU library, deliberately designed courses, and degree programs that reflect the historical breadth of humanity, SKSM approaches the cause for liberation from within their own distinct starting points. Given the faculty’s commitments, to the high touch processes of the school, the time allotted for research and publication is limited.

The Evaluation Committee noted the following areas of needed improvement: faculty research and writing; diversity of faculty; and the theological faculty’s advancement of learning within theological education and contributions to the scholarly study of religions in higher education.

Given that “research is an essential component of theological scholarship and should be evident in the work of both teachers and students. Theological research is both an individual and a communal enterprise and is properly undertaken in a constructive relationship with the academy, with the church, and with the wider public” (Standard 3, section 3.2.3.1); “...In accordance with the school’s purpose and constituencies, insofar as possible, the members of the school’s own community of learning should also represent diversity in race, age, ethnic origin, and gender (Standard 3, section 3.3.1.3); The theological faculty contributes to the advancement of learning within theological education, the committee encourages “structural changes to the advising system that could position faculty to uniquely contribute to the constructive relationship between diverse publics, the academy, the church and the world (Standard 3, section 3.3.3.3).

4. Library and Information Resources

A primary aspect of SKSM’s partnership with the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) is the use of the GTU library by all students and faculty. The main building of the library is located in close proximity to the current campus of the school, less than one block away (Standard 4, section 4.2.4). The Flora Lamson Hewlett Library serves as the common library for all eight members of the consortium and is the primary symbolic and collective enterprise of the schools, centers, and affiliates of the GTU. The library exists as the historic embodiment of the consortium’s will to carry out its mission of educational excellence. Initially formed in 1969 from the consolidation of the member schools’ individual libraries, the GTU library continues to build on its ecumenical heritage, making it one of the most diverse and comprehensive theological libraries in the nation and perhaps the world.

As such, the GTU library is a superb resource available to the students of SKSM. The library includes more than 500,000 volumes and subscribes to 1,145 periodicals. The historic collections represent European/North America theological traditions of Christianity as well as the religious experience in Latin America, the Middle East and Asia (Standard 4, section 4.1.2).

The library also provides membership in the Statewide California Electronic Resource Consortium (SCELC) which allows access to 83 electronic databases. Additionally, the GTU library has increased access to resources for online learners through Moodle. This allows online students to access electronic resources and a live reference librarian during library hours (Standard 4, section 4.2.4). The library subscribes to many digital resources and continues to improve its online presence to provide support to distance learners (Standard 4, section 4.1.4). Electronic resources are increasing in usage in direct proportion to the decline in the circulation of print materials. As distance learning increases and local residency decreases, the reliance on the physical collection consequently diminishes. This changing trend of the locus of education will have implications for the relationship between the GTU and its member schools into the future (Standard 4, section 4.1.5).

As the Starr King School of Ministry school plans for its future, the relationship with the GTU and the library should be reviewed. If SKSM chooses to leave the GTU or change its affiliation, the school would need to submit a plan for addressing the library and information resources that

it offers to students and ensure that it retains access to a strong collection of print and especially electronic resources (Standard 4, sections 4.5.1, 4.5.5).

Rare Book Collection

The Starr King School of Ministry houses a unique and valuable collection of rare books that includes over 1,300 volumes. This collection includes volumes from the early 16th century to 1967. This treasured collection has numerous works of Unitarian and Universalist history, many of which do not exist anywhere else (Standard 4, section 4.1.3).

The rare book collection is housed in the basement of the SKSM. The room is securely locked and is controlled by a dehumidifier, but the collection has noticeable signs of decay. The room was also not fire-proof, a specific concern in Berkeley. (4.5.4)

While the books have been cataloged, no process has been taken to digitize the volumes and preserve the actual text in an electronic format. The staff at the GTU library expressed interest in working with SKSM to apply for funding to digitize these volumes and to find a more secure and protected environment for the collection.

The Evaluation Committee recommends for growth in SKMS's Library and Information Resources:

- The Starr King School of Ministry collaborates with the staff of the GTU library to execute a strategy for digitizing all volumes within the rare book collection. (4.5.6)
- Remove the collection from its current location and collaborate with the GTU library to find a more controlled environment for the collection that would also ensure access to the books by the students and faculty of SKSM as well as other members of the GTU. (4.5.4)
- An appraisal of the collection be undertaken to assess the value of each volume.

