

# Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education

## *Duration (Reduced Credit MDiv) Peer Group Final Report*

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### **Context**

ATS Degree Program Standard A.3.2 states "... an MDiv program shall require a minimum of three academic years of full-time work or its equivalent." Anecdotally, in the 1980s, at many ATS institutions this meant six semesters of full-time enrollment (i.e., 72 semester hours), including supervised field education. It was not even necessary for students to enroll in classes during the summer in order to complete their degrees in three calendar years.

Since that time, ATS schools have gradually added to their degree requirements. The impetus to do this has come from several sources:

- ATS itself requires a more global perspective for MDiv programs, necessitating additional content.
- The core disciplines of theological scholarship have developed new knowledge, approaches, and methodologies that need to be covered in the curriculum.
- Constituent churches want coverage of leadership theory and skills not historically part of the MDiv curriculum, including community organizing, financial literacy, fundraising, volunteer management, risk management, strategic planning, and project management, all the while demanding improved preparation in fundamentals such as doctrinal theology and preaching.

- MDiv candidates come from increasingly diverse backgrounds and it has become nearly impossible to maintain any expectations of prior preparation for many schools. Schools utilize various strategies to fill gaps but they all require time.
- At one time the vast majority of MDiv candidates were preparing for local church ministry but it has become increasingly difficult to predict where students' careers will take them. The curriculum has to be adapted to this reality.

A survey conducted by ATS in 2016 indicates that roughly half of ATS schools require 90 semester credits or more for the MDiv. While some are designed to be four-year programs, many assume that students will be able to take 15 to 16 credits per term to complete the degree in three years. Many institutions have added summer term content and intensive courses during the traditional winter breaks in order to permit students to continue completing degree programs in three calendar years, but statistics reveal that many students are unable to accomplish that goal.

<b>TABLE 1: Data from ATS Entering and Graduating Student Questionnaires</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2016</b>
Percentage of entering MDiv students age 30 and younger	58.6	51.1
Percentage of entering MDIV students with one or more dependents	32.6	38.8
Percentage of MDiv students attending part-time	15.7	20.7
Percentage of part time students planning to work 20 hours or more	78.2	83.3
Percentage of full time students planning to work 20 hours or more	22.3	27.0
Percentage of graduating MDiv students taking four or more years to finish	24.7	29.3
Percentage of graduating MDiv students incurring \$30,000 or more of educational debt in seminary	23.7 (2007)	39.0

At the same time, the typical MDiv student is changing (Table 1). Many MDiv students are now older and have families. They are more likely to be attending school part-time and more likely to be working 20 hours or more per week. These students struggle to maintain a traditional full-time course load and to pay tuition and expenses for additional credit hours. As a result, the number of students taking four, five, and even six years to complete an MDiv program is rising.

### **Motivation**

The peer group members are all primarily focused on exercising proper stewardship on behalf of their constituents, although a significant subtext is a concern for offering programs that are competitive with other ATS schools that their potential students might choose. Time is a significant concern for many MDiv students, particularly those who are looking at a second career or bi-vocational ministry and who already have family responsibilities and dependents. Because many of these students cannot attend school full-time, their time to degree is already prolonged. There is an inherent financial component as well. More required course hours to fulfill degree requirements mean more tuition and other costs for the degree.

The question is how to balance appropriate rigor and comprehensiveness within the current reality of higher educational costs overall and increasingly more complex constraints on the time and resources of student constituents. No one wants to shortchange students on preparation for their careers in ministry and service. The challenge is to rethink and reimagine our programs, possibly employing technology and improved pedagogy, to accomplish our ends within a reasonable timeframe for our constituents.

## Crucial Issues and Questions

The question at the core of our deliberations is, “What is the fundamental nature and purpose of the Master of Divinity degree?” This question can potentially be approached from many angles. It can be asked philosophically, historically, or comparatively with other programs of professional education. In practical terms, it must be asked and answered from each of these perspectives. However, given the ultimate goal of this project is the revision of the ATS Standards, that seems the place to begin.

Looking at the existing ATS Standards for the degree, several facets stand out:

- The MDiv is a generalist’s degree. It is intended to prepare students for just about any kind of ministry. In that regard, it is ambitiously comprehensive.
- The MDiv is at once a professional and an academic degree. It is explicitly designated as potential preparation for advanced academic study. As such, it stands out among the standards for ATS degrees, most of which are firmly designated either academic or professional.
- While the standards do not reflect this, the MDiv is implicitly a foundational degree. It is the preparatory degree for what has traditionally been primarily local church-based ministry, although it is understood to be necessary for wider leadership in the church. Despite the comprehensiveness called for in the standard, it is impossible to provide a young woman or man with all the preparations/he will find necessary in a career that may span 20 to 40 years. The best that can be hoped for is the establishment of a good foundation.

