

Proposed Strategy for Evaluation of Master of Divinity Programs for Accreditation by the Association of Theological Schools

Overview

The purpose of the Master of Divinity (M. Div.) is to prepare individuals for faithful and effective ministry. Therefore, each program should be grounded in a theology of ministry congruent with the faith community served and by evaluated by its results. M. Div. programs in ATS-accredited institutions are expected to educate and form students in four areas – 1) Religious Heritage, 2) Cultural Context, 3) Personal and Spiritual Formation, and 4) Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership.¹

ATS-accredited institutions are expected to follow four steps in evaluating outcomes in each of these four areas -- 1) the identification of desired goals or outcomes for an educational program, 2) development or adoption of a system of gathering quantitative or qualitative information related to the desired goals, 3) the assessment of the performance of the program, and 4) the establishment of revised goals or activities based on the assessment.²

ATS-accredited institutions are also expected to develop and implement ongoing evaluation procedures for employees, students, educational programs, and institutional activities. Employees obviously means faculty and staff, and institutional activities refer to support functions such as governance, library and information resources, instructional technology, facilities, finances, and administration. These institutional characteristics or attributes provide the foundation for the institution's educational and formational program which is designed to yield the desired outcomes.

The primary focus of ATS assessment for accreditation is on assurance of educational and formational outcomes. In contrast, institutional attributes are evaluated in terms of their support of educational and formational in terms of capacity, continuity, and integrity. While providing evidence of educational and formational outcomes is the primary assessment task, the institution must also provide evidence that it can sustain (capacity and continuity) its outcomes over time with integrity.

M. Div. Outcomes

M. Div. programs in institutions accredited by ATS are expected to articulate and assess student outcomes in Religious Heritage, Cultural Context, Personal and Spiritual Formation, and Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership. Within these four broad

¹ A.2 Primary Goals Of The Program and A.3.1 Content, *Bulletin 46*, Part 1, 2004, pp. 95-96.

² Planning and Evaluation 1.2.2, General Institutional Standards, *Bulletin 46*, Part 1, 2004, pp. 48-49.

categories, ATS requires student attainment in particular areas as outlined in the following table.

Figure 1 reflects the outcomes of an M. Div. program as described in *Bulletin 46*, Part 1, 2004, pp. 95-96 under A.2 Primary Goals Of The Program and A.3.1 Content. The first column, M. Div. PROGRAM CONTENT, lists the content areas expected in M. Div. programs within ATS-accredited institutions. The second column, APPROACH AND OUTCOMES, is included to indicate that each ATS-accredited institution should describe its way of dealing with each content area and to define their respective intended learning and formation outcomes. The third column, ASSESSMENT STRATEGY, indicates that the institution should develop and implement strategies for assessing student achievement and formation for each content area.

Figure 1. CHECKLIST: Designing M. Div. Program and Assessing Outcomes		
M. Div. PROGRAM CONTENT	APPROACH & OUTCOMES	ASSESSMENT STRATEGY
1. Religious Heritage		
1.a. Scripture		
1.b. Faith Community's Doctrine/Theology		
1.c. Faith Community's History - Social/Institutional		
1.d. General Christian History & Heritage		
2. Cultural Context		
2.a. Contemporary social cultural issues		
2.b. Global, Multi-cultural, Cross-cultural Church		
3. Personal & Spiritual Formation		
3.a. Counseling & Reflection		
3.b. Christian Faith Development		
4. Capacity for Min. & Public Leadership		
4.a. Ministry Practice		
4.b. Relation of practical ministry to other subjects		

The Planning and Evaluation 1.2.2 section in General Institutional Standards requires a four-step evaluation process.

1.2.2 Evaluation is a critical element in support of integrity in educational efforts, institutional renewal, and individual professional development. Evaluation is a process that includes: **(1) the identification of desired goals or outcomes for an educational program**, or institutional service, or personnel performance; **(2) a system of gathering quantitative or qualitative information related to the desired goals**; **(3) the assessment of the performance of the**

program, service, or person based on this information; and (4) the establishment of revised goals or activities based on the assessment. Institutions shall develop and implement ongoing **evaluation procedures for employees, students, educational programs, and institutional activities.** (Emphasis added.)

