

## McGill School of Religious Studies Bachelor of Theology Survey

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Who is My Neighbour? Interfaith Dialogue and Theological Education in the Global Village

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### Résumé de l'article

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# McGill School of Religious Studies Bachelor of Theology Survey<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a brief analysis of a survey created with the intent of better understanding the student experience of those enrolled in McGill University’s Bachelor of Theology. The questions were crafted with the objective of understanding how certain demographic features – education, age, ethnicity, and origin of province or country – have affected the experience of students in the Bachelor of Theology program during their first semester. The paper reviews the survey data with the aim of offering some tangible ways to better meet the changing needs of current and future students in McGill’s Bachelor of Theology program.

**Keywords:** Changing Demographics, Bachelor of Theology, McGill University, Data-Analysis

The Bachelor of Theology program<sup>2</sup> at McGill University’s School of Religious Studies “is the most intensely theological education available as a first undergraduate degree in a publicly funded University in North America.”<sup>3</sup> As such, the School is invested in the program’s success and perseverance despite encountering constant challenges in funding and student enrolment. Over the course of the last several decades, the program has witnessed a change in student demographics, and, by extension, student needs. These changes have prompted the School to ask whether the program is adapting well to the needs of those interested in the Bachelor of Theology program. Given this context, in 2022 the BTh program committee endeavoured to take steps to better understand, not only the impact of increasing demographic diversity on the program, but also the intersection between this diversity and student graduation rates. As a result, a survey<sup>4</sup> was created as a first step in better understanding how the School’s diverse student population experienced the BTh program. The survey sought to understand some of the challenges and successes that students encountered in the first semester of the program to improve future student experiences.

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1. Special thanks to Professor Ian Henderson for taking the time to revise and edit this report. His comments and feedback were greatly appreciated.

2. The Bachelor of Theology program is the direct result of a reworking of the initial 1948 Bachelor of Divinity program which occurred in 1970 to comply with provincial professional degree programs. For more on the transition from the Bachelor of Divinity to the Bachelor of Theology program see H. Keith Markell, *The Faculty of Religious Studies McGill University 1948-1978*, (Montreal: Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill University, 1979), [https://www.mcgill.ca/religiousstudies/files/religiousstudies/markell\\_history\\_of\\_frs.pdf](https://www.mcgill.ca/religiousstudies/files/religiousstudies/markell_history_of_frs.pdf).

3. “Bachelor of Theology (B.Th.) General Information,” McGill School of Religious Studies, accessed February 12, 2024, <https://www.mcgill.ca/religiousstudies/undergraduate/bth>.

4. The survey and report were made possible thanks to a grant awarded to the School of Religious Studies by the Lilly Endowment Foundation. For more information about the Lilly Endowment Foundation please visit <https://lillyendowment.org/>.

## Background Information

The School of Religious Studies at McGill University offers the Bachelor of Theology as either a first (90/120 credits) or second degree (60 credits). As a first degree, it provides a more intensive study of Christianity than what is offered within the Bachelor of Arts (BA) program in Religious Studies. As a second degree, it is primarily intended for individuals who want to qualify for the ordained ministry in a Christian denomination.<sup>5</sup> According to the McGill Faculty of Arts website:

The Bachelor of Theology degree serves three types of students: those seeking a classically oriented undergraduate program in the humanities that allows them to focus eventually on theology and related disciplines (90/120 credits); those who already have a degree but desire to add this competency, whether out of personal interest or with a view to graduate research in a theological discipline (60 credits); and those who not only desire but require it for the sake of a subsequent professional degree such as the Master of Divinity.<sup>6</sup>

The Master of Divinity (MDiv) is available upon completion of the BTh degree for those seeking to pursue ordination and is offered by the Montreal School of Theology. The MDiv consists of taking one year of professional and vocational courses beyond the BTh, through one of the three affiliated Theological Colleges. The United Theological College,<sup>7</sup> Presbyterian College, and Montreal Diocesan Theological College (Anglican/Episcopal) are the three colleges associated with the McGill School of Religious Studies. Together these colleges belong to the Montreal School of Theology, which was established to promote ecumenical co-operation in theological education in Montreal.<sup>8</sup> From the perspective of the University and the School the BTh program is independent of the MDiv program.