Within the standards, there is considerable disjuncture between the two professional degree standards (Standard A. Master of Divinity and Standard B. Master of Arts in (specialized ministry)). The two standards contain a great deal of common language, particularly surrounding the content of the educational program. However, while the MDiv standard stresses comprehensiveness and generality, the MA standard stresses specialization and limitation. This seems a contradiction from the general pattern of professional education. In many fields, it is the shorter degree that is more general and the more advanced degrees that lead to specialization. The key to this relationship lies in the history of the degrees. The current MA standard has roots in earlier degree programs that were aimed primarily at groups who were excluded from the ecclesial roles that required an MDiv. Therefore, they are built around assumptions that the ministries of those with MAs will take place in contexts where they will be overseen by others with broader theological preparation. This also explains why there is no relationship specified between the two degrees nor a defined path from an MA to an MDiv.

These observations lead to some critical questions:

- Is the MDiv a *professional* degree, an *academic* degree, or is it by nature *both*? Can a single degree program of three to four years’ duration provide both excellent professional preparation for ministry in virtually any context *and* sufficient academic rigor to qualify for academic doctoral programs? How helpful is the professional/academic distinction that holds through most of the degree program standards?
- Is the MDiv a *foundational* or a *terminal* qualification for ministry? It seems evident that most graduates will inevitably need further education in one form or another. Should this not be accepted in designing programs and reflected in the standards? What are reasonable expectations for a foundational degree?
- What should be the relationship between the professional MA and the MDiv? Does the understanding of the professional MA as an inherently “limited” degree hold up in a context where

many MA holders lead ministries with a great deal of autonomy and where many church bodies grant them equal voice and vote in church councils? Should pathways for further education be defined for both professional degrees?

- Is adequate *formation* related to degree *duration*? How do we define and measure formation to begin to explore this question?

## Opportunities and Benefits

The potential benefits of limiting the required credit hours for the MDiv are closely related to the motivations of the peer group participants to develop them:

- Respond to the needs of students with real life constraints.
- Contain costs and decrease the level of student debt.
- Increase availability to underrepresented groups.

The opportunity here is to retool the professional standards to make them more practical, more flexible, and more responsive to current needs. This is, of course, a complex task and there is no desire to dismantle what has been a very successful core tradition. However, there are some clear possibilities:

- Focus on the foundational and professional facets of the MDiv.
- Rationalize the relationship between professional MA and MDiv and open the possibility of “stackable”<sup>1</sup> professional credentials. Perhaps include the possibility of “less than MA” credentials that can be combined to qualify for professional degrees.
- Provide an underpinning for differing approaches to credentialing, including “Competency Based Education” (CBE) and related variations such as offering academic credit for prior learning and experience.
- Provide support within the standards for ongoing learning<sup>2</sup> programs.

The goal is to provide ATS schools with tools that permit them to work with their constituencies to build programs that respond to their needs. For example, not all Christian bodies have a tradition of formal leadership education. This permits schools to offer these constituents opportunities that are more responsive to their needs while inviting them to consideration of broader issues.

The Master of Divinity has proven a remarkably robust credential. The standard has evolved beyond the needs of “mainline” Protestantism to be embraced by a broader fellowship of Christian organizations. That core vitality needs to be preserved. At the same time, adjustments are needed to respond to new developments in the church, in the academy, and in society. Historically, the trend has been for the MDiv to become more “professionalized,”<sup>3</sup> incorporating facets of professional education including supervised

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<sup>1</sup> “Stackable credentials” are part of a defined sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to move an individual along a career pathway.

<sup>2</sup> In the context of this report, “ongoing learning” represents both “continuing education” and “lifelong learning.” “Continuing education” connotes a formal, externally organized, and administered system of occasions for formal instruction. “Lifelong learning” connotes a set of skills, attitudes, and habits that lead primarily to ongoing self-education. A comprehensive program of theological education requires both approaches.

