

Master of Arts in Bible Program Evaluation

May 2001

The Master of Arts in Bible (MAB) degree program evaluation was conducted under the direction of Dr. Miles Lewis, Dean of Graduate Education and Dr. John Soden, Coordinator of the M.A. in Bible program. Some of the underlying principles for this evaluation were guided by Departmental Assessment, a publication of the American Association for Higher Education, authored by Jon Wergin and Judi Swingen (2000).

Wergin and Swingen comment that program evaluations have suffered over the years for two important reasons. First, the process is “often tedious, time consuming, and of little consequence” in terms of substantive changes in the program or continued dialogue with Graduate School stakeholders. Also, these authors note the opportunity for “critical reflection is lost in the desire to get the thing done.” Therefore, programs would be better served by promoting formative evaluation procedures and reminding students and faculty of the long-term changes that should result from the evaluation process. Second, evaluations by nature have a backward focus (on what has already happened) rather than a forward look (on what is possible) where “reviews are guided by the institution’s strategic goals and result in action plans with direct budgetary consequences.”

This report is to serve two primary goals: (1) To foster continued dialogue and a spirit of inquiry that encourages faculty, students and administrators to question assumptions and create avenues to meet program challenges and student needs, and (2) To provide both a backward focus and a forward look. In so doing the evaluation will outline the history of the program, data collection processes, and current program strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the report will list recommendations for improving the M.A. in Bible degree and potential action plans to address the needs of the program.

M.A. in Bible Evaluation Process

The evaluation process was begun during the 2000 fall semester and data collection was completed in March 2001. The data collection consisted of student surveys, focus groups with students and Bible faculty, dialogue with the Graduate School Academic Affairs Committee, and input from both college administrators and peer consultants from other institutions.

The peer consultants were Dr. Mark Bailey, President-Elect and Professor in the Biblical Exposition Department at Dallas Theological Seminary, and Dr. Sid Buzzell, former Vice-President of Academic Affairs and now a faculty member in the Biblical Division of Colorado Christian University. Both of these individuals offered suggestions on curriculum structure. In addition, Dr. Ron Burwell, Associate Dean for General Education and Assessment at Messiah College, assisted in the design and interpretation of the student questionnaire.

Some of the issues listed by faculty and administrators as important to explore were the following:

1. Directed Research Project
2. Research
3. Biblical Languages
4. Non-Bible Majors and Prerequisite Courses
5. Core/Required Courses
6. Biblical Studies/Theological Studies Concentrations
7. 30 Hour Length of Programs
8. Writing Style
9. Electives in Addition to Bible Courses
10. On-line Courses
11. Attracting Students Outside Central Pennsylvania
12. Additional M.A. in Bible Programs

Historical Background of the M.A. in Bible Degree

Degree Approval Process

The concept of offering graduate studies through the auspices of Lancaster Bible College has been part of the institution's strategic planning since 1979. One concept that was studied was the development of a cooperative arrangement with an established accredited graduate school or seminary. In 1990 Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, located in Deerfield, Illinois, began to teach Bible courses on the LBC campus as part of their Master of Arts in Religion degree program. This cooperative arrangement existed for three years as determined at the outset of the institution's relationship.

In June 1992, as part of Lancaster Bible College's strategic planning process, the inclusion of graduate studies as part of LBC's future was considered essential. The dream of LBC President, Dr. Gilbert Peterson, was for a practical degree with a balance of practice and theory. He wanted to offer masters level programs to prepare men and women more fully for practical ministry. The architect of the degree was Dr. Robert Willey with input from Dr. Lloyd Perry. The PDE proposal indicated a program built around incoming students with an undergraduate major in Bible. The M.A. in Bible would offer a degree to improve research and communication that could be used as a transitional degree as well as having immediate impact on ministry.

After research and an institutional self-study, the College developed a program plan for the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). The request for approval of the offering a Master of Arts in Bible degree was submitted to the PDE in March 1994. Approval was received from the PDE in August 1994 with the first M.A. in Bible course being taught in January 1995.

