

Program Review Masters in Liberal Studies
School of Continuing and Professional Studies—Lehman College

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Date: May 29, 2023

Lehman College's Master's Program in Liberal Studies (MALS), housed in the Adult Degree Program (ADP) of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies (SCPS,) is a Bronx gem, that serves a student body representing great diversity by age, racial and ethnic identity, and gender. The program advances students in their careers, nurturing their individual aspirations and the community's economic health, and developing critical thinking, research, and writing skills enhanced enough to advance students into doctoral programs. MALS contributes to Lehman College's ambitious plans as outlined in the 2025 Strategic Plan to be "a catalytic engine of inclusive excellence and upward mobility," while falling squarely within the college's mission to provide "a transformative educational experience while advancing equity, inclusion, and social justice."

This is the MALS program's first formal program review since its initiation in 1990 and its formally approved evolution in 2012. As part of my evaluation of the program I read the MALS program self-study, Lehman College's five-year strategic plan, the college's Institutional Learning Goals, and the 90x30 plan. On April 19th I enjoyed in-depth meetings with leadership of the SCPS, nearly a dozen core and associated faculty within the MALS program, the Academic Assessment Director, the Interim Vice President of Enrollment Management, the MALS Academic Director and a large group of students and alumnae of the program. I left Lehman College with a profound regard for the work that the college, and the MALS program specifically, engages in and its ability to transform students' quest for knowledge into concrete progress for individuals and the larger community.

For the external review I was asked to:

- Examine how the program meets the College's mission, vision and goals, with a focus on how the program educates and empowers students, and moves forward the College's Institutional Learning goals, advances its 90x30 plan, and integrates into the strategic plan;
- Evaluate the success of the program in achieving student learning goals and expectations, in internal collaboration, and in norming to comparable programs;
- Articulate program faculty strengths in pedagogy, service, and scholarship;
- Explore how assessment will be used to improve the program; and,
- Identify potential program adjustments or innovations.

Organization of Program and Curricula. While the School of Continuing and Professional Studies might not seem a natural place to house the MALS program, its success in recruiting students and meeting its undergraduate adult student needs, its neutral location in relationship to the many programs tied into MALS, and its strong leadership and proven advocacy of MALS

make it an excellent host. Leaders in the school work closely with the graduate director to enhance recruitment, are motivated by the 90x30 plans articulated by Lehman's previous President. The SCPS is Lehman College's home for developing and sustaining small businesses and enhancing workforce development in the Bronx. It is thus connected to local community non-profits and industry, such as health care, the borough's primary employer and an industry that channels students to the MALS program.

The MALS curriculum consists of a 36-credit, twelve-class course of study including four introductory core courses and a concluding three-credit capstone or six-credit thesis. A program strength is that MALS students enter as a cohort, and take four core courses, generally in sequence. Courses include *MLS701 Introduction to the Liberal Arts*; *MLS 702 Arts and Humanities*; *MLS 703 Social Sciences* and *MLS 704 The Sciences*. This cohort model and curricula intends to build collegiality among students, most of whom have been out of the classroom for several years, and to ensure that they have the necessary research and writing skills. As the self-study indicates, students do better, by a nearly .2 GPA in electives following these core classes—student acquisition of skills may be measured in this way. More than 80% of students surveyed indicated they were “very satisfied” with the core requirements. This was also born out in meetings with students who indicated a strong sense of community because of the core courses.

The remaining credits (18 with thesis option, 21 with capstone project) are electives. The graduate director works closely with MALS students to promote a coherent curriculum that moves them toward their capstone or thesis research and professional goals. Lehman's MALS program provides students multiple options to fulfill these credits. Students can take master's classes in many departments across several of Lehman's schools, including the School of Arts and Humanities, the School of Social and Natural Sciences: approximately 30% of the courses students take lie in these graduate programs. Additionally, about 22% of courses with a liberal arts orientation are taken within the professional schools, such as Human Sexuality or the History of Multicultural Education in the Schools of Health or Education respectively.

A critical intervention from 2016 is allowing graduate students to enroll in upper-level undergraduate courses under a 700-level designation. The MALS director works closely with Lehman faculty in multiple departments to ensure additional or alternative work to provide graduate-level depth to students. The graduate director registers students into such courses with individual approval of professors who agree to oversee this work. Nearly 40% of elective courses are taken this way. This innovation has boosted enrollment in undergraduate courses and enhanced the number and diversity of classes available to graduate students.