<sup>3</sup> In *Piety and Profession* (Eerdmans, 2007), Glenn T. Miller describes the increasing dominance of the professional model of ministry particularly as it was expressed in theological education. In *Piety and Plurality* (Eerdmans, 2014) he states, “Beginning in the 1960s, the professional model began to fray around the edges ... The various visions that we discussed ... were an attempt, in part to replace it with another vision or, in some cases to supplement it. Although each had some effect on theological education, none became dominant.” (p. 362)

field experience. Emphasizing its foundational nature and focusing on professional, applied knowledge are rational steps toward preserving its effectiveness. Professional preparation requires a solid academic foundation but concentrating on applying academic insights to pastoral situations will permit a more targeted and effective course of study.

Yet it is also desirable particularly for those who will teach in seminaries to have both pastoral and academic preparation. At least two paths to such preparation will continue. A student who has a strong undergraduate foundation in his/her discipline can do more advanced work in the course of the MDiv and thereby qualify for PhD work. A student who cannot do advanced work in the MDiv program may qualify by completing a ThM in one additional year. Schools with a strong tradition of preparing pastor/scholars, particularly those embedded in universities and those whose parent traditions embrace that model of vocation, will likely continue in that vein and they should have the flexibility to do so.

### **Challenges and Obstacles**

One clear challenge is establishing standards that preserve the core strengths of the MDiv while creating a framework for greater flexibility and creativity. Not all institutions will embrace a tighter focus on professional preparation and they should not be forced to. Not all traditions will perceive “stackable” credentials as suiting their needs and, again, they need not be forced to do so. However, those schools that are prepared to work with their constituencies to respond creatively to emerging needs should have a framework that supports their efforts.

Working with ecclesial and other constituents represents another continuing challenge. This is especially true on two fronts: Competency Based Education and ongoing learning. The current standards allow ATS schools broad latitude in defining their own missions and outcomes. However, it is unclear that Competency Based programs can succeed on such an independent basis. Schools that wish to implement CBE would seem to need considerable buy-in from the churches they serve and, therefore, consensus on the competencies they are working toward. If accredited credentials are to be portable that would seem to imply broad consensus across disciplines as well. How will this consensus be developed, codified, and assessed?

Unlike the American Bar Association or the American Medical Association, ATS has no clear means to enforce requirements for continuing education. However, both common sense and anecdotal evidence show an obvious need for regular opportunities for ongoing learning throughout the career life of ministers and other church professionals. What can ATS do to help its constituencies realize and address this need? Would it make sense to create expanded standards for ongoing learning programs offered by member institutions? Would an institutional standard establishing continuing education offerings as a necessary component of a viable professional education program be appropriate? What resources can ATS bring to bear to help its member institutions make the case for ongoing learning to their constituents?

### **Demonstrating Educational Effectiveness**

From one perspective, there is no inherent difference in demonstrating the effectiveness of a reduced credit MDiv program from any MDiv program. According to the standards, individual institutions determine the intended outcomes of their programs and the measures that are used to assess their effectiveness. While those outcomes and measures are subject to critique, a reduced credit program introduces nothing new into the process of assessment.

If an institution is running more than one MDiv program, as might be the case if the institution is operating a program that provides advanced standing for prior experience and CBE-type individualized curricula for older students and a more traditional program for younger students, it may be necessary to demonstrate that the two programs provide suitably comparable outcomes. This would be similar to the requirement to demonstrate that extension programs are producing comparable outcomes to residential programs.

However, as new programs are built it is vital to make assessment part of their intrinsic designs. Historically, ATS schools have had to superimpose assessment of educational effectiveness on pre-existing curricula and program designs. The results have not always been happy. With new and fundamentally redesigned programs, the opportunity exists to incorporate assessment from the beginning, developing program outcomes and measures in tandem with curriculum so that they form a coherent whole.

Ultimately, the success of graduates in their vocational careers is the best measure of the effectiveness of degree programs. While defining and tracking these outcomes is inherently difficult, schools should be encouraged to seek relationships and processes with their alumni/ae and their institutional constituents to do meaningful follow up on their educational programs. This can also produce benefits in designing and recruiting for continuing education programs.

### **Financial Viability**

There is a financial impact upon institutions that shorten their degree programs. The crudest model of this is that the school loses the percentage of tuition and related fees per student that the program requirement is reduced. For example, if an MDiv program is shortened from 84 to 72 hours, the institution will lose 14.3% of its anticipated tuition and fees per enrolled student. The period of time during which the income is realized changes as well. Often, the change is made with the hope of enrolling more students, though in actuality matters are rarely so straightforward. The change may be made with an eye to remaining competitive and to losing fewer students to other schools. Part of best practice is for individual schools to define a careful business plan that articulates both the reasons for shortening the degree program and what will constitute a successful outcome from the change. This would hold true regardless of the kind of innovation a school is considering adopting.