M.A. in Bible Program Objectives

As the Graduate School catalog states, “The M.A. in Bible program is designed to provide individuals who possess extensive Biblical studies or an undergraduate major in Bible the opportunity to pursue an integrated program of graduate study in Bible and theology with an emphasis on the development of skills necessary to research and communicate Biblical subject matter” (p. 6). The program was designed to afford a transitional degree program for additional graduate degrees.

Also, according to Dr. Gil Peterson, one of the individuals who crafted the curriculum, the M.A. in Bible program was to combine Bible content and communication skills. Dr. Peterson noted that in an ideal setting a Bible professor would team-teach with another instructor who was an expert in communication. This approach has never been realized.

Student Composite

The M.A. in Bible program was designed to attract primarily Bible college graduates. In the Request for Approval document submitted to the PDE on March 28, 1994, LBC emphasized the differences between our M.A. in Bible program and the M.S. in Bible at Philadelphia Biblical University — “Lancaster Bible College’s objectives expressed in curricular structuring and offerings indicate a program that is a graduate program for those who have an undergraduate major in Bible. Thus, course work will be of a level and intensity that assumes a significant undergraduate background in Biblical studies and theology. Survey or introductory courses in Bible and theology as included in the PBU program are inconsistent with such a curriculum. Furthermore, Lancaster Bible College’s proposal emphasizes the development of language, interpretive, and research skills for the purpose of maintaining life-long learning habits” (p. 8).

The program has attracted a student base that is largely from non-Bible majors (approximately 67%). The direction for ministry is still largely professional (approximately 65% of the evaluation questionnaires), although a significant number of lay leaders are looking for improvement in their Bible knowledge and study skills for lay ministry.

The geographic distribution for M.A. in Bible students is almost exclusively from south-central Pennsylvania, with 53% coming from the Lancaster area, 18% from York, 15% from the west shore region, 5% from Elizabethtown, and 5% from Hershey. Only one student (3%) attends from out of state (Virginia).

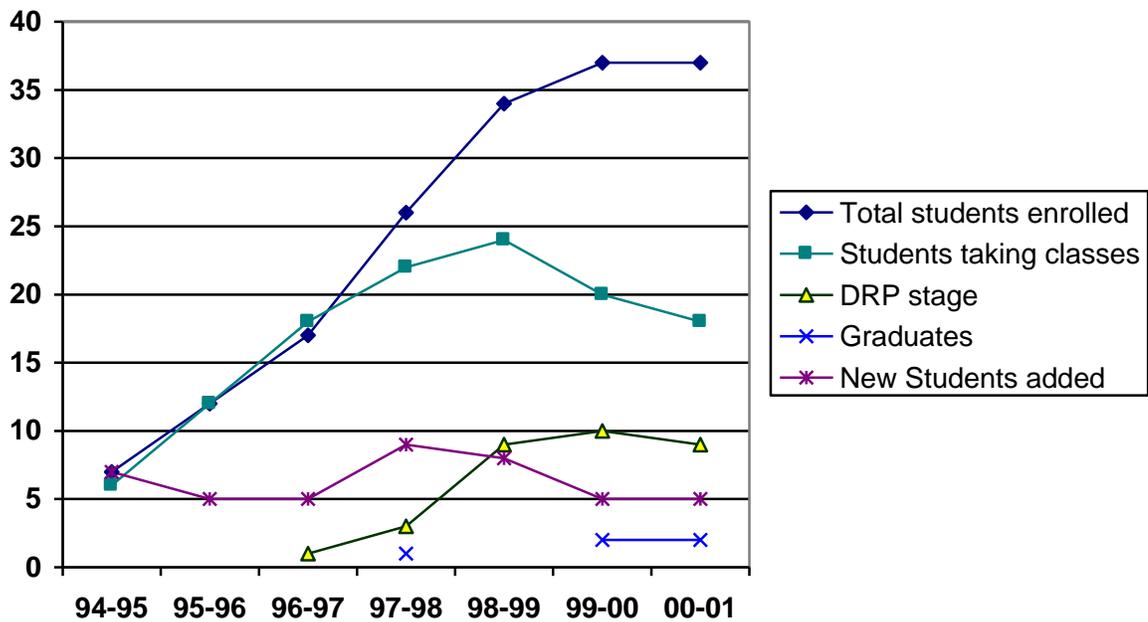
The main reasons for students choosing LBC over other institutions for their graduate training were: (1) convenient geographic location and (2) conservative/Biblical reputation.