The Montreal School of Theology, however, presents the BTh degree as a component of the Master of Divinity Program. To obtain a Master of Divinity, students must successfully complete the majority of their coursework – which consist of courses taken in years two and three of the BTh program – in years one and two, as well as some college-specific courses. In their third year of the MDiv program students must also successfully complete the “In-Ministry year,” which consists of courses taken exclusively at the colleges alongside an in-field placement.<sup>9</sup> From the standpoint of the Montreal School of Theology the MDiv program – which is an ATS<sup>10</sup> accredited program – is a joint venture with the McGill School of Religious Studies,<sup>11</sup> and the courses taken by students in the BTh program are necessary to obtaining the

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5. For more information about the Bachelor of Theology see the McGill School of Religious Studies site:

<https://www.mcgill.ca/study/2023-2024/faculties/arts/undergraduate/programs/bachelor-theology-bth-religious-studies>.

6. “Programs, Courses & University Regulations Fall 2023–Summer 2024,” McGill University Faculty of Arts, accessed March 5, 2024, <https://www.mcgill.ca/study/2023-2024/faculties/arts/undergraduate/programs/bachelor-theology-bth-religious-studies>.

7. At this time the United Church of Canada offers its program through the Montreal Diocesan Theological College and has so done since 2022.

8. Established in 1914, the Montreal School of Theology, is the “oldest ecumenical center for theological education in the English-speaking world” (“Brief History,” Montreal School of Theology, accessed December 2023, <https://mst-etm.ca/about-us/#brief-history>). For a more detailed account of the formation of the School, see H. Keith Markell, “The Affiliated Colleges,” in *The Faculty of Religious Studies McGill University 1948–1978* (Montreal: Faculty of Religious Studies McGill University, 1979).

9. For more information about the Master of Divinity program visit the Montreal School of Theology site, <https://mst-etm.ca/master-of-divinity-program/>.

10. Association of Theological Schools of the US and Canada.

11. “McGill School of Religious Studies,” Anglican Church of Canada Continuing Education Plan, accessed March

MDiv. In terms of understanding some of the comments and responses offered by the survey participants, it's important to note that the courses taken in the BTh program are taught largely from a historical-critical and non-confessional, though faith-positive perspective.

### Description of Survey and Participants

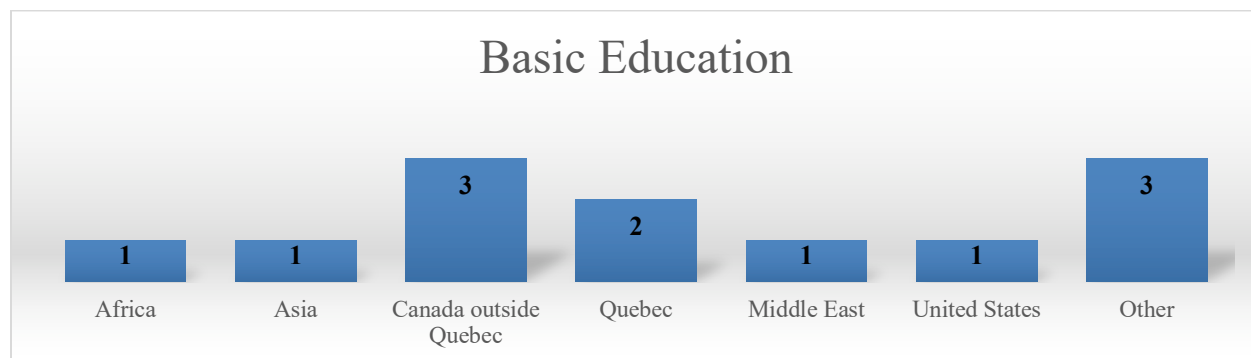
The BTh survey contains a total of three (3) multiple-choice questions, one (1) Yes / No question and thirteen (13) short answer questions. The survey was created and developed to better understand how students experience the McGill School of Religious Studies (SRS) BTh program in light of the growing diversity within the applicant and student populations. The survey focused primarily on the initial experience of being enrolled in the BTh program. The questionnaire was designed by Prof. Ian Henderson, Dr. Amanda Rosini, and Doctoral Candidate Prudence Neba after consultation with McGill's Teaching and Learning Services. The survey was conducted through an online McGill Outlook application form and all responses to the survey were anonymous. The survey responses were read by Rosini and Neba who then synthesized the short answer responses and prepared the report.