5. Faculty

In its assessment of the Starr King School of Ministry's faculty, the Evaluation Committee carefully analyzed the school's self-study report, faculty handbook, faculty *curricula vitae*, publications, and expertise in the various areas of field work that play an integral part of both the Master of Arts in Social Change and the Master of Divinity degree programs. Moreover, the committee conducted interviews with the President, the Dean and three meetings with faculty members: core faculty, non-core permanent faculty, and adjunct faculty. The information garnered from these meetings and the review of pertinent documentation enabled the Evaluation Committee to accomplish a substantive appraisal of the school's faculty.

The Evaluation Committee observed faculty to be enthusiastically supportive of the school's mission of educating to counter oppression and to demonstrate authenticity in this commitment through their efforts to be agents of social and environmental justice. They also demonstrate appreciation and affection for their students. In the Evaluation Committee's meeting with them,

the students articulated extreme gratitude for their professors' openness to their religious contexts and for the faculty's attentiveness to their particular needs and ministerial goals. They spoke highly of the faculty's competence in their respective fields of expertise, their excellence in teaching, and their willingness to participate in practices that contribute to the students' flourishing not only in ministerial aptitude but also in their affective and emotional growth. Beyond the SKSM faculty, the students have found faculty at the GTU to be of great worth to their academic interests and ministerial formation.

Starr King School of Ministry utilizes a trifold faculty categorization structure comprised of core" faculty, advising faculty and adjunct faculty. The school employs 30 faculty members, yet only two teach full-time and another three have administrative responsibilities (Dean, Associate Dean, and Assessment Coordinator).

Core faculty are either hired through a national search and have permanent contracts or are ex-officio, as in the case of the President and Dean. SKSM does not offer tenure but has long-term contracts for core faculty. In accordance with the faculty handbook, core faculty do not undergo evaluations for contracting, although they do undergo qualitative evaluations for promotion in professorial rank. Core faculty retention is encouraged by the offer of regular sabbaticals on a schedule amenable to both the faculty and the institution.

The advising faculty are non-core permanent teaching faculty who share in the advising responsibilities of the core faculty. Most of these are part-time academic positions and are compensated in correlation with teaching and advising loads. There are 15 advising faculty, which is a full time equivalent of 12.5. Like the core faculty, advising faculty have academic ranking (Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, Professor). Advising faculty are afforded an annual renewable contract.

With the exception of adjunct faculty, all faculty have voice and vote in faculty meetings and exercise responsibility for the planning, design, and oversight of the school's curriculum. The school has an annual effectiveness assessment of faculty comprised of a narrative self-evaluation and another evaluation by the Dean.

Faculty have an advising load of approximately 10 students. The advising model adopted by SKSM is comprehensive given the uniquely individualized nature of student led and advisor accompanied course development. The adviser is tasked with the initial assessment of the advisee's tailor-made program and the plan for execution of the program of study. Faculty advisors are also responsible for ongoing vocational discernment with their advisees, and for the ongoing assessment of the student's plan of academic studies. Advisers are often tasked with offering mental health support and spiritual direction to students whose studies bring up personal issues that are unsettled. Although these services are extended to the student, the advisors are not professionally trained for this type of accompaniment, but they offer their support as a service to students who often cannot afford professional counseling. When the spiritual or mental health needs of the advisee extend beyond the competency of the adviser, a referral to a professional in the field is made. Moreover, the advisers assess their advisees' progress in meeting the program goals and thresholds and mentor the student in the preparation of a mid-program portfolio. The

50 to 70-page portfolio is then presented to a committee chaired by the adviser and includes another faculty member, a student peer, and the advisee. This process is then repeated at the completion of the student's program.

As a result of conversations with faculty and administration and a review of the school's advising program, the committee recommends that: A report be required by October 1, 2020, regarding faculty advising of students that addresses the sustainability of current advising practices: including course selection, intensive vocational discernment, mental health support, and spiritual direction. The report should include a sustainable advising method detailing necessary financial support (Standard 5, section 5.3.3).

The school's faculty meet the necessary competencies for their responsibilities. Eleven faculty members have doctorates, two junior faculty members are nearing the defense of their Ph.D. dissertations, and the rest are professors of practice. The professors of practice have competencies in ecclesial administration, transformative ritual, community organizing, interfaith chaplaincy, social justice activism, and other areas of expertise that are integral to SKSM's mission and academic programs.

Starr King School of Ministry encourages faculty research but does not make explicit expectations in terms of output. The GTU does have standards in order for faculty to be granted status to advise doctoral students, serve on doctoral committees, and regularly teach doctoral level courses. Only one Starr King faculty member meets the GTU standards for membership in the GTU's Core Doctoral Faculty.

