LOYOLA UNIVERSITY NEW ORLEANS
INSTITUTE FOR MINISTRY
EXTENSION PROGRAM

The Office of Religious Education and Catechesis is the co-sponsor of the Loyola University Institute of Ministry Extension Program from New Orleans in the Diocese of Columbus. This program has been operative in the diocese since 1995. Loyola University New Orleans, through its Institute for Ministry (LIM), offers masters degrees and certificates in pastoral studies and religious education entirely onsite in a local area. Through a partnership with local sponsoring agencies, a diocese, parish, retreat center, or other established institutions, Loyola has offered these degrees and certificates in extension format since 1983. The program, known as the Loyola Institute for Ministry Extension Program, is a professionally oriented graduate program that develops the theological and ministerial competencies of participants through an integration of rigorous academic study with theological reflection on ministerial practice and the participants' lived adult experience as people of faith. Students’ integration of their knowledge of the Catholic faith with their own ministry is a primary feature of this program. Students develop a solid ministerial proficiency by combining in-depth study of the Christian theological tradition of their first ministry context with an appreciative and critical understanding of the contexts in which they minister. These contexts include the sociocultural context of their ministry, the personal context of participants’ own faith development and spirituality, and the institutional context and organizational dynamics of the ministry sites in which they work and collaborate with others. Since the world and the Christian community are developing a growing awareness of ecology, the context of creation is also included. In addition, participants develop specific competencies in a ministry focus area of their choice.

The Loyola program originated as a response to Vatican II's universal call to ministry and to the changing demographic patterns in church and society since the Council. The program particularly responds to the educational needs of Catholic dioceses with little or no access to residential graduate programs by offering adult practitioners the opportunity to pursue graduate studies in learning communities within their own localities.

The Process

The institute offers a 36-hour curriculum of 10 common curriculum courses and two focus area courses. (All courses are three credits.) The common curriculum courses are taken in sequence in learning groups, each led by a master's level, Loyola-certified facilitator under the direction of Loyola faculty. The sessions for each course are designed by Loyola faculty and incorporate a variety of reflection methods and experiential learning approaches, as well as lecture material in printed form and videotaped input from leading scholars in the field. The learning process seeks to nurture a breadth of theological knowledge and provide opportunities for participants to practice skills related to the performance of ministerial and religious education. In the process, students learn habits of theological reflection on their performance of ministerial skills, weaving a content of the tradition with practice and lived faith. The two focus area courses are taken as semi-independent study between Courses Five and Ten of the common curriculum.
The Learning Community

Because Christianity is a communal faith, Loyola faculty believe that education to deepen understandings of the Christian faith and to learn how to engage in Christian ministry is best fostered with the rich experience of community. Participants in Loyola's program form learning communities of eight to fifteen members who remain together for the duration of the program. Within this setting students support, encourage, listen to, and challenge one another as they reflect upon their own life and ministerial experiences in light of course content and gospel values.

Learning groups include students with a variety of interests and goals. Some are professionally employed ecclesial ministers or religious educators, while others may work in hospitals, social service agencies, various businesses, or other settings. Groups may be ecumenical in composition. In order to assure a graduate level discussion, learning groups must have a majority of their students enrolled for graduate credit.

Sponsoring agencies select facilitator candidates to lead these Loyola learning groups. Facilitators hold a graduate degree in pastoral studies, theology, religious education, or a related field and are skilled in interpersonal dynamics and group leadership. Before being certified to facilitate a Loyola group, they must successfully complete a week-long facilitator certification workshop led by a Loyola faculty member.

Facilitators are not instructors. Rather, they implement the learning designs for each session created by Loyola faculty. Loyola faculty maintains phone, e-mail, and written communication with facilitators and students, and monitor the progress of groups. Loyola faculty also provide consultation to facilitators and offer further skills development and program information through facilitator workshops held later in the program.

Faculty Presence to Learning Groups

Faculty support and monitor the progress of learning group participants in a variety of ways through:

(a) careful and integrated design of course content, extensive syllabi, and group sessions;
(b) development of class lectures provided to students in a CD format;
(c) creation of supplemental videos that bring national scholars to learning groups;
(d) evaluation of students' written assignments;
(e) phone contact with learning group;
(f) accessibility to students through e-mail, phone, and fax communications.

Each course is coordinated and overseen by an instructor of record who is a faculty member at Loyola. The instructor of record is responsible for coordinating all aspects of a course and is assisted by a team of adjunct faculty who are pastoral scholars in their fields. Each course that a learning group undertakes is assigned to an adjunct faculty member who contacts the group to give general advice about the assignment and to discuss student questions, and provides constructive feedback and evaluation of graduate student assignments. In focus area courses, adjunct faculty are individually assigned to students and are available for consultation on course content and written assignments. Through the institute's toll-free telephone lines and e-mail, instructors of record are also readily available to students, facilitators and liaisons who wish to discuss any aspect of course content, assignments, or resources related to their courses.