

Focus on ministry: Harvard revamps its M.Div. program

by [Richard Higgins](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

The first class to start and finish Harvard Divinity School's revised M.Div. program won't graduate until June, but HDS's move to tighten degree requirements and bolster ministry studies has already begun to reinvigorate the divinity school, officials say.

"Greek has ballooned," observed Stephanie Paulsell, professor of the practice of ministry studies, and that has forced HDS to add a class in the subject. Driving the Greek revival is a language requirement that can no longer be evaded by M.Div. students, most of whom begin the three-year program by studying scriptural tongues such as Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic.

Even more significant, "ministry studies have moved to the center of the school," said Paulsell. Applications to the M.Div. program are up, and attendance at weekly chapel services in Andover Hall has "doubled or tripled," said Dudley C. Rose, associate dean for ministry studies and an architect of the revision. "After sharpening the program, we found we were getting not only more applications but stronger ones," he said. The M.Div. degree is usually required for ordained ministry, which makes the M.Div. program the core program at most divinity schools and seminaries.

Harvard launched its curriculum revision in 2005 following a debate about the direction of the school in an era of increasing religious pluralism. HDS students come from as many as three dozen Protestant traditions—liberal to evangelical—as well as from Catholicism, Judaism and other religions. The school has in recent years showcased its academic firepower, theological inclusivity and expertise in world religions. The diversity of studies led to the criticism that HDS had replaced the language of faith with an academic approach to religion that suited scholars but did little to shape ministers. At one point Peter J. Gomes, minister to the Memorial Church at Harvard, HDS professor and an acclaimed preacher, warned that HDS was

compromising its “essential Christian identity, without which no other identity would be possible.”

The renewed focus on ministry follows the dramatic growth in Harvard’s master of theological studies program, which allows students not seeking ordination to combine study of religion and study in another field. Introduced in 1968, the M.T.S. program quickly outpaced the M.Div. program. However, over the past 20 years, says Rose, the ratio of M.T.S. students to M.Div. students has held roughly stable.

That ratio is about 3 to 2. This June, about half of the 220 students enrolled in Harvard’s M.T.S. program, and about one-third of the 160 M.Div. students, will graduate. “We have the highest percent of M.Div. students we’ve had in some time and can’t really handle any more,” said Rose, “so we’re at the levels we want.”

Harvard’s redefinition of ministerial training tightened course requirements and made the program more tradition-specific. The school threw in major financial resources, adding four new faculty and two new staff positions in ministry and creating three new courses. At the core of the program is the conviction that the study and the practice of religion inform and influence each other—that theological scholarship cannot be separated from practical theology. Paulsell, a minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), calls the program a “third way.” She says the program treats ministry as “the most human field of study within the humanities.” Dean William Graham, who backed the changes, made a similar point during the debate. “We are human beings first,” he said, “and scholars or ministers or theologians second.”

Whereas a few years ago some M.Div. students said they felt like second-class citizens in the scholarly life of HDS, Rose reports that students now say they find ministry studies to be the place that is most intellectually stimulating. The M.Div. revision created three new introductory classes—one in ministry studies, one in the historical, cultural and social roles of Christianity, and one on theories and methods in the study of religion. All are team-taught and required. Six of the 21 other courses needed to graduate must be in history, theology and faith practices in a particular tradition, three in scriptural studies and three in another religion. Also required are three semesters of one language, field placements, competency in three arts of ministry and a senior thesis.

Mandating the study of other religions stirred controversy, but Rose defended the requirement. “In a sense, it’s impossible to know your faith tradition without

knowing others,” he said. Studying another tradition “puts your own tradition in sharper relief. There is too much emphasis on learning *about* other religions and not enough on learning *from* them. We actually can learn from them while remaining rooted in our own.”