After careful review of the self- study and faculty *curricula vitae*, the committee determined that scholarly research was an area of growth in meeting ATS accrediting standards as they relate to research. As a result, the committee recommends that the school establish clear criteria in the expectation of faculty to engage in research; the provision of structured opportunities for faculty to achieve these expectations; and the workload in teaching, advising, and administration that permits adequate attention to scholarly pursuits (Standard 5, sections 5.1.8; 5.4.1, and 5.4.2).

The Evaluation Committee concludes that Starr King School of Ministry meets the expectations set forth in Commission Standard 5, Faculty. It found the quality of instruction and faculty commitment to the mission of Educating to Counter Oppression commendable. However, the committee noted the need of growth in the area of faculty research. Additionally, the committee found the need for improvement in the area of the school's advising practice and recommends that a report be required by October 1, 2020 that maps out a sustainable advising method and delineates its correlating fiscal impact. The committee is confident that these matters will be satisfactorily attended to by the school.

6. Student Recruitment, Admission, Services, and Placement

Starr King's student recruitment practices and policies have recently undergone an updating by the new V.P for Academic Enrollment. The V.P., along with the Admission's staff have implemented a dynamic webpage which identifies the Unitarian Universalists and multi-religious

character of the institution. In addition, the admission's staff is building a renewed infrastructure for admissions including enhanced marketing and recruitment initiatives. The recruitment material available on the webpage clearly provides an outreach consistent with the mission and purpose of the school. (6.1.1)

The website offers prospective students the opportunity for spiritual and vocational discernment and provides options for contacting the Admissions staff for more information. The admission's office offers individual interviews with potential students via Zoom video conferencing and a monthly open house that is both virtual and in-person. (6.1.2)

Among the various new strategies being implemented by the V.P for Academic Enrollment, the Admissions Applicant Evaluation provides valuable assessment of the incoming student body that will benefit student services as well as enhance the recruitment and admissions process. (6.2.3)

The recruitment material online demonstrates a clear effort to encourage diversity in its admissions in terms of race, ethnicity, region, denomination, gender identity, sexual orientation and disability. A diverse student body and the inclusion of those marginalized by both church and society are a particular strength of SKSM. (6.2.4)

Outreach is oriented towards Unitarian Universalist communities, particularly at the UUA General Assembly as well as other faith-inspired social justice events. Additional recruitment efforts targeting those who may be seeking theological formation but are not associated with traditional denominations or religiously-affiliated groups is also recommended as SKSM may appeal to such potential students in a unique way. (6.2.4)

SKSM publishes a Student Handbook which articulates all policies of the institution as well as students' rights and responsibilities. This handbook is reviewed and revised annually. While all students receive a physical copy when entering the school, a digital version is available on the website. (6.3.1)

Student financial aid is currently overseen by an outside vendor, FA Solutions and follows ATS Policy Guidelines. The default rate for alumni is also quite low as compared to other institutions and is periodically reviewed by the V.P for Academic Enrollment. (6.3.7, 6.4.1, 6.4.2)

7. Authority and Governance

Starr King School of Ministry is a self-governing theological seminary. It is governed by a self-perpetuating board of trustees, in which the responsibility for the seminary is vested. The board has full authority for all institutional and educational operations. The board also shares appropriately its responsibility of governance with the president, whom it appoints and whose performance it evaluates regularly, and for the administration, under the direction of the president and the faculty.

In the self-study and during interviews with representatives of the board of trustees, faculty,

president and other administrators, it was clear that Starr King has sufficiently clear lines of both authority and accountability. The school has a commitment to openness and transparency. The Evaluation Committee at times encountered the awkwardness of the very high level of shared responsibility of the school but could see it was consistent with the democratic principles that are common to its denominational affiliation.

The bylaws provide for a board of trustees up to twenty members. However, as reported in the self-study, “the Board has found it difficult to fill all positions for the past several years.” There are currently thirteen members of the board of trustees; eight are elected and five are *ex officio*. *Ex officio* members include two students, the president, the dean, and a faculty member. All *ex officio* members have both voice and vote. The board meets biannually, with occasional meetings for committees and working groups more frequently. The president reported that there were increasingly successful efforts to fill the vacant positions on the board. The Evaluation Committee noted that the ratio of elected trustees to those serving by virtue of office had the risk of a disproportionate influence of those with vested interests. Although this risk was present, there were many reassurances that student and staff trustees were able to take broad and inclusive views of their role as a trustee.