Another aspect of best practice is to consider change in the context of the full educational program of the individual school. For example, a school that chooses to shorten its MDiv program as an act of proper stewardship for constituent resources may also choose to strengthen its ongoing learning program out of the same basic motivation. Depending upon the mission and resources of the individual institution, a holistic approach to an educational program that addresses the needs of primary constituents may well be the best overall approach not only to service but to financial viability. This will enable the school to better establish goals for the size of its faculty and staff as well as other necessary resources. Again, there may well be significant overlap in matters related to financial viability between a reduced-duration program and other models, such as the combined BA/MDiv model.

### **Insights, Innovations, or Possibilities**

“Duration” seems to be a proxy for a spectrum of concerns regarding the quality and effectiveness of the MDiv degree. This became particularly clear in conversation with peer groups working on other models. The existing standards use a minimum duration to specify enough time to “fulfill the broad educational

and formational goals of the MDiv.” In other words, it is a measure of the adequacy or sufficiency of the degree. This perception that duration is a proxy for adequacy was reinforced by concerns from other groups about “watering down” the MDiv, particularly from the DMin peer group. Other peer groups expressed concerns related to perceptions that some programs are “second class,” (i.e., lower quality, because they require fewer credit hours, are completed part-time, or are awarded on a nontraditional (i.e., CBE) basis.

The group wrestled unsuccessfully with identifying another way to describe the essential concept of adequacy. Time seems an arbitrary and poorly correlated measure of adequacy even though it is ubiquitous in academia. This is one of the foundational insights of CBE approaches and it may be that CBE can offer a better, more highly correlated way to specify sufficiency for the professional degree programs. A better way of defining the standard benchmark for the minimum quality of the professional master’s degrees would be beneficial for all models and all types of institutions.

“Formation” seems to be a related proxy for concerns about quality and effectiveness. Formation is a complex concept that has tended to be referenced within ATS and within the standards without a solid definition. In part, this is excusable because different constituents within ATS have differing approaches to and emphases in formation. For example, although all ATS schools must contest racism, historically Black institutions face unique challenges for formation and cultural identity in the context of the contentious and unresolved history of slavery and Jim Crow in the United States. It is a sign of the times that concerns are being expressed that face-to-face teaching and residential education are being undervalued. Historically, these were the standard for theological education and they are strongly linked to effective formation. However, *how* they promoted effective formation has been poorly delineated, largely because there were no serious competing models. A stronger framework for conceptualizing formation would ultimately help improve all professional theological education.

### **Recommended Practices for Reduced Duration Programs**

There is no one way to approach reducing the requirements for an MDiv program. Schools that are motivated to attempt it must duly consider their missions, their constituents, their cultures, and their resources. Negotiating this level of change is never simple. The members of the peer group all did it differently, but they perceived some helpful strategies.

1. Design programs holistically to preserve integrity, continuity, and purpose throughout the institutions offerings.
2. Explore the possibilities of greater integration across theological disciplines in the curriculum. Co-teaching integrated courses can support both time efficiencies and offer pedagogical benefits in helping students make better connections in knowledge and skill.
3. Consider organizing the faculty to better address the specific mission of the school and the goals of the curriculum rather than by traditional academic disciplines.
4. Deepen relationships with church constituents and develop means to leverage student work experience and integrate practitioner mentoring into the degree programs.
5. Develop a plan for ongoing education that includes both pathways for additional credentials (stacking) and continuing education.

## Educational Principles

The members of the Duration Peer Group are committed to both the stated purpose of the MDiv degree, "... to prepare persons for ordained ministry and for general pastoral and religious leadership responsibilities in congregations and other settings," [Degree Program Standard A.1.1.1] and to the four broad areas of content aligned with that purpose [Degree Program Standard A.1.2.1. ff.]:

- Knowledge of religious heritage
- Understanding of the cultural context
- Growth in spiritual depth and moral integrity
- Capacity for ministerial and public leadership

However the peer group does not assume that these areas are listed in an order of priority even within the structure of the existing standards, and believes there are normal and necessary variations in how these areas are addressed and related among schools of different traditions and missions.