The primary objectives for student's enrolling in the M.A. in Bible program were: (1) personal growth in increasing their knowledge of the Scriptures, and (2) for preparation for future vocational ministry. The LBC Bible faculty notice that students enroll for a variety of purposes. From their perspective the student body is stretched along a continuum, with focused ministry preparation on the one end and a general desire for more continuing education on the other extreme.

Student Enrollment

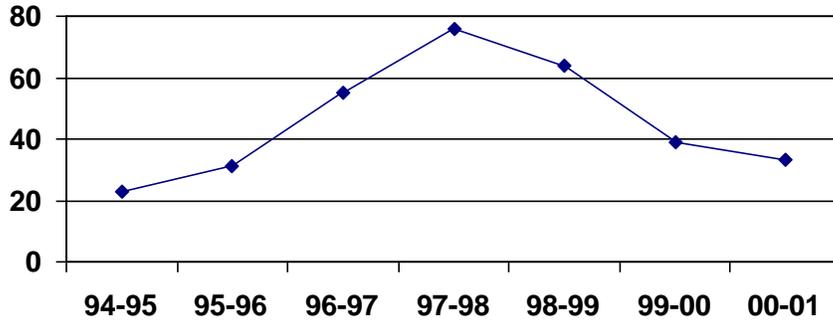
The charts below summarize the enrollment and attendance figures to date:

Bible Program Enrollment



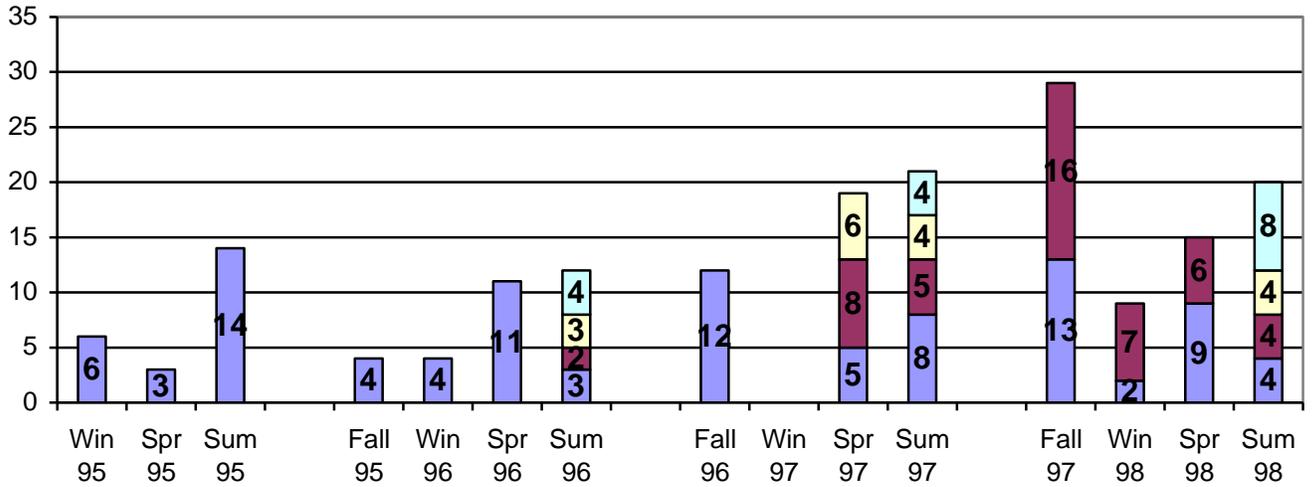
While the total enrollment has only recently reached a plateau, the number of students taking classes and the actual student-course hours taken have declined slightly in the past two years. New student enrollment, however, may actually rise again this academic year (2000-2001) by the summer term.