The Evaluation Committee did not find evidence of timely board minutes or adequate processes of accountability for decision making. During the interview with the board, it was clear that certain board members were well aware of the serious challenges facing the school and were eager to move toward addressing the concerns, but there was no evidence of a timeline or process to achieve these goals. It is for this reason that the following area of needed growth was identified: Focused attention to the governing board’s infrastructure, particularly the timely reporting of board minutes, processes of accountability and decision making, that provide effective protocols for institutional governance (*Standard 7, section 7.1.3.10*).

Delegation of authority to the president and from the president to appropriate officers of the institution was evident in the self-study and interviews. Staff had position descriptions and sufficiently clear responsibilities. The degree of turnover in the school however, does pose a continual concern about “on-boarding,” new staff and assuring responsibilities and tasks are completed.

The board of trustees has a more informal than formal self-evaluation. Despite the informality of the self-evaluation, the trustees are actively aware of the need for continued growth, both in numbers and in functioning. The board had a very extensive review of its processes and procedures following the appointment of the current president in 2014. The year-long review represented a significant season of distrust, conflict and confusion. The report of that year-long review was nearly twenty pages in length and identified many areas of broken trust and painful concern. The turning point that 2014 represented put Starr King in an extraordinarily precarious place, especially because it meant the loss of key leaders and the confidence of many donors. That the school has found ways to heal, to continue to shepherd its mission, and to move to a new level of trust is worthy of high commendation.

8. Institutional Resources

The institutional resources of SKSM currently provide an adequate means of delivering programs to accomplish its mission. The small campus has deferred maintenance, shared spaces that are sometimes cramped, technology that is workable but not always reliable, and other limits borne of limited finances. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly a place, an actual physical place, that is well-loved by students, faculty and staff. The technology, for Zoom classrooms and computer services, functions well enough to have students, faculty, trustees and staff regularly meet from distant locations. While technological “glitches” were reported by almost all, and experienced by the Evaluation Committee, the community demonstrates a patience that indicates the quality of what is encountered is well worth the occasional hiccups in connections. There were several reports of not having adequate compensation for employees to meet competitive benchmarks. This concern was raised often, because it meant that the desire for justice that is so much a part of the commitment of the school, was not served as well as possible. Despite the oft expressed concern about compensation, the morale of employees seemed high and the love for the work they do evident. If there was a morale issue encountered by the Evaluation Committee, it was with the uncertainty of the school’s future.

The Evaluation Committee found, in the self-study, interviews, review of financial statements, fundraising projections and other materials, cause for concern about the long-term sustainability of Starr King. In financial terms the problem can be described as follows:

- The assets of Starr King grew over the two-year period from 2016-2017. In fiscal year 2016, the audited financial statements indicate a combined total of cash, receivables, and investments of \$5,931,497. In fiscal year 2017, this amount went up to \$8,074,767. This increase was primarily due to the receipt of a \$2 million gift for permanently restricted scholarship.
- In fiscal year 2018, despite a positive investment return, the value of cash, receivables and investments dropped to \$7,798,190.
- At the time of the comprehensive visit, no audited financial statements were available; however, from interviews and reports received, it appears that fiscal year 2019 results produced a combined spending from endowments of \$884,214 and an operating deficit of \$663,664, resulting in an erosion of cash, receivables and investments in excess of \$1 million.

The \$884,214 budgeted spending of endowment in FY2019 is itself in excess of 10% of invested funds. Added to this amount is an operating deficit, making the functional spending of endowment beyond prudence. The result is a significant erosion of the invested funds of the school. A permanently restricted fund value of approximately \$7.2 million, already by the end of 2019 exceeds invested funds by nearly \$2 million or close to 25% “underwater.”

Starr King outsources much of their accounting function, and at the end of September there were no reports from the accounting firm that were reviewable by, the Evaluation Committee; however, a budget report was shared that showed a FY2020 planned budget deficit of \$778,838. If the current fiscal year continues the path projected by this budget, the school would need to

spend nearly 15% of invested funds before market returns. Even in a remarkable investment return year, 15% market returns are unlikely. In brief, Starr King, is ‘burning through cash’ at a rate that is not sustainable for more than five years. Furthermore, the funds it is spending are pledged in support of permanently restricted funds and should not prudently be spent without a clear and reasonable plan for restoration.