The group's discussions were undergirded by several additional principles:

- Theological education is not limited to formal education programs. It does not begin when the student begins a degree program. It does not end when the student graduates.
- Vocational discernment is incremental. Therefore, theological education is never "finished." Why should practicing pastors have less rigorous continuing education requirements than Zumba instructors?
- Theological education is essentially relational. Faculty mentoring and peer relationships are essential to student learning and formation.
- Received models of theological education must be continually reassessed in the light of new knowledge, cultural change, and emerging needs, and the exploration of alternative models must be allowed and encouraged. Traditional disciplinary boundaries do not necessarily serve contemporary needs.
- Theological education is not monolithic. Individual religious traditions have unique and valuable perspectives. Individual students have unique needs, capabilities, and resources. Schools must be flexible and responsive to the needs of their constituents.

Within the framework of the standards, ATS institutions have customarily developed their own approaches and balances to suit their missions and traditions. The challenge to this group is to maintain the integrity of purpose and the four broad areas of content while holding down the required number of credit hours. Of course, fundamental issues arise. The approaches of the members of the peer group are not uniform.

- Some members have attempted to restructure their curriculums to cover the core content in fewer classroom hours.
- Roman Catholic members have made a distinction between the requirements for lay vocations and those for candidates for the priesthood.
- One member has developed a proposal to take into account students' prior learning (specifically for older students) and build a shorter, more customized program based on that assessment. Their concerns intersect with those working on Competency Based Education approaches.



## Recommendations for Standards Revision

As a result of our work together, the peer group offers these recommendations regarding the revisions of the Standards of Accreditation:

1. Clarify the professional and academic modes of the Master of Divinity degree:
  - a. Define the MDiv *primarily* as a professional degree with learning outcomes oriented toward professional competencies. This is not to forbid the use of the MDiv as preparation for further graduate study but rather to emphasize that where it is so used; it will be because the professional competencies that it promotes are valued within the academic context.
  - b. Emphasize the foundational nature of the MDiv as an introduction for students to a range of theological disciplines. The breadth must be delivered in a manner that maintains academic content appropriate to the master's level, but nevertheless it is the foundational breadth that reflects the character and purpose of the degree rather than the depth to which each discipline is pursued.
  - c. Explicitly promote ongoing learning and formation for ministry beyond the MDiv. It should be recognized that this one degree cannot realistically provide all the knowledge and skills required for a full career in ministry.
  - d. Establish a framework for appropriate specialization with the degree, (i.e., where can a level of specialization appropriately coexist with foundational breadth and the requirements to engage a variety of theological disciplines and to engender a range of professional competencies?) Also, can this specialization appropriately involve deeper engagement with an individual academic discipline or the development of a specific set of ministry skills or both?
2. Clarify the relationship between the professional MA and the MDiv:
  - a. Explicitly permit using the MA as an entry-level degree for ministry with appropriate content requirements.
  - b. Define a relationship between the MA and the MDiv that would permit the credentials to be "stacked." Consider accepting the MA, in conjunction with appropriate experience, as the prerequisite for the DMin.
3. Identify ongoing learning as an expected and necessary component of professional education and take whatever steps possible to ensuring a vital and effective ecosystem of education beyond degree programs.
4. Allow for the "stackability" of degrees and provide a framework to recognize lesser documented credentials (e.g., transcribed certificates) as stackable components that can be applied toward degrees.
5. Define a better benchmark for the adequacy of degree programs than duration.

6. Eliminate special cases for students without BAs and differing delivery modes and place all programs on a common standard for quality and effectiveness.

### **Broader Implications**

It must be acknowledged that the circumstances that create pressure to contain the time commitment required to complete an MDiv are not universal among ATS institutions. The culture of priestly formation in Roman Catholic institutions mitigates many of the factors that create that pressure and the culture of some other traditions may do the same. Schools with very strong financial aid resources or very reliable feeder sources may not feel the same pressure either. However, schools that serve diverse church communities, operate in regions with many alternatives for theological education, or that have missional commitments to serve very diverse constituents will recognize the factors cited here. Their numbers are likely significant.

Engaging the issue of duration has led directly to consideration of the basic nature of the MDiv degree and its relationship to the other standard degrees of graduate theological education. The result is recommendations that may potentially lead to radical reframing of some of the basic concepts underlying the ATS Standards of Accreditation, including how to define quality in accredited programs and how to understand the relationship between professional and academic orientations in disciplines related to theological education. None of this will be easy and some of it may prove impossible. That is as it should be for striving for both quality and practicality are not light tasks, but they are the tasks of faithful stewardship. All ATS institutions will benefit from deep consideration and better shared understanding of the core concepts and values of our common task, even if they serve only to help them better understand the strengths and values of what they are already doing.