The survey was sent to eighty-six (86) participants, sixty-eight (68) of whom still had active McGill email accounts and eighteen (18) of whom did not – personal emails on records were thus used for these participants. Emails were sent to participants from an SRS administrative account and the account was only accessible to the administrative team at SRS. The pool of participants selected to respond to the survey was based on students who registered for their first time in the BTh program between Fall 2018 and Fall 2022. The survey was initially sent to participants on February 20th, 2023, and a reminder was sent on March 22nd, 2023. The survey was closed on March 31st, 2023. Of the eighty-six (86) participants solicited to partake in the survey twelve (12) responded, and the following is an examination and assessment of these.

### Survey Responses and Assessment

#### Question 1: I had my basic schooling in (Select One)

Out of the twelve (12) respondents, five (5) indicated that their education was from a Canadian institution, one (1) from an American institution, and three (3) from institutions in Africa, Asia, or the Middle East. The remaining three (3) indicated “other” as the region where they received their basic education.<sup>12</sup>

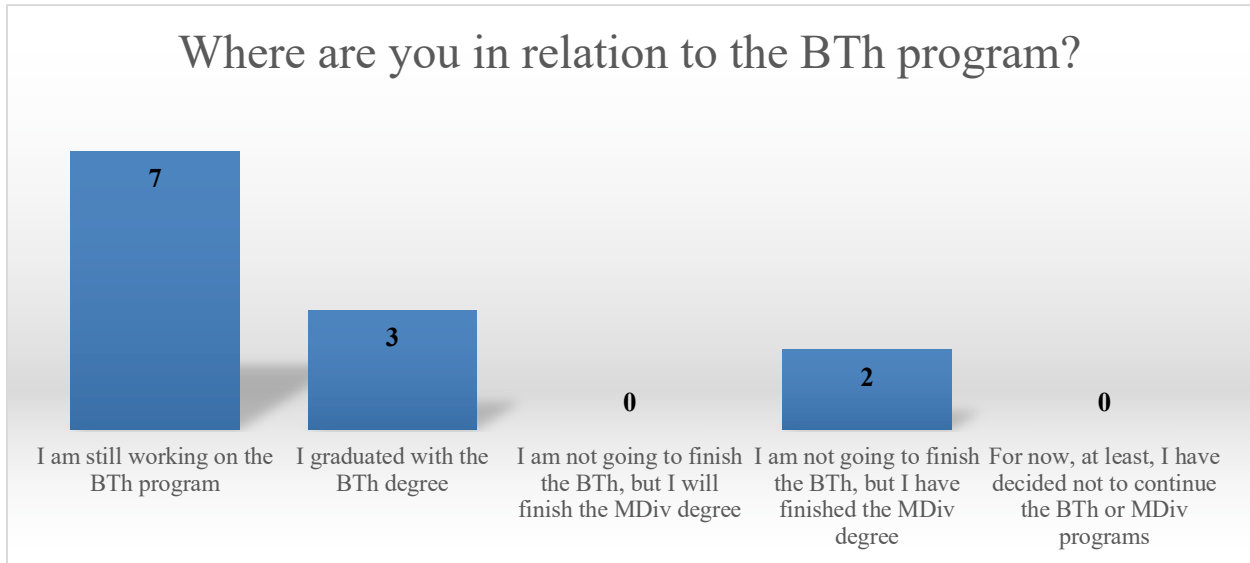


5, 2024, <https://cep.anglican.ca/institutions/mcgill-school-of-religious-studies/>.