There is a plan, included in the self-study appendices, that projects balanced budgets by FY2024. The projection is a fairly straightforward pro forma, with one significant variable—an increase in unrestricted annual giving from \$812,584 to \$1,794,615 over five years. This planned growth in unrestricted giving over so short a period of time is very optimistic. Furthermore, it is not borne out by the results of the most recent fiscal year. In FY2019, the fundraising goal was \$812,584, but actual gifts totaled only \$714,953.

The fundraising has shown considerable improvement over the last several years. From a low in FY2015 of \$553,893 to over \$700,000 is a very positive sign. The Evaluation Committee reviewed fundraising plans and projections that show steady and credible results over the next five to ten years. It is for this reason that the Evaluation Committee identified the following strength: The strategic initiative in fundraising, particularly increasing the number of donors, the development of multiple giving opportunities and the expansion of relationships.

Despite strong progress in fundraising, a projected growth of 120% in five years, is not currently supported by the fundraising record or available projections. In addition, the school has enjoyed favorable investment returns for several years, but again, even at the most favorable level they cannot sustain the net operating losses. The Evaluation Committee looked for but was unable to yet find reasons for recommending the removal of Notation N8.b: “The institution’s financial resources are not adequate for long-term institutional vitality and there is no credible plan to address this issue in a timely and effective manner.”

In June 2020, Starr King will need to present a credible plan to address the issue of long-term institutional vitality. In order to do this, the school should have better, more thorough and timely financial reports. In interviews with staff, a plan to improve this reporting is underway. Unfortunately, no such process had concluded by the time of the comprehensive visit, and therefore the Evaluation Committee recommendations call for a report by April 1, 2020, regarding a system of budgetary and timely reports of revenues and expenditures to those persons with oversight responsibilities. (Standard 8, section 8.2.2.5).

Primarily based on Starr King’s financial stability, the Evaluation Committee recommends the reaffirmation of accreditation for five years, instead of the usual ten years.

Educational Standards

Starr King School of Ministry offers two master’s level degrees and has effectively articulated the distinctions among the degrees with regard to their educational and vocational intent. Goals and objectives of each program support the design of the curriculum, and the enrollment is sufficient to ensure a viable community of learning. The standards for degree program and

nomenclature meet the requirements of the standard. SKSM does not offer doctoral level degrees.

Both of SKSM's degree programs reflect the characteristics of its curriculum. This is clear in how the curriculum integrates SKSM's thresholds for ministry, which are also helpful for ongoing evaluation of student progress and degree program impact. The emphasis on empowered, student-centered learning is reflected in the variety of modes by which students may pursue course work and in the flexibility to craft personalized degree programs. Students are also encouraged to develop praxis -- learning opportunities like field education, internships, personal development experiences, and activism, upon which they reflect with advisors and faculty.

Starr King School of Ministry offers residential courses that accommodate high-residence students on-campus and low-residence students who attend by Zoom, aided by the assistance of an on-campus tech minister. Students who connect by Zoom receive distance education credits for these courses. There are also on-campus, week-long intensive courses. Intensive courses, as well as courses that accommodate high and low residence, which are considered hybrid courses, are in accordance with the standard for campus-based education. All on-campus activities, including weekly chapel services, are shared with distance education students by Zoom.

Starr King School of Ministry currently operates with an ATS-granted exception to ES.2.1.1, which allows it to reduce residency requirements to 22.5 credits rather than 30. Residency at SKSM centers around contextual education, and in particular, immersion learning experiences, which are partially funded. Opportunities have included ECO class immersion, Ministry in Times of Disaster in Sonoma, Mindful Walk Pilgrimage in Transylvania, a 5-day journey to the US/Mexico Border, and a planned trip to Tijuana for the Forced Migration and Social Justice course (Spring 2020). Students report that these immersion experiences are life changing.

There is no extension education program. Distance education courses may consist of exclusively online and other technologically assisted instruction or a blend of intensive classroom and online instruction. Distance education is an integral part of the curriculum at SKSM. While some students take hybrid courses, others look to pursue fall and spring semesters asynchronously, and summer and intersession terms in residency in Berkeley.

Starr King School of Ministry offers Moodle-based asynchronous classes and Zoom-based synchronous classes. The curriculum committee reviews whether the course plan meets ATS requirements. Courses are approved and reviewed in the same way campus courses are, by the curriculum committee and Dean of Faculty regarding syllabus, content, requirements, and learning goals. Student learning is assessed in the same way whether a course is residential or online class. Online classmates become a community of learners, and online instructors comment/reply to their Moodle class often. As one of only two Unitarian Universalist seminaries, some of the UU formation courses are only taught online to reach as many students as possible. These practices meet ATS standards.