**Total Student-Course Hours per Year
(including adjusted undergrad and Ind. Stud)**



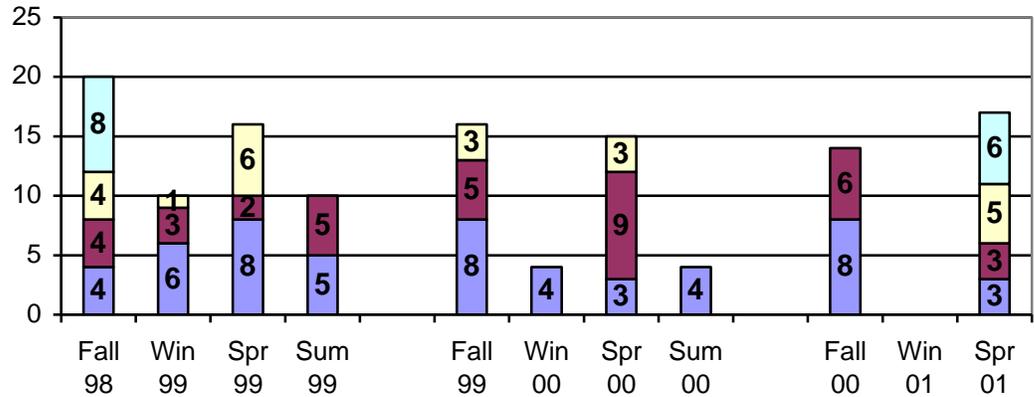
The following charts are a detailed breakdown of number of courses offered each term and the student enrollment.

M. A. Bible, Total Course Enrollment (W95-Su98)



Courses cancelled: 1 2
 Adjusted undergrad: 1, 2 2 1 2

M. A. Bible, Total Course Enrollment (F98-Sp01)



Courses cancelled:			1	1			1		1	
Ind. St.:		1	3					1		1
Adjusted undergrad:	4									

Primary Program Issues

A guiding factor in the design of the evaluation was to address the 12 issues highlighted earlier, which were collectively developed by the Bible faculty and administrators. A summary of the data collection processes is highlighted below.

Directed Research Project

The Directed Research Project (DRP) is a challenge for both students and faculty. Students have an unrealistic fear of the DRP, have difficulty in narrowing down their topic, and complain that Advisors are not always as clear in describing the way the paper is to be done. Also, from some students' perspectives the level of scholarship required in the DRP exceeds the expectations for the average research papers in courses, especially as it relates to the "practicality" of the DRP for use in ministry.

Although students attend the DRP Seminar (a four hour workshop conducted two to three times a year) there is often a lengthy time between the seminar and individuals working on their Directed Research Project. The DRP seminar is inadequate to cover all the unique needs of research, which are different for the M.A. in Bible student and M.A. in Ministry student. As Dr. Burwell stated, the "students are asking for more guidance and intervention in the DRP process."

The faculty notes the lack of writing skills and proof reading by students and is frustrated with students' desire for an "unrealistic" turn-around time for drafts. Different faculty

seem to have differing standards for the DRP. They would like to establish firmer dates for moving a student through the DRP, as well as a clearer delineation to the existing DRP process. Finally, the distinct nature of a Bible DRP needs to be clarified and differentiated from the Ministry DRP.

Research

As a group, the faculty sees the need for a research course. However, they feel that any research course should be specific to the unique needs of students in the M.A. in Bible program. In addition to the research course, Dr. Spender, Chair of the Biblical Division, suggested a "Research Day" be initiated to allow students to present current research, especially as it relates to their Directed Research Projects. The faculty also suggested introducing the DRP details to students early in the program.

The students are evenly divided regarding their interest in a research course, with some feeling a definite need for this in order to finish the M.A. in Bible program and the others unsure of the importance of another required course. Some of the hesitancy for a research course includes reluctance in adding hours to the program and the unknown elements and requirements that the course might entail.

Biblical Languages

The students found the languages to be the most challenging in the curriculum, requiring more time and effort to assimilate the content. They also had difficulty in "trying to use the tools before we knew the language." However, even with the difficulty they experienced, students were interested in more language courses.

Faculty desire to improve the foundation Greek and Hebrew by increasing hours in the languages and teaching these courses "as real languages rather than tools courses." Drs. Spender and Soden desire to place an extra three-hour course in either Hebrew or Greek, as a required program component. Dr. Buzzell also commented on the importance of languages and offered the same suggestion of offering an extra-required language course. In addition, Dr. Mark Bailey emphasized that if he were doing a program similar to the M.A. in Bible structure he would definitely include the languages.