12. Basic education is intended to refer to schooling prior to post-secondary education.

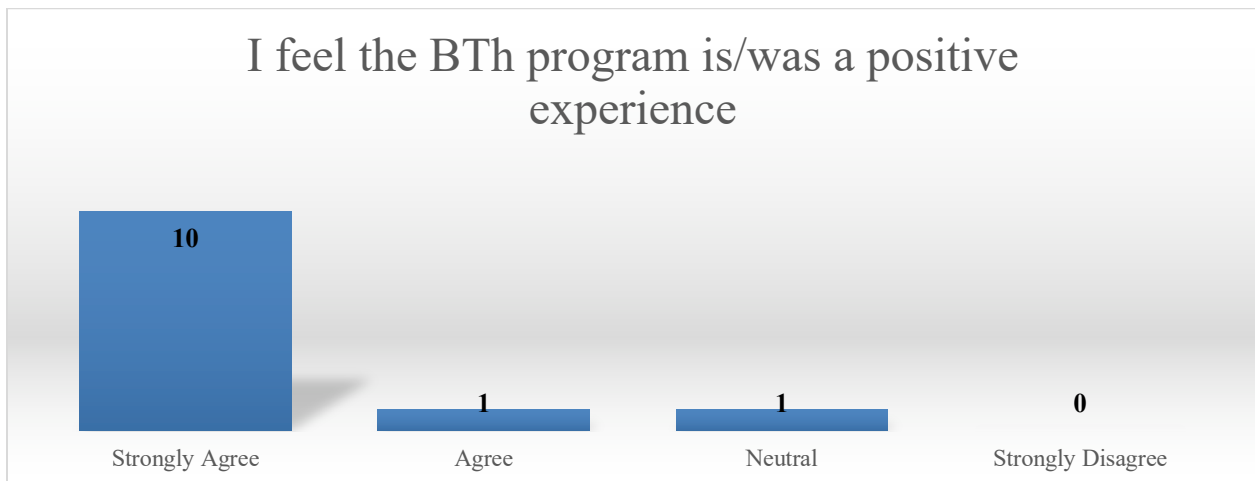
**Question 2: Where are you in relation to the BTh program? (Select One)**

For this question, seven (7) participants indicated that they are still “working on the BTh program,” three (3) participants noted that they graduated from the program, and two (2) indicated that they did not finish the program but did finish the MDiv degree. None of the participants selected the possible answer “I am not going to finish the BTh, but I will finish the MDiv degree” or “For now, at least, I have decided not to continue the BTh or MDiv programs.” All participants appear to have either completed the BTh program, received an MDiv degree, or are intending to complete the program.



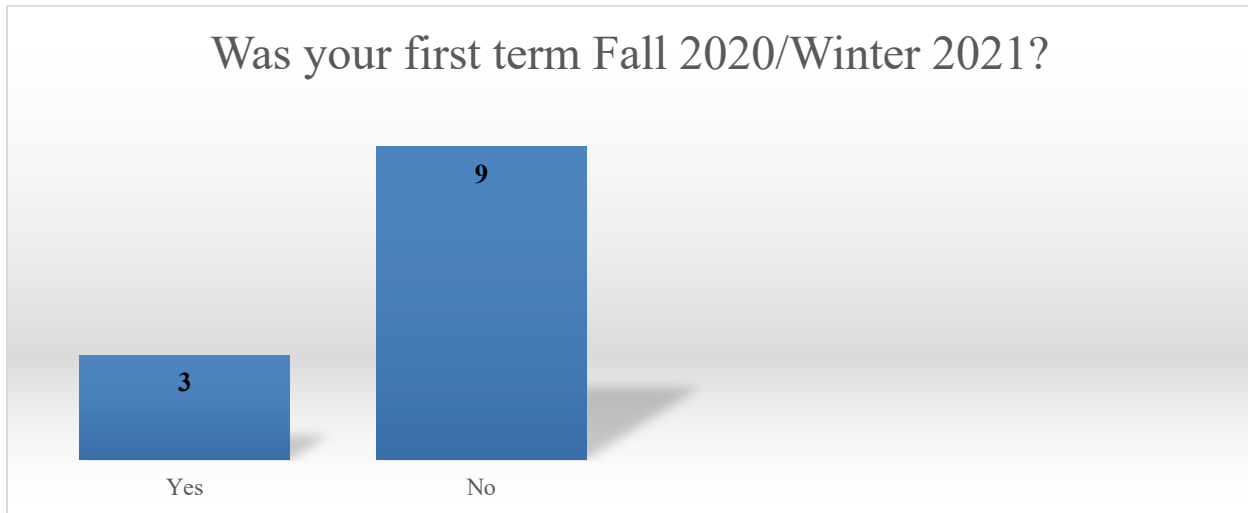
**Question 3: I feel the BTh program is/was a positive experience. (Select One)**

In this question ten (10) of the respondents indicated that they strongly agree with the statement, one (1) agreed and one (1) was neutral. No participant disagreed with the statement.