The school contracts with the Chaplaincy Institute (ChI), a religious, ordaining entity that has been recognized as an Ecclesiastical Endorsing body by both the APC and the ACPE (Association for Clinical Pastoral Education). The contract allows students who do not wish to be ordained in the UU Church to seek ordination particular to chaplaincy. SKSM is intricately involved in the ongoing curriculum work to ensure compatibility with its own 4-C's and accompanying thresholds for ministry. In 2018, SKSM dissolved a contract with the Religious Freedom Center of the Freedom Forum Institute, which had cultivated competencies in legal literacy, religious literacy, and civil discourse, to prepare leaders to address the national challenge of religious pluralism.

Membership in the GTU allows SKSM to access to library holdings and technical support for distance learning. Additionally, SKSM has its own PhD level Director of Online Education, who teaches online and provides technical support services to students and faculty. Assistance is offered in the form of training videos and Moodle instruction during student orientation. Advising/adjunct faculty also participate in all training offered to core faculty.

Students can participate in Starr King Individualized Learning (SKIL) courses. A SKIL course is intended to deepen a student's study and practice toward learning outcomes associated with the program's four goals or C's and is limited to meeting a student's unique educational interests that cannot be met in regular classes. The SKIL courses meet the requirements for faculty directed individual instruction.

In response to feedback from ATS regarding the sustainability of a previous comprehensive student assessment tool, SKSM restructured its assessment structure in 2014-2015. The work that SKSM has done in light of that feedback is well observed in its current structure. The identified tools for assessment and evaluation involve input from faculty, staff, and students and are well-aligned with the school's mission and commitment to student-centered learning. The Assessment Coordinator reports about program effectiveness and updates information about assessment process/changes/etc. to the Board every year at the Board's Spring meeting in Berkeley. The tools are robust, yet a question remains over how to make good use of the evidence collected. SKSM might benefit from a cyclical schedule of data collection, evaluation of data and tools, and necessary modifications. The data that currently exists is substantial, but faculty report that there may not be enough time between comprehensive data collection and evaluation of evidence to make necessary modifications to the curriculum or assessment tools before the next round of comprehensive data is collected. A cyclical (or staggered) schedule for comprehensive data collection, evaluation, and subsequent modifications might support sustainable practices of engaging evidence to more readily inform educational programming.

Although almost all students come to SKSM having earned a baccalaureate degree, the school reports that they are careful to observe that non-baccalaureate students comprise less than 15 percent of the student body. These students are reviewed with particular attention to writing ability, age/stage of life, and reasons for not completing undergraduate studies. Its practices for accepting transfer credits and sharing credits between programs meet ATS requirements. SKSM reports that accepting an applicant with advanced standing is a very rare occurrence. As with transfer credits, the Dean of Faculty makes these decisions.

There are two nondegree instructional certificate programs at SKSM: Certificate in Unitarian Universalist Studies and The Certificate in Multi-Religious Studies. The first of the two programs is more widely attended. The first program requires completion of six online courses and short-term intensives. The latter consists of Starr King and GTU courses in multi-religious studies. As stated, the program structure and practices meet ATS requirements for nondegree instructional programs.

The Evaluation Committee recommends growth through inclusion in the assessment plan a cyclical (or staggered) schedule for comprehensive evaluation of the assessment plan in order to more readily inform educational programming and effectiveness (Standard Educational Standard ES.6.2.4).

Degree Program Standard A: Master of Divinity (MDiv)

A.1 Purpose/Goals/Assessment

The purpose of SKSM's Master of Divinity degree is to educate and prepare people for Unitarian Universalist ministry and other forms of progressive religious leadership including parish ministry, religious education, chaplaincy, community ministry, spiritual direction, and interfaith ministry.

The MDiv degree program meets the graduate-level educational requirements for fellowship as a Unitarian Universalist minister, board certification as a Chaplain or Pastoral Counselor, and/or for ordination in a variety of other religious traditions and interfaith contexts. The MDiv degree is also the recommended degree for admission to advanced programs oriented to theological research and teaching such as the Doctor of Ministry. The primary goals and learning outcomes do a good job of communicating the school's mission to students and satisfying ATS requirements.

Starr King School of Ministry employs a variety of assessment measures and practices – both direct and indirect - to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of its MDiv program. Consideration of the assessment practices for the M.Div should also be included in the school's response to the recommendation for Educational Standard ES.6.2.4.