The program was originally designed for individuals who bring a significant undergraduate background in Biblical studies to the classroom and who would be utilizing the M.A. in Bible program as a transitional degree for further graduate studies in Bible and theology. However, 67% of the students in the program are non-Bible majors and are mostly in the program to enhance their Bible knowledge for ministry as lay leaders within their churches. Sensing the student composite some Administrators are unsure about extra language requirements and suggest the focus of the program could be in English Bible.

Other institutions offering M.A. programs in English Bible vary in their approach to language requirements. Wheaton Graduate School has an M.A. in Biblical Studies (36 hours) and students are expected to have a working knowledge of Greek or Hebrew prior to entering the program. Philadelphia Biblical University offers a M.S. in Bible (62 hours) and students are required to take either Greek Language Tools or Hebrew Language Tools. However, neither Columbia Biblical Seminary's M.A. in English Bible (48 hours) or Dallas Theological Seminary's M.A. in Biblical Studies (62 hours) have any language requirements. All of these four institutions have a similar purpose in their master's degrees in English Bible, yet they treat the language requirements in a different manner. At the same time, it is recognized that some of these institutions also offer other degree programs in Bible and theology where there is a heavy emphasis on Greek and Hebrew.

Non-Bible Majors and Prerequisites Courses

The faculty feels the necessity for prerequisites and offers anecdotal evidence for their having to soften the rigor of Bible content in their graduate courses to address deficiencies in the students. This was especially evident in the "Advanced Hermeneutics" course. The faculty are open to creative ways to provide a baseline of Bible background to prepare students for graduate level study—anything from a focused reading program to taking undergraduate courses or designing prerequisite courses on the graduate level. The faculty also suggested a two-track system—one for Bible college graduates and the other for non-Bible majors. The Graduate School Academic Affairs Committee would concur with the need for prerequisites. Both of the above groups are open to allowing students to have the option of testing out of prerequisites courses.

The students were open to having hours added to the program but were neutral on the need for prerequisites. The student GPA's would bring into question the necessity for prerequisites, as students with a non-Bible undergraduate major have a slightly higher GPA than our students with an undergraduate major in Bible. However, as Dr. Ron Burwell offered, these "non-Bible students may be stronger academically as they come from demanding undergraduate programs in engineering, pre-med, microbiology, international studies, etc., and may be more focused if they sense a lack of preparation for graduate Bible courses."

To balance the above, Dr. Soden shares that success in the courses is not the only issue, but "holes" in the education of someone with a "master's" degree in Bible may be just as significant. Students who graduate from the M.A. in Bible program should have a basic background across the discipline. With the broad nature of the courses in the curriculum faculty can only go in depth in isolated areas.

Curriculum — Core/Required Courses

Faculty and the Graduate School Academic Affairs Committee are satisfied with the four core courses, but the faculty would like to see some of them sequenced as prerequisites for some of the electives. Students valued the core courses (4.0–4.5 on a 5-point scale), but are not always in a position to take them in sequence. Also, many students entering the program “test the waters” by taking a Bible course as opposed to a core course to gauge continued involvement in the program. Dr. Buzzell felt that a course on "Spiritual Formation" would be an important addition to the core course offerings.

Curriculum — Biblical Studies/Theological Studies Concentrations

Students overwhelmingly favored the current option of allowing them open electives as opposed to majoring in either Biblical Studies or Theological Studies. Some students would also like more focused Bible book studies in the curriculum.

The Graduate Dean and faculty agreed to keep the current system. As it relates to the packaging of individual courses, the faculty enjoys the wide latitude the "selected topics" approach provides, as it allows them "to teach to their passions" in a given course. They do recognize, however, that teaching to their interests may create an uneven course content, depending on the current instructor. Also, they noted that covering a wide content area in one course is less beneficial to students "who lack Bible background." Dr. Bailey also cautioned that the generic titles for courses may allow too much flexibility in defining program goals. He felt that we should standardize each course a little more so that each one has a non-negotiable part reflected in the course description.