**Question 4: Was your first term Fall 2020/Winter 2021? (Select One)**

Here only three (3) participants indicated that their first term was in Fall 2020/Winter 2021, while nine (9) indicated that this was not the case. Thus three (3) of the respondents began the program during the pandemic.

**Question 5: Are there some (good or bad) elements about taking the BTh program that has changed your understanding or practice of theology?**

Out of twelve (12) participants, ten (10) responded to this question. Overall, participants felt that the knowledge acquired throughout their degree provided a better understanding of theology and provided clarity in terms of their own misconceptions about theology and the Church. One participant noted that the program offered a “better understanding of my faith and opened an intellectual door.” Another participant noted that, because of their fundamentalist background, managing all the information and details became quite difficult at times. However, they did indicate that the “historical-critical approach changed my way to approach the Bible.” Overall, participants noted that there are many positive qualities to the program – namely, that it is in-depth, detail-oriented and quite rigorous. However, they also noted that there seems to be a great deal of emphasis on scholarship that is several decades old, with a lack of more contemporary scholarship both from a literary and archaeological standpoint. Additionally, there is an emphasis on Western post-modern culture, and this creates a disconnect with the actual diversity that we find within society.

Fifty percent of participants indicated that the program was very good in terms of the quality of teaching and content but noted that the classes in Religious Studies were extremely demanding and at times overwhelming. There is the possibility of going deeper and further exploring theology, but the program is demanding and results in not having much time to do such in-depth exploration. One participant noted that their “theology was completely reshaped,” while another stated that their theology had not changed in any way thus far. One participant noted that they had already received a BA in Religious Studies and much of what was already acquired was now being re-emphasized in the theology program. One respondent conveyed that they were now “more open to interfaith dialogue and had a better appreciation for other forms of Christianity.

**Question 6: What were your personal learning goals when you first entered the BTh program?**

Ten (10) out of twelve (12) participants responded to this question. Six (6) participants indicated that they sought to better understand their faith, while four (4) noted that they wished to gain knowledge about the Bible/Scriptures beyond what they personally knew and understood. One respondent stated that they wanted to become an ordained minister, but that their studies led them to work with refugees. Another participant noted that they hoped the program would allow them to be more creative thinkers. Yet another respondent stated that they simply sought to pass (not fail) and “to glean some answers to popular teleology.”

**Question 7: How did the BTh program support (or hinder) your ability to reach your learning goals?**

This question was also answered by ten (10) out of twelve (12) participants. For one participant, the BTh classes were safe spaces to explore and learn. Another participant noted that it led them to abandon their preconceived understanding and practices and allowed them to explore something new. One respondent stated that they were challenged and encouraged to question their own understanding of the Bible – something they felt was extremely beneficial to them – but that this was not always the case in all classes. More specifically, this participant noted that it was more difficult to explore alternative interpretations within the field of Old Testament studies and that there seemed to be greater rigidity and intolerance in this field. While four (4) participants noted that their professors were all clearly knowledgeable, specialists in their fields, and pushed students to be critical thinkers, one of the four respondents added that this then placed too much emphasis on academic learning and created tension with the spiritual aspects of theological education.

Another participant, who indicated that they were an “older” student, noted that although professors were very understanding, many of the classes were not accessible and lacked support mechanisms for older adults who were returning to the university system after so many years, thus making the content of many courses and the teaching approaches difficult to comprehend and integrate.