A.2 Program Content

Program content and pedagogies are informed by the 4-C's and eight threshold areas. The combination of coursework, field education, internships, immersion experiences, individualized learning, and faculty advisory support are the medium through which content is delivered. SKSM's multi-religious context creates a rich experience for students that the program's structure accommodates in accordance with ATS expectations concerning religious heritage and cultural engagement. Multi-religious, trauma-informed, counter-oppressive instruction routinely draws on the arts, humanities including poetry, natural and social sciences, psychology, neuroscience, economics, and earth science. Of particular note is the institution's programmatic response to trauma.

A.3 Educational Resources and Learning Outcomes

The school's capacity to create opportunities for students who come from various religious backgrounds and social contexts is notable. Its holistic approach to theological education and praxis supports well integrates the intellectual and affective, individual and corporate, ecclesial and public dimensions of ministerial leadership. This approach seems to position students well to step into SKSM's commitment to countering oppression and building just and sustainable communities. A key strength is its placement of students in traditional and non-traditional settings through Contextual Education.

Keeping in line with trends in theological education, many of SKSM's students are distance and/or low residency. This shift challenges the work of community-building, and SKSM is developing ways to foster connections that cultivate formation and academic growth. One of the helpful ways in which they have addressed this challenge is through connecting student orientation to the Summer or Winter intensive semester. Orientation includes communal worship, communal meals, and small cohort groups that will remain together through the seminary experience. Key among these experiences is the introductory level ECO core intensive that solidly grounds students in SKSM's mission, goals and intended outcomes for theological education and ministry in the larger world.

The school's practices and policies for duration fall within ATS requirements for this standard.

Various announcements were observed throughout the building informing students of opportunities to participate in community events, and students share information about gatherings and resources. The faculty also provides significant resources to students through its rich repository of diverse experiences. Even still, SKSM may benefit from increasing the richness of the resources of the faculty by perhaps increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of its faculty and administration when possible.

Information about admission is thoroughly covered in the Educational Standard and Standard 6 sections. The school reports that the majority of its students come with undergraduate degrees from accredited institutions of higher education and that it does occasionally accept students who have not completed their baccalaureate degrees. These practices are in accordance with Degree Program Standard A.4.2.

Degree Program Standard B: Master of Arts in Social Change (MASC)

B.1 Purpose/Goals/Assessment

Rooted in Starr King's mission of educating to counter oppression, the purpose of the Master of Arts in Social Change is to prepare students to be spiritually grounded, transformative leaders of social change. To this end, the program has four clearly articulated goals: to call forth compassion, wholeness, healing and liberation; cultivate multi-religious life and learning;

counter oppressions and embrace radical hospitality; and create just and sustainable/regenerative communities.

The program is individually designed to adequately respond to the student's particular needs and ministerial aspirations. The committee's review of sample particularized programs developed to correspond to the student's unique plan of studies demonstrate fidelity to the standards set forth for basic programs oriented toward ministerial leadership as well the specific goals of the MASC program. Beyond the courses offered by Starr King to provide the student with the necessary understanding of the theologies that inform the ministerial praxis, MASC students enroll in courses offered by GTU. In addition, to bolster competence in the interdisciplinary scholarship that undergirds their particular area of interest, Starr King students have access to courses offered through the University of California in Berkeley. The Committee's review of syllabi demonstrate that MASC students engage up to date theological and interdisciplinary scholarship appropriate to the goals of the degree program. The syllabi also denote processes that facilitate critical and constructive reflection of the course's subject matter through the integration of theological content and other disciplines that undergird the processes of countering oppression and social change. In addition, the integration of this scholarship is augmented in conferences with the student's adviser.

The school employs a variety of qualitative and quantitative assessment measures such as narrative course evaluations by faculty and student evaluation of courses. In addition, the learning outcomes associated with the program's four goals or C's are assessed through eight rubric-based "thresholds." Competence in the thresholds are achieved through course work, experiential learning, individualized learning projects, immersion experiences, supervised internships and field education, as well as other learning opportunities sponsored by the school. The student's progress in meeting these thresholds is assessed by the adviser with the student on a continuous basis and by a committee composed of the adviser, another faculty member, a student peer, and the student, by reviewing a portfolio prepared by the student with their adviser at the mid-point and at the completion of the program.

Quantitative studies of students petitioning for graduation report an 80% success rate in meeting the program thresholds and the fieldwork desired outcomes. Surveys of placement rates are undertaken six months after the completion of the program. The results for the graduating classes of 2015 to 2018 demonstrate that the average vocational placement is 62.25% and an additional 24.75% had engaged in further study or were participating internships or residencies for a combined placement rate of 87%.