30-Hour Length of Program

In order to build in additional language and research courses the faculty were in favor of increasing the number of M.A. in Bible program hours. The students were equally divided regarding the attractiveness of additional hours (7 – more attractive, 6 – neutral, and 4 – less attractive). Drs. Bailey and Buzzell questioned whether 30 hours would prepare people for a Bible teaching ministry in the local church or higher education contexts.

Writing Style

Drs. Soden and Spender were eager to change the required writing style from MLA to SBL (Society for Biblical Literature) to attain consistency between the articles students read for course work (which are in the SBL style) and the writing of research papers. Also, the change in style could encourage our graduate students to publish. The Graduate School Academic Affairs Committee agreed and passed a motion in December 2001 to require the SBL format for the M.A. in Bible program.

Generally, the faculty felt the writing ability of graduate students is sub-par, lacking basic elements of structure. This is especially true for international students, as they have difficulty in developing their thoughts on paper.

Electives in Addition to Bible Courses

Students greatly desired to have one or two elective options outside of the Bible program (13 – Yes, 1 – No, 2 – Not Sure). The Graduate School Academic Affairs Committee saw a real benefit in considering hours outside the Bible program to enhance leadership and practical ministry skills.

On-Line Courses

Students were evenly divided in their interest in on-line courses. The faculty would be open to considering on-line courses. Dr. Spender noted that hermeneutics was given consideration as an on-line course six years ago. But on-line courses have not been an institutional priority.

Attracting Students Outside Central Pennsylvania

The Dean of Graduate Education and the Graduate School Academic Affairs Committee see the packaging of programs, promotion, and extension sites as crucial for the viability of the M.A. in Bible program, as they are unsure as to whether the population base of south central Pennsylvania can continue to support the M.A. in Bible program. The Vice President of Academic Affairs noted that there are few, if any, graduate programs within the United States that seek to just attract students from a limited 2-3 hour radius.

The Committee also suggested a more aggressive presence in local churches and major conferences (i.e. Women of Faith, Promise Keepers, Sandy Cove Conference Center).

Additional M.A. in Bible Programs

Dr. Spender and the Graduate School Academic Affairs Committee would like to explore combining our M.A. in Bible program with a Certificate Program in Bible.

Master of Arts in Bible Strengths

- Student Satisfaction – Overall students gave a very positive evaluation to the M.A. in Bible program, sharing that their objectives for entering into the program were being realized. In addition, each survey respondent indicated they would recommend the program to others. From the students' perspective, the institution and program are credible.
- Program Structure – Students value the core courses, have enjoyed the open elective structure, and would be eager to enroll in courses outside of the Bible/Theology tracks. They have enjoyed the flexibility of the program.
- Faculty – Faculty have enjoyed the relationships with our adult learners and students have been satisfied with the level of interaction with our Bible faculty. Student evaluations for Bible courses indicate the faculty is effective.

Master of Arts in Bible Weaknesses

- Communication Issues – There is a need for wider communication flow with our students. Many were frustrated with the lack of library hours for the adult learner's schedule, information on Snack Shop hours, parking stickers, bookstore hours, and academic advising.
- DRP/Research – The lack of research skills and misunderstanding of the DRP process make this a challenge.
- Languages – Faculty are not satisfied with the language tools approach to Greek and Hebrew. Students would like to have additional hours in Biblical languages.
- Prerequisites – The faculty feel they are being hindered in the depth of content they can explore when students have varied Bible backgrounds.
- Course Rostering – Students desire more variety in the courses being rostered and see a need for offering the core courses more frequently.

Master of Arts in Bible Recommendations

The major areas for improving the M.A. in Bible degree programs are listed below, along with some emerging ideas on tentative action plans to achieve these recommendations.

1. Develop a Required Orientation for Incoming Students to Begin to Address Communications Issues.

Initiate a required Orientation Course (one credit hour) for students matriculating in all LBC graduate programs. The course could be three 4-hour meetings on a weeknight or a Friday PM and all day Saturday module. Potential content would be Graduate School processes (registration procedure and advising, bookstore policies/hours, etc., curriculum issues, an overview of the Directed Research Project/Thesis, library tour and information literacy skills, and a writing seminar. Orientation will be offered in August and January and is required prior to the student completing their third graduate course.