**Question 8: How did your learning goals change during the program?**

Out of twelve (12) participants, nine (9) responded to this question. One participant noted that they withdrew from ordination but chose a different path and instead chose to work for a refugee organization. Another participant indicated that the program allowed them to develop a more concise approach to answering specific questions and offering insight on certain issues. One respondent indicated that as a “forty-year-old student” they initially entered the program as a faith commitment but as they progressed the goal became to simply pass the classes as the pace was very challenging. This was a recurring theme among respondents: four (4) participants noted that their goal quickly shifted to the simple task of “just passing” classes, as many of them felt that this task was much more challenging than they had expected. Yet another respondent said that they discovered that the path to knowledge was a humbling experience which led to a shift in their goals. Another participant noted that they realized that they enjoyed academic work.

**Question 9: What would success in the BTh program look like for you?**

This question was also answered by nine (9) out of twelve (12) participants. Five of the nine participants expressed that success was developing the capacity to balance their studies and personal lives, or as finding a balance between scholarship and faith (i.e., a balance that allowed them to understand their faith while simultaneously being critical about it). Two participants expressed that the ability to communicate and express oneself clearly and concisely to an audience was an important aspect of a successful program. Getting good grades was another aspect of success noted by another respondent, however, the respondent also indicated that it was difficult to achieve good grades and dedicate time to creating friendships. For this respondent, the program fails to offer study, work, and home life balance. Yet another participant indicated that academic advising for BTh students on course options/selection was poorly structured and that there should be greater emphasis placed on helping students understand the expectations of courses. As courses are taught by a diversity of professors with different pedagogical backgrounds and expectations, this was a major failure in the eyes of one respondent as they felt that the program offered very little in terms of advising. One participant stated that the “BTh program would be more of a success if it made learning ancient languages a requirement, such as Biblical Hebrew.”

**Question 10: What in your past studies and life experience best prepared you to study Theology at McGill?**

Out of twelve (12) participants, ten (10) responded to this question. One participant stated that their familiarity with academic reading and writing prepared them for their studies, while another indicated that being well-versed in Protestant and Calvinist theology was a plus to them. One respondent indicated that they already had a degree in Philosophy. Another respondent stated that reading intellectual novels and fiction from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries prepared them greatly for theological studies. Another participant was helped by the fact that they brought great determination, courage, and a strong commitment to the program. One respondent said they already had a BA in Religious Studies. Another participant indicated that their Maritime connection and traditional link to McGill was an asset. One participant noted that they were a professional and had few resources to help them through the program although they did note that they had taken a research methods course in the past, which helped enormously. One respondent said working for the Church for seven years prepared them for theological studies at McGill.

**Question 11: What in your past studies and life experience left you unprepared to study Theology at McGill?**

Out of twelve (12) participants, nine (9) responded to this question. Two participants noted that their fundamentalist background did not provide great preparation for even beginning to think in a historical-critical manner. Another respondent felt quite prepared. One participant noted that they were retired from a science-based field, and they felt quite unprepared. A second respondent also noted that they were older and indicated that it was very difficult to absorb and manage an academic level of learning. Another participant indicated that, despite having a degree in Religious Studies, they still struggled with many theological concepts. One participant expressed that the expectations and course load were unrealistic and made it difficult to manage and learn.



**Question 12: What advice do you have for someone who is about to start the BTh program?**

Out of twelve (12) participants, ten (10) responded to this question, with seven (7) of these ten (10) offering detailed comments. The following are the seven (7) detailed comments:

- Find mentorship from people of faith who have already dealt with academic/secular theology.
- Make sure that you study deeply, and widely. Not only within the context and presuppositions of any given professor. There is great merit to the method of study at McGill, but it is quite narrow. If you have a good foundational knowledge, you will be enriched, and likely challenged by the process. If you are beginning your studies, I would recommend a different program with a wider scope.
- Become malleable clay, trust you are being taught well, and seek to make the most of all the experience. Oh, and take WCOM 250 “Research Essay and Rhetoric”<sup>13</sup>; invaluable to every student unless you’re already a master writer and researcher.
- Take time to learn how to learn: how to take notes, how to study, how to write essays, etc. Take time to learn how to work within the bureaucracy of the university. Also, spend time with people. Make friends, have quiet study dates, and go for pizza.
- Understand that this is a rigorous degree at a secular university. Any “devotional” aspects to what might be considered a “seminary education” are excluded from this program (although not discouraged!)
- Get a couple of counsel sessions and get real advice from knowledgeable people who will help organize the courses into the years of completion and hopefully success.
- Put away your assumptions, judgements, and anticipation. Prepare to work and learn. Be humble. Plenty of time for expressing your own views, once you've learned enough to have one that's worth having.