B.2 Program Content

The program content of the MASC is structured to meet the student's individual needs. The successful completion of the program requires a minimum of 48 credit hours of coursework of which six credits must be taken at other GTU academic entities. The committee found that most students obtain more than the minimum requirement of coursework at other GTU academic institutions and contend that the opportunity to cross-register at other schools has substantially enhanced the content of the program. In addition, students are required to participate in two

annual symposia, a community placement and a correlating integrative reflection course, and a final project representative of the student's learning during the program. During the second year of study, students participate in a six-month community placement designed to integrate spiritual leadership and practical skills in the service of social change. Community placements may be local, national, or international and include supervision from a seasoned progressive activist. The specific placement site is determined by the particular interests and ministerial goals of the student. These community placements have included prison chaplaincy, at-risk children's advocacy, interfaith programs for the homeless, urban farming, using arts for healing and social transformation, genetic research think tanks, teaching for social transformation, and grassroots organizing.

B.3 Educational Resources and Learning Outcomes

Starr King students are considered "low residency" if they reside at a distance that impedes their physical presence in the classroom. "High residency" are those who live in close proximity to the school are able to attend classes in person on a regular basis. Up to two-thirds of the MASC degree credits may be completed in low-residence online course work offered by Starr King or other GTU member schools. In-person intensive course work on the Berkeley campus is required of all low-residency students. The intensive sessions are offered each August and January; in addition to course work, students participate in symposia and common worship. High-residency students attend classes on campus at Starr King or other GTU schools. They are also able to take online and hybrid courses.

The school has well developed assessment instruments to evaluate the effectiveness of the varying learning environments. This includes a comparison of learning outcomes between the low-residency and high residency students. Their data show no significant variation between the two categories of students. Supervisors of field work in the Bay area and at distant sites are assessed for competence and are overseen by the school's Director of Contextual Education.

B.4 Admissions

As delineated in the student handbook, a prerequisite for admission into the MASC program is a bachelor's degree from an accredited college or university, or its equivalent degree from a non-US school. Occasionally, Starr King offers admission to well-qualified applicants who have not completed an undergraduate degree if the applicants can show evidence of capacity for graduate theological work. The number of students who are admitted to the program without the completion of a bachelor's degree is capped at 10% of the student body. The admissions process requires an interview with the Admissions Director and the submission of a completed application that is evaluated and accepted by the Admissions Committee.

Both of SKSM's master's programs are constructed in a way that meets the requirements of Standards A and B, respectively. Overall, the committee's meeting with students who are graduates of the programs, our review of the outcome assessments, and other pertinent

documentation indicate each program's effectiveness in meeting its purpose and goals. Moreover, the committee found the degree programs' capacity to adapt to the student's religious backgrounds, interests, and ministerial aspirations as well as its fidelity to Starr King's mission of educating to counter oppression commendable.

IV. COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

After reviewing all appropriate information in light of the Commission's Standards and Procedures, the Evaluation Committee recommends to the Board of Commissioners the following actions:

1. To reaffirm the accreditation of Starr King School for the Ministry for a period of five years, with the next comprehensive evaluation visit in fall of 2024, one term before the period of accreditation expires on March 31, 2025.

Prior to this visit, a follow-up report regarding notation N8.b was *extend* for good cause for one year (to June 2020, Board of Commissioners meeting), "*The institution's financial resources are not adequate for long-term institutional vitality and there is no credible plan to address this issue in a timely and effective manner.*" A report is due on April 1, 2020 providing credible evidence for long term institutional vitality.

2. To approve the following degree programs:

Master of Divinity
Master of Arts in Social Change (MASC)

3. To approve the following extension site(s): None
4. To grant approval to offer comprehensive distance education: Yes
5. To encourage that attention be given to maintaining and enhancing these distinctive strengths:
 - a. The institution's missional integrity, as lived out in their Education to Counter Oppression (ECO).
 - b. The strategic initiative in fundraising, particularly increasing the number of donors, the development of multiple giving opportunities and the expansion of relationships.
 - c. The school's capacity to make space in the educational community for diverse religious perspectives that link contextualized human experience, social justice and spiritual practice.
6. To encourage that attention be given to the following areas of needed growth during the next period of accreditation, with each area linked to a specific Standard:
 - a. Focused attention to the governing board's infrastructure, particularly the timely reporting of board minutes, processes of accountability and decision making, that provide effective protocols for institutional governance (*Standard 7, section 7.1.3.10*).