2. Sharpen the M.A. in Bible Program Objectives and Marketing Strategies

The focus of the program needs to be clarified. The program was initially designed to be utilized as a transitional degree for additional graduate studies/degrees. However, none of our M.A. in Bible graduates have pursued additional graduate education and the current students view this degree as a stand-alone program. Until the objectives of the program are clear we will not have direction on the kind of curriculum to develop.

Also, clarity needs to be brought to marketing the program. If we limit our promotion to just a 2-3 hour range from the college this geographic area may not be able to provide enough students for the program. If we market the program on a wider scale this may entail repackaging the curriculum and a major budget increase to market the program.

3. Restructure the Advising Procedure to Ensure Each Student Has a Faculty Advisor

Current students will be assigned an advisor from our Bible faculty and new students will be given a faculty advisor upon matriculating into the M.A. in Bible program. In addition, plans should include an advisor orientation and periodic meetings with advisors.

4. Clarify the DRP Process

The Directed Research Project should be introduced during the Orientation and students encouraged to merge course projects/papers with potential DRP topics. A

more rigid time-line needs to be developed that puts the student on a path to complete the DRP in one year. A separate handbook for the Bible program would relieve some of the confusion regarding the differences with the Ministry DRP. Regular consultations between students and DRP advisors (via phone, direct meetings, email contacts) need to be incorporated into the DRP process. In addition, clarity on the roles of advisors and second/third readers should be more clearly defined.

5. Address Student Needs for Research Skills

Basic research and writing skills will be introduced during the Orientation sessions. However, a required 2-credit hour Research Skills course should be introduced into the curriculum to replace the Directed Research Project Seminar. The goal of this regular spring semester course would be to have students complete their DRP Proposal. Also, the proposal aspect may take on a different form from that of the M.A. in Ministry program. In addition, contacts with the student and DRP Advisor needs to be built into the course requirements.

6. Establish Prerequisite Procedures

To provide all students without an undergraduate degree in Bible with a base-line understanding of the Scriptures required prerequisites could be added to the program. The areas most needed appear to be overviews of the Old and New Testaments, historic and systematic theology, and hermeneutics. Four 2-hour graduate courses would be developed around these areas. Alternatively, students could take these courses at other institutions either on-line or through video modules. Courses may be bracketed, similar to Westminster Seminary, where prerequisite courses count toward a student's GPA but not toward the number of hours in the program. Also, students would be allowed to test out of these four courses.

These Graduate School Bible prerequisite courses would serve the other graduate degrees at LBC and could also be the core elements of a Graduate Certificate Program in English Bible.

7. Examine Curricular Additions and Adjustments

Prerequisite courses should be categorized as Core Courses and the current "core course" listing could be "Required Courses." Required courses should be sequenced in such a way as to encourage students to complete these hours prior to taking electives.

As part of the "Required Courses" another three hours of languages would be added. Additional 3-hour Elective courses—Greek tools II and Hebrew Tools II—will be added to the curriculum, one of which will be required of all M.A. in Bible students.

This will raise the language requirements to nine hours, and students may choose to take an additional language course as an elective option. In addition, consideration should be given to adding a required "Spiritual Formation" course.

In Electives we should consider adding more focused course offerings, such as Genesis, the Pentateuch, Gospel of John, etc. In addition, the selected topics offerings should have more standardized objectives and common elements.

Students should continue to be allowed to take one 3-hour course in another degree program. On-line courses should be a part of further discussion.

Continued dialogue needs to be focused on the creative packaging of M.A. in Bible programs. Courses could be sequenced in three different 1-week modules during the summer months or in 1-week units spread throughout the year (January, May, and August).

In conclusion, the goal of this program evaluation was not a "product" (i.e. a series of recommendations), but a "process" that contributes to continuous improvement in our M.A. in Bible degree. The program review did help to identify needs for change. It is our prayer that the continued sharpening of the M.A. in Bible program be effective and growth-producing in the lives of our students.

Respectfully submitted,



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Document submitted to:

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