**Question 13: How long were you in Montreal before your first class in your first BTh Term at McGill?**

Out of twelve (12) participants, ten (10) responded to this question:

- 2 years
- a few years
- one week
- 60 years
- 25 years
- one month
- one month

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13. WCOM 250 “Research Essay and Rhetoric” is a McGill Skillset course offered by the McGill Writing Center. For more details see <https://www.mcgill.ca/study/2023-2024/courses/wcom-250>.

- ten days, when frosh week was over, I was there, 2016–2019
- 52 years
- 10 years

**Question 14: What might have helped or challenged you in your first Term at McGill?**

Out of twelve (12) participants, seven (7) responded to this question. One participant noted that being a Dio student<sup>14</sup> helped get them through the first semester. Two participants indicated that understanding the mechanics and expectations of university courses helped greatly, something these respondents indicated they were able to achieve by taking the WCOM 250 (formerly CEAP 250) course. They also indicated that a similar course should be offered by the University Professors teaching within the program. Another participant indicated that their underdeveloped reading ability/capacity made reading academic works difficult. Two respondents expressed that academic advising could have been better structured and that this was a challenge. They suggested that academic advising incorporate a detailed explanation of courses, expectations, and evaluations to better prepare students. Another participant noted that learning about so many diverse theoretical approaches at once was difficult, especially when you do not understand the point and how it will help you in your degree. One respondent noted that the program structure is difficult for mature students and stated that the program is not accommodating to those working full- or part-time and who have family responsibilities. One specific element this respondent noted was mandatory attendance; they raised this as an important challenge that needs to be addressed by the SRS because working adults with a family cannot attend all classes all the time – this is simply impossible. They suggest that classes should not have mandatory attendance, or attendance should not be part of the evaluation/grade assessment.

**Question 15: In your first Term at McGill, what helped you feel engaged in your studies?**

Out of twelve (12) participants, nine (9) responded to this question. Out of the nine (9) respondents, four (4) specifically mentioned engaging Professors and course content. One participant stated that learning about scriptures in an academic setting was engaging. Three participants also noted that having the opportunity to be heard and to communicate their concerns also helped them engage with the professors and course material. Another respondent expressed that having classes where students could communicate and discuss common concerns and questions amongst themselves also allowed them to engage better with their classes.

**Question 16: What made you feel bad in your first Term at McGill?**

Out of twelve (12) participants, nine (9) responded to this question. One participant noted that certain professors show very little sensitivity and flexibility in dealing with their students. They noted that this was particularly the case with students of different cultural backgrounds. They further stated that these Professors seemed to show very little interest in the success of their students and noted a harshness and

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14. Here the student is referring to their affiliation to the Montreal Diocesan Theological College, often referred to as the Montreal Dio.

rudeness to their mannerisms at times, a harshness that might be unintentional but that can nevertheless have painfully devastating effects for students who are not accustomed to the university setting let alone the Western university setting. Another participant indicated that not being able to meet course expectations and failing was very difficult. One respondent noted that being an older student was a lonely experience and that they had a difficult time integrating and making friends. One participant expressed a dislike for some of the seminar-style classes, noting that they found them to be very unstructured and difficult to follow. This respondent thus recommended the use of planned and descriptive lectures, stating that this would be better suited for a diverse community of students of different ages and backgrounds. One respondent noted that being unprepared for course expectations made it difficult and made them feel inept and unsupported. Another respondent indicated that being admitted in the Winter made integration very difficult, especially because they were an older student. Yet another student stated that they saw a visible disconnect between the colleges and SRS.