In light of the four Educational Goals identified in **Figure 1** and the four evaluation steps prescribed in 1.2.2 Evaluation above, **Figure 2** can be used as an assessment checklist for meeting ATS standards. **Figure 2** shows that each of the four Steps of Evaluation should be applied to each of the four components of M. Div. education. That is, a seminary is expected to identify goals or outcomes for student learning and formation in each of the four areas – Religious Heritage, Cultural Context, Personal and Spiritual Formation, and Capacity for Ministerial & Public Leadership. And as **Figure 1** above indicated, certain contents should be addressed in each area. For example, Religious Heritage includes Scripture, theology of faith community, history of faith community, Christian tradition, and inter-dependence of Scripture, a particular faith community’s theology and history, and the broader, cross-cultural Christian tradition.

Figure 2. Content Areas/Evaluation Steps

Evaluation Steps	Religious Heritage	Cultural Context	Personal & Spiritual Formation	Capacity for Ministerial & Public Leadership
Identify Goals	State in observable terms	State in observable terms	State in observable terms	State in observable terms
Collect Information	Observe, test, survey	Observe, test, survey	Observe, test, survey	Observe, test, survey
Assess Program	Identify strengths & weaknesses	Identify strengths & weaknesses	Identify strengths & weaknesses	Identify strengths & weaknesses
Revise Goals or Activities	Make & document improvements	Make & document improvements	Make & document improvements	Make & document improvements

By identifying the four areas of educational and formational outcomes and by requiring that each to be evaluated through four steps, ATS is not suggesting that seminaries are expected to develop the same outcomes within Religious Heritage, Cultural Context, Personal and Spiritual Formation, and Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership. That is, a seminary identified with a particular faith community will have distinct emphases within some or all of these four content areas that will differ from an inter-denominational seminary or one identified with another faith community. M. Div. programs are unlike other post-baccalaureate, professional master's degree programs in that they differ in content and emphasis by constituencies. For example, MBA programs are similar in content across institutions. On the other hand, a Roman Catholic seminary may emphasize spiritual formation more than a Protestant seminary. On the other hand, Biblical studies and languages may account for a greater portion of the curriculum in an Evangelical seminary. Nevertheless, all M. Div. programs, regardless of their faith community's distinctives, are expected to deal with these four content areas. It is assumed that curricular content, methods of instruction, and student outcomes will differ across faith communities.

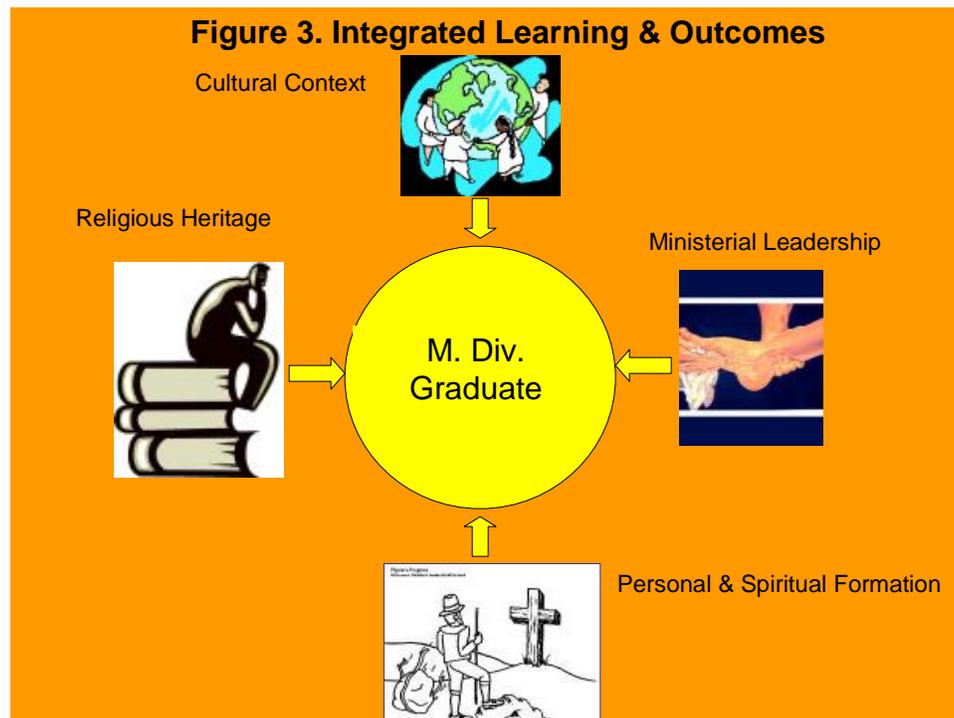
The ATS Degree Program Standards indicate that achievement and formation in these four broad content areas and their sub-components should be integrated. That is, the apparent intent of the standards is to avoid learning religious heritage, cultural context, personal and spiritual formation, and capacity for ministerial and public leadership in isolation from each other. In this regard, note the following standards:

A.3.1.3. Instruction in these areas (A.3.1.1.1. Scripture, history of doctrine and theology of faith community, the faith community's social and institutional history and A.3.1.1.2. broader Christian tradition that transcends culture) shall be conducted so as to indicate their interdependence with each other and with other areas of the curriculum, and their significance for the exercise of pastoral leadership.

A.3.1.3.2. The program shall provide opportunities to assist students in developing commitment to Christian faith and life ... in ways consistent with the overall goal and purpose of the school's M. Div. program.

A.3.1.4.2. The program shall ensure constructive relationship among courses dealing primarily with the practice of ministry and course dealing primarily with other subjects.

These standards suggest that the focus for assessment of M. Div. programs should be on curricular not individual course outcomes. That is, an M. Div. program is to cultivate or nurture individuals for ministry through integrating thought, faith, and behavior. Integrated outcomes result from an integrated curriculum and instructional strategies. **Figure 3. Integrated Learning and Outcomes** illustrates this emphasis on learning and formation experiences designed and conducted to foster integrated understanding and praxis.



Emphasis on Assessing Student Outcomes

The *ATS Assessment Guide* assumes that the emphasis in evaluation is on student learning and formation. In contrast, institutional characteristics or attributes (such as faculty qualifications, library holdings, and financial resources) are to be evaluated in terms of their support of and contribution to the educational and formational program. Accreditation, in general, has worked on the assumption that certain institutional attributes or characteristics assure certain levels of student achievement and formation. But there is little or no empirical evidence that they do. Assurance of overall degree program or seminary experience outcomes requires more direct evidence than documentation of faculty credentials, instructional resources, balanced budgets, and strong library collections.

An emphasis on direct evidence of students attaining expected learning and formation goals is necessary to assure seminary stakeholders that graduates have generally reached the publicized results of the M. Div. program. This does not necessarily mean that an accredited seminary has to certify that *every* graduate has reached a pre-set proficiency level in all areas. It does mean that ATS expects seminaries to formulate its own student outcomes in these four areas and to provide reliable documentation that graduates *generally* manifest them. That is, the ATS policies and standard do *not* suggest or require that *each* graduate must reach pre-determined levels of proficiency or attainment on competency examinations and maturational assessments in all four

areas. But they do require evidence that indicates that a graduating class corporately possesses expected outcomes.

Assessment of Institutional Attributes

The traditional indicators of educational quality, faculty qualifications, facilities, finances, and library and instructional resources are important supports of educational and formation programs. The value of institutional attributes may be gauged by how well they assure capacity, continuity, and integrity of the educational and formational program.

Capacity. Is there evidence the seminary has the capacity to enable the educational program to instruct and form its students so that they reach the intended outcomes?

Continuity. Is there evidence that the seminary is likely to continue to exist and to operate effectively and faithfully?

Integrity. Is there evidence that the seminary is an integrated and transparent organization?

It is not enough to demonstrate that a set of students at a particular time generally manifest the seminary's outcome characteristics. There must also be evidence that the seminary is capable and likely to continue to facilitate such student growth with integrity. **Figure 4 Institutional Attributes and M. Div. Outcomes** illustrates that institutional attributes and resources support the educational and formational program. Their value lies in their contribution to assuring capacity, continuity, and integrity in the educational and formational program.

