

Re-assessing Your Bible Curriculum: New Insights from Research Findings

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ABHE's "Policy on Biblical and Theological Studies"

While significant content in biblical/theological studies is unequivocal, the method of engagement, delivery, and evaluation of that content are subject to the unique contexts of individual institutions and programs, and ABHE intentionally seeks to maintain flexibility in how the Bible/theology core is fulfilled.

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Study Procedures

- Conducted in summer 2018
- Schools with institutional accreditation = 110
- Offer baccalaureate degrees = 97
- Bible/theology requirements listed in academic catalog or on website = **90**
- Examination of hours required and courses included in the curriculum

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Nomenclature

- ABHE says "a core of Bible/theology studies."
- No required terminology
- Wide variety among institutions

Term	%
Bible & Theology/Biblical & Theological Studies	32.2%
Major	26.7%
Core/core requirements	20.0%
Requirements/course requirements	14.4%

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Most Popular Courses (10+ Schools)

Rank	Course	%
1	Systematic Theology/Christian Doctrine	88%
2	Hermeneutics/Biblical Interpretation	78%
3	New Testament Survey	66%
4	Old Testament Survey	61%
5	Gospels/Life of Christ	43%
6	Pentateuch	39%
7	Romans	33%
8	Bible Survey Acts of the Apostles Bible/Theology Electives	28%

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Most Popular Courses (10+ Schools)

Rank	Course	%
11	Bible Electives	26%
12	Apologetics	24%
13	Basic Christian Beliefs	23%
14	Discipleship/Christian Life	21%
15	Old Testament I Old Testament II	19%
17	Capstone Seminar	16%
18	Spiritual Formation	14%
19	History of Israel Old Testament Poetry/Wisdom Literature Old Testament Electives Missiology Doctrine of Holiness	12%

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Most Popular Courses (10+ Schools)

Rank	Course	%
24	Prophets	11%
	Synoptic Gospels	
	Paul's Letters	
	New Testament Electives	
	Christian Ethics	
	Theology Electives	
	Church History	

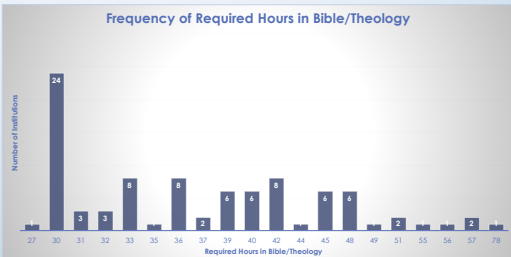
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Model 36-Credit Curriculum (excluding electives)?

- Hermeneutics
- Bible Survey
- Old Testament Survey
- Pentateuch
- New Testament Survey
- Life of Christ
- Acts
- Romans
- Basic Christian Beliefs
- Apologetics
- Systematic Theology
- Discipleship/Christian Life

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Frequency of Required Hours in Bible/Theology



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Average Hours by Category

Category	Average Hours
Bible (Hermeneutics, Bible Survey, Bible electives)	6
Old Testament	7
New Testament	10
Theology	12

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Survey Courses

- 28% of institutions require a general Bible Survey course.
- Following Bible Survey with additional surveys may be repetitive.
- Most institutions start with OT Survey courses and NT Survey courses.

Courses	%
Bible Survey → OT Survey & NT Survey OR OT I-II & NT I-II	12.2%
Bible Survey → Pentateuch, Life of Christ, etc.	13.3%
Bible Survey → OT I-II (no NT I-II)	2.2%
OT Survey & NT Survey OR OT I-II & NT I-II	59.0%

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Electives

Category	%
Bible/Theology Electives	28%
Bible Electives	26%
Old Testament Electives	12%
New Testament Electives	11%
Theology Electives	11%
Gospels Electives	2.2%

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Surprising Findings

- Only 14 institutions require a Capstone course or Senior Seminar (Systematic Theology may serve this purpose).
- 22 institutions require an Apologetics course; 9 require a Worldviews course; 59 do not require a defense-of-faith course.
- 10 institutions require a course in Christian Ethics.

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Surprising Findings

- 10 institutions require a course in Paul's Epistles, but 30 require a course on Romans.
- 10 institutions require a course on all the OT Prophets.
- No two institutions had the same curriculum.
- No institution provided a rationale for the design of the curriculum.

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Depth vs. Breadth in Curriculum Design



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Depth	vs.	Breadth
Choice	vs.	Prescription
Focused	vs.	Comprehensive
Process	vs.	Content
How to think	vs.	What to think
Incoherence	vs.	Coherence
Distributed	vs.	Directed
Freedom	vs.	Constraint
Sampling	vs.	Coverage
Relativism	vs.	Absolutism
Charles Eliot	Vs.	James McCosh

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Opposing Views

Charles William Eliot

- President of Harvard University, 1869-1909
- Few required courses, many electives
- "Eliot believed that American liberal education should allow you to choose your own courses, excite your own imagination, and thus realizes your distinctive self" (Zakaria, 2015, pp. 55-56).
- Suskie (2018) calls this "pick-from-a-list curricula."

James McCosh

- President of Princeton University, 1868-1888
- "Universities should provide a specific framework of learning and a hierarchy of subjects for their students" (Zakaria, 2015, p. 56).
- He promoted a prescribed curriculum with limited electives.