**Question 17: Is there anything else you would like to tell us about your experience of the first Term of the BTh program which might help us welcome future students?**

Out of twelve (12) participants, eight (8) responded to this question. One respondent noted that it would be immensely beneficial to include an introductory class tailored specifically to theology students, as some students – especially those with little preexisting academic training – need extra help differentiating between academic and church-based approaches, methods, and questions. Another participant expressed that it would be beneficial to provide more support to new students who sometimes get overwhelmed by the workload. They noted that the professors should be more accommodating, especially for older students. One participant noted the need to have welcome signs at the start of the semester, as you do not get a sense that we are welcome. One participant observed that the struggles of students from non-Western backgrounds were very visible and noted that this was in stark contrast to those who grew up in a Western context. This participant recommended extra support for these students. Additionally, this respondent also stated that even though they saw many problems (the respondent did not specify what these problems/issues may be) with the colleges, “the McGill side is rigorous, academically excellent and quite honestly one of a kind.” One participant noted that since the School of Religious Studies receives so many diverse students an orientation about other cultures, especially those who are not necessarily from a Christian background, would be worthwhile.<sup>15</sup> Another respondent concurred, noting the importance of general orientations. Despite hearing otherwise from younger students, the respondent believes this element to be vital. A third participant also reiterated this sentiment and indicated that they appreciated the mandatory meeting for all newly admitted students.

**Concluding Remarks: Moving Forward**

The following are observations and suggestions based on the review and analysis of the survey responses. As noted, the aim and scope of conducting the survey was to better understand the experience of students in the Bachelor of Theology program. The reason why there was an emphasis placed on better understanding the experience students had in the first semester of the program was to see if it was possible

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15. It is important to note that the courses that are part of the Theology Program at McGill are not reserved exclusively for Theology students thus the courses are also taken by students interested in the Bible, Christian theology, and Christian ethics.

to identify any barriers to integrating into the university setting and the expectations of the program. Some of the responses pointed to a lack of support for “older” students who have not attended an educational institution for several years. Additionally, participants noted that, for those not accustomed to Higher Education programs, the expectations and objectives of the program could have been better explained. Several participants expressed that they expected the courses to have a deeper engagement with theology and contemporary theological questions, but instead realized that the emphasis of the program was more about the academic understanding of the history of the development of the Bible and Christian Theology. In this respect, the program could be better defined, namely with respect to 1) the level of historical/critical understanding and knowledge about the Old and New Testaments students are expected to acquire, and 2) how the component taught by SRS professors differs from the component taught by the Theological Colleges. Accordingly, it seems that it would be valuable to include, at the beginning of the Fall term, a more detailed orientation on the expectations, objectives, and goals of the program, perhaps more focused on how courses taught at SRS are intended to supplement and complement the pastoral courses taught by the Theological Colleges. It would also be valuable, as the term progresses, for new students to meet every four weeks with the Chair of the BTh program to review the difficulties and obstacles they are facing so strategies can be devised to help them better adapt and integrate into the program.

Additionally, the challenges faced by non-Western students appear to be different from those faced by North American students. The survey does not offer many details as to what exactly these challenges may be, and it would be worthwhile to further investigate these difficulties and obstacles to better cater to this internally varied category of students. This being said, members of the BTh committee should make themselves aware of the frequent linguistic, educational, and cultural barriers faced by non-Western students, as knowledge of these barriers is crucial for devising appropriate support mechanisms for students who are struggling in one or more of these areas. The linguistic barrier could be approached by developing Writing Networks or Support Groups to help students overcome the academic language barrier and aid them in better understanding what is expected of them when writing an assignment. The cultural barrier could be approached by proposing projects focused on helping non-Western students better integrate and share their experiences and culture. This could be achieved by allocating funding for cultural events where members of the program come together to present how Christianity is practiced and expressed in their community back home.

Other challenges seem to revolve around time management and the “heaviness” of the workload. Several participants noted that the program was difficult to manage while also having to work full-time and care for one’s family. This particular aspect may require a more personal element to be integrated into the support mechanisms of the program. Understanding students’ backgrounds, financial needs, responsibilities, and challenges could help facilitate more individualized support for students struggling with having to complete coursework while working full-time and taking care of their families. Considerations concerning flexibility and what that entails exactly will need to be discussed by the members of the BTh committee. The objective of the flexibility and how it should be applied is to offer individual students a better success rate.

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