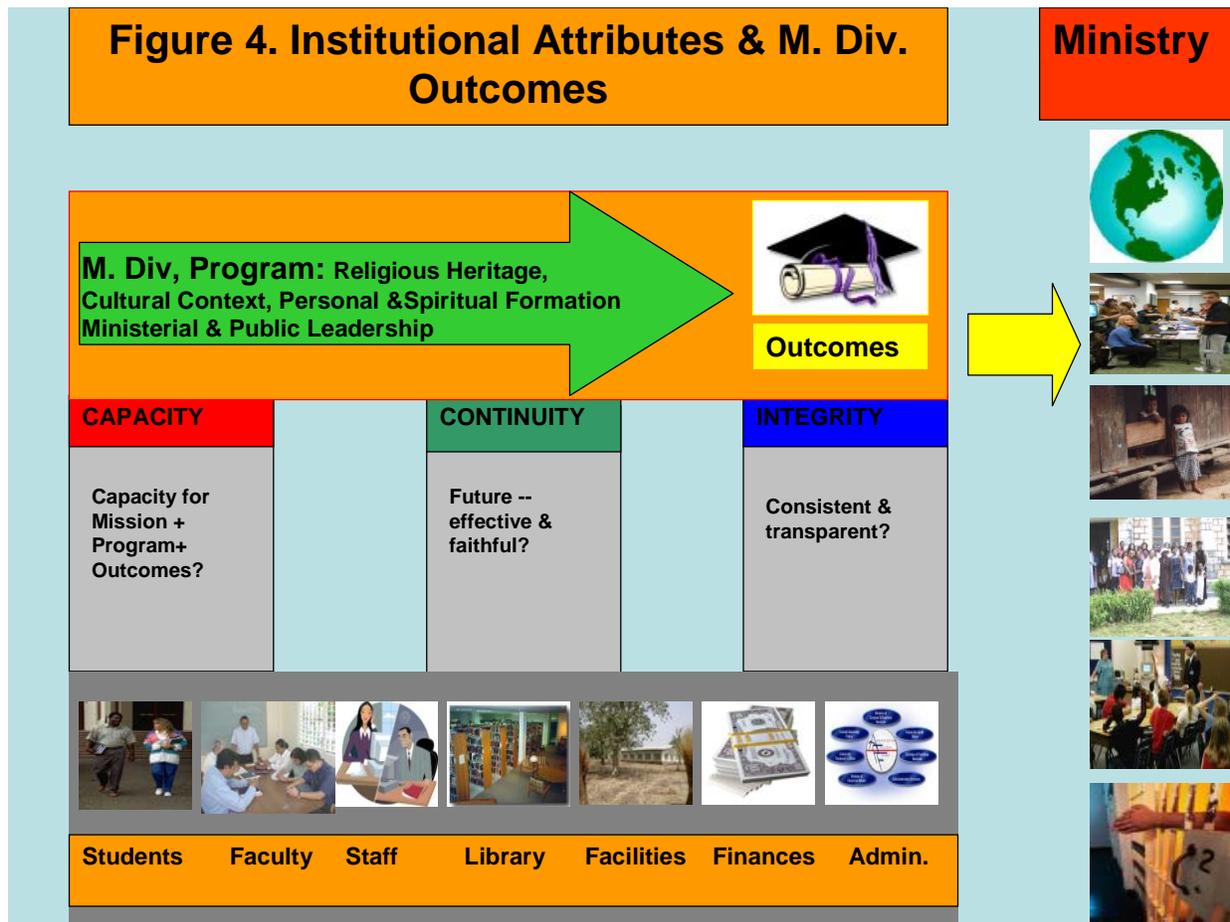
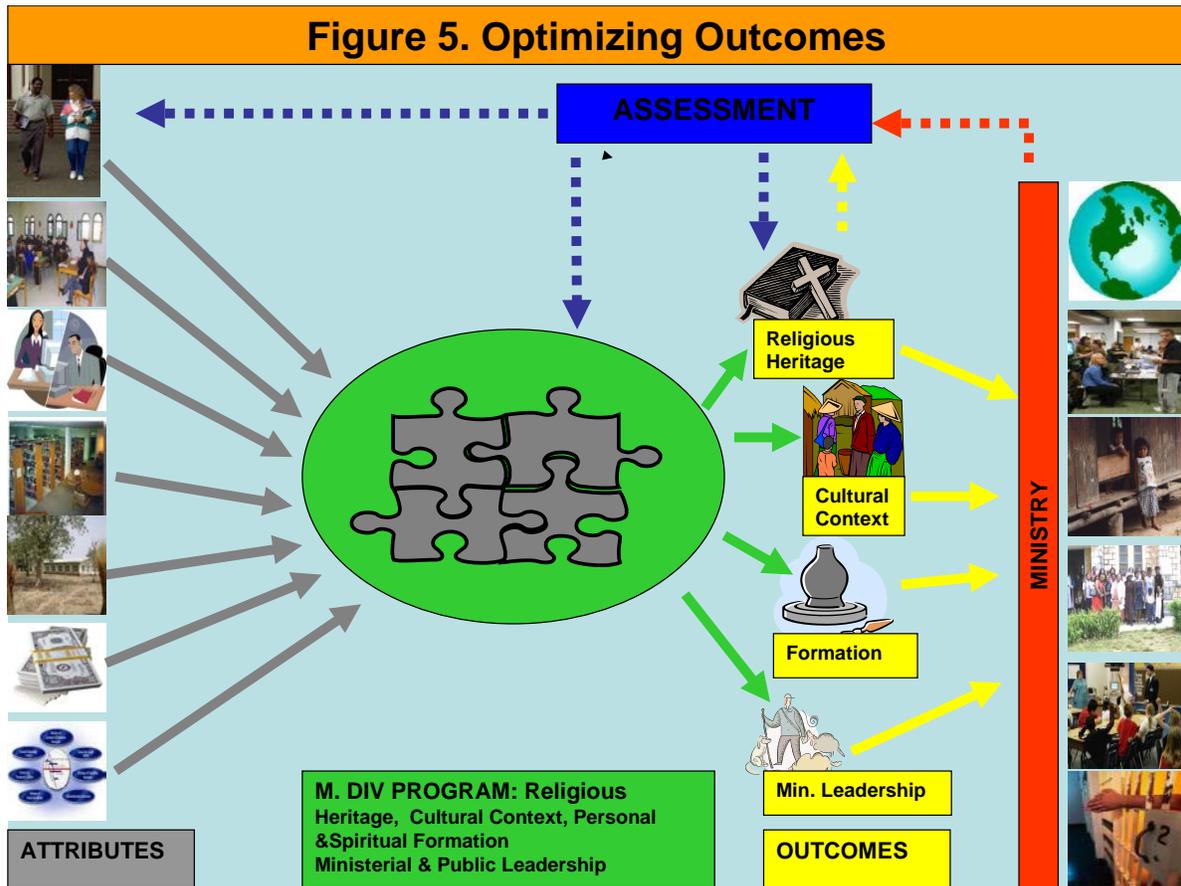


Figure 5. Optimizing Outcomes illustrates how an M. Div. program may be assessed and those assessments used to improve program outcomes in terms of ministry faithfulness and effectiveness. The institutional attributes and resources (identified in **Figure 4** as the foundation of an M. Div. program) appear on the left in **Figure 5**. In **Figure 5**, they represent the resources brought together in the instructional and formational program designed to yield the desired outcomes in Religious Heritage, Cultural Context, Personal and Spiritual Formation, and Capacity for Ministerial and Public Leadership. The dotted-line arrow going from ministry to student outcomes suggests that assessments of ministry should be used in evaluating student outcomes. Similarly, assessment of the educational and formational outcomes should be used to evaluate the quality of each attribute and the mix of the attributes which constitute the educational and formational program.



ATS Assessment Guide

This guide to ATS assessment offer practical and usable ways a seminary may provide direct evidence of educational and formational outcomes. It will also offer ways to evaluate the contributions of institution's attributes or characteristics to its educational and formational program.