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Later Trends

- Eliot's ideas were derived from Protestantism and Ralph Waldo Emerson.
- He was more in sync with American culture's emphasis on individual freedom and self-determination.
- In 1960s and 1970s, student activists pushed for more openness in the general education curriculum.
- "Throughout the twentieth century, undergraduate education at universities and colleges has come to be thought of more as a way of life that develops general habits than as a set of courses that develops particular skills" (Roth, 2014, p. 123).
- General education is often described with food metaphors: supermarket, cafeteria, buffet and smorgasbord (Green, 2018).

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Criticisms of Distributional Requirements

- Courses are fragmented and unrelated to one another.
- Students have a very different experience from each other.
- Too many choices results in an incomplete, incoherent, and inferior education.
- "Graduates emerge with hodgepodge transcripts that hold the evidence as to why they're embarrassingly undereducated" (Casement, 2012, p. 146).
- "The learning students get will be a patchwork of specialized parcels of information from here and there rather than a broad vision of the most significant basics available in each of the main areas of knowledge" (Casement, 2012, p. 165).

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Criticisms of Distributional Requirements

- Distributional requirements allow students to "take the path of least resistance in the quest for the college degree" so that they received "the educational equivalent of a steady diet of junk food" (Leef, 2003, p. 4).
- Administrators inevitable add more and more courses in response to pleas from deans and influential professors (Leef, 2003, p. 6).
- Faculty members cannot ensure that all students will receive the same knowledge and skills that they have identified as essential for lifelong success (Diamond, 2008).
- The result is "a curriculum that seems to rest on a series of unexamined premises, implausible assertions, and unrealistic hopes" (Bok, 2013, p. 175).

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Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, & Halonen, 2011, p. 95

Each specialty course tends to be designed and taught by an individual faculty member who typically designs the course as an expression of a passion in research rather than a coherent feature of a well-developed curriculum. Although a well-designed curriculum provides students with choices, including courses in new and emerging areas of the discipline, these choices should not come at the expense of a solid foundation and a coherently designed program.

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Proponents of a Coherent Curriculum

- Gaff (1999): Faculty members need to adopt more prescriptive requirements for general education.
- Leef (2003): A strong core curriculum requires sequential study in subject areas such as English, history, mathematics, science, foreign language, and the arts.
- Ratcliff (1997): Reduce distributional options and require a more focused, logical sequence of courses that will lead to useful and long-lasting skills and insights about the world.
- Zemsky (2013; Zemsky, Wegner, & Duffield, 2018): The distributional approach should be replaced with a deliberately designed, constrained curriculum that is more effective at achieving learning outcomes.

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Casement, 2012, p. 146

Students like courses that sound like they're fun or trendy or easy, and tend to pass up ones that are more onerous but make for a better education. Faculty like to teach their specializations rather than the basics. And administrators like to keep students and faculty happy.

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Depth vs. Breadth in Bible & Theology



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Most Common Approach

- Most ABHE schools opt for a looser, elective-heavy approach.
- Most begin with survey courses followed by narrow electives.
- They do not prioritize covering the entire canon or field of study, such as theology.
- They provide a sample of subjects that graduates can build on later.
- They prefer focused courses that provide deeper study rather than a broad, comprehensive set of required courses.

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Drawback #1

- An elective-heavy curriculum results in gaps of knowledge.
- Their awareness and understanding of the entire biblical canon may be spotty.
- Sometimes knowledge is needed immediately when there is not time to look up information.
- One must have a base of knowledge in order to know how to look things up.
- This is why professional majors tend to be prescriptive with few, if any, electives.

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Drawback #2

- A choice-based approach complicates efforts to show that the curriculum actually achieves the stated student learning outcomes.
- Since the course of study is unique to each student, assessment of learning will not identify how to improve student learning.
- "Curricula that are not focused by clear statements of intended outcomes often permit naïve students broad choices among courses resulting in markedly different outcomes from those originally imagined: by graduation most students have come to understand that their degrees have more to do with the successful accumulation of credits than with the purposeful pursuit of knowledge" (Diamond, 2008, p. 2).

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Dunn, McCarthy, Baker, & Halonen, 2011, p. 106

The curriculum needs to have a coherent structure that builds skills and exposes students to the breadth of the discipline, but it should also be flexible enough to allow for experimentation and growth into emerging areas of the discipline. A flexible curriculum ensures that students master the skills and content of the discipline, but also provides for student choice so that students can focus on areas of the discipline they find most interesting and applicable to their career goals.

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Schools with a Broad, Comprehensive Curriculum

Criteria

1. At least two courses cover the entire Old Testament.
2. At least two courses cover the entire New Testament.
3. At least two broad courses in theology.

Schools

- Crossroads Bible College
- Berrity Bible College
- Grace Mission University
- Heritage Christian University
- International Reformed University and Seminary
- Kansas Christian College
- Lancaster Bible College
- Lincoln Christian University
- Oak Hills Christian College
- Prairie College
- Welch College

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Observations

- The average number of hours in Bible and theology at these institutions is 43.5.
- Two of them require only 30 hours of Bible and theology but do not require electives that dig deeper into specific books or topics.
 - Grace Mission University
 - Lincoln Christian University
- Students may have these choices as part of the general electives.

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Conclusion

- There are at least 90 different ways to divide up the field of Bible and theology into at least 30 hours of required courses.
- Each approach is guided by the mission, values, priorities, and denominational heritage that are distinctive to each institution.
- As faculty members review and design their curriculum, they should clarify in their own minds and state explicitly what principles and priorities guide their decision-making.
- Then, students will understand the role of the Bible and theology curriculum in their degree programs.

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Resources

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