There is additional flexibility for student electives. CUNY's “e-permit” system allows Lehman's MALS students to take graduate courses in other liberal arts master's programs across CUNY. While only a small proportion of students take advantage of this possibility, a few students have built unique foci in their studies by following this path. Also, students may petition for up to six credits of “Prior Learning Assessment,” based on the ADP's successful model, which students may access after developing a portfolio that demonstrates their knowledge. The graduate director ensures the portfolio addresses the student's learning objectives within the program. A bit more common are Independent Studies that students propose in conjunction with willing

faculty, that allow students to customize their studies toward their scholarly interests and/or career goals, and which offer support to students as they move forward on their capstones. Additionally, students have taken credit-bearing internships to move their professional goals forward. Finally, the program accepts twelve transfer credits in appropriate master's level courses taken in the previous five years—up to one third of the full degree.

As with the core courses, MALS students are highly appreciative of electives within their curricula; 80% indicated they were “very satisfied” on the student survey. Students embrace the range of courses and seeing their growth as scholars. They believe they achieve a deeper relationship with faculty who may mentor them in the future. Students who've availed themselves of the e-permit system felt it met both their geographic and time needs—and more significantly fulfilling niche interests that could not be addressed with Lehman's curricular offerings.

Student Experience of Program: I met a large number of students and alumnae during my visit. Students represented the program's inclusivity, and were diverse in terms of racial and ethnic background, gender, age, and current occupation. Their connection to the program was also mixed—some were current staff at Lehman, others worked within health care or the theater world, some had taken a significant time off after their undergraduate degrees, others much less.

Students believed their MALS education and experiences sustained their career goals; several students were heading on to Ph.D. programs, indicative of the strength of the degree that they had received. Several things were striking about discussions with current and former MALS students.

- Critical to their engagement with the program was the support of the MALS director and the MALS faculty. Multiple students mentioned the close attention they received from the director. Their intellectual goals were met as the director worked with them as a full person, and as a scholar. His insight into their needs as students, workers, and parents kept them at ease, sensing that his confidence in them would be returned by their engagement in the program. Students also emphasized the support they received within particular classes, from Independent Studies advisors, and thesis or capstone advisors. The trust and engagement that advisors placed in them, the direction they offered, and the oversight of particular projects was key to their success.
- The range of capstone and thesis projects was wide—indicative of the intellectual resources of the college and its capacity to launch students into diverse areas of inquiry. Projects included the more applied, such as an exploration of motivational speaking impact on students' academic and personal development, a business plan for an after-school program, or a critical thinking reader for middle-school students. Many projects conducted basic research and humanistic investigation, such as studies of infanticide within enslaved African American communities, black women's wellness, AI and gambling, projects on African American soldiers in Britain during WWII, and multi-media projects exploring Puerto Rican art and music, or spirituality and the soul music of Donny Hathaway.
- Students were clear that the burdens of graduate education were higher than for their undergraduate degree, but that the writing requirements left them as better writers.

- Lehman College’s curriculum is more ambitious than many other local MALS programs, yet students were enthusiastic about their course requirements and choices, even in areas that might not have been obvious fits, such as the science requirement.
- Support services to students were rated a bit less high, though still mostly “very satisfied.” The SCPS might want to see if administrative assessment identifies particular qualities or aspects to those services, particularly financial aid and the bursar’s office, that affect this still relatively positive response.

Despite the challenges of graduate school, particularly for working mothers, the retention rate in the MALS program is quite high—with less than 25% dropping out of the program. This contrasts with graduate programs more generally, which have retention rates equal to undergraduate programs, at about 50%.¹ Students time to degree is relatively short, particularly considering the constraints on working-students time—the average time to degree is 2.6 years. And the students’ survey indicated positive career outcomes from their studies. Half of the students indicated their degrees had led either to promotions or positions more in line with their interests, and almost ten percent pursued further doctoral studies after graduation.

Accessibility: Courses are available during the day or at night, but most students work, often full-time, hence avail themselves of night classes. Approximately 90% of courses are taken in the evening and students suggested this scheduling accommodated their needs.

The program serves a wide range of academically-prepared students. More than 20% began the program with a GPA lower than the 3.0 required by the program. Of 19 such students, the self-study reports only one was forced to drop out of the program; those remaining have a slightly lower GPA than other MALS students. Those who did not excel at the undergraduate level had greater focus, and skills development and MALS provided learning supports. Here the MALS program amplifies educational opportunity for post-traditional students.

Faculty: Lehman College’s highly accomplished faculty provide the MALS program’s curricular range and richness. Faculty have won book awards from the Association of Latino and Latin American Anthropologists, Fulbright Fellowships, and grants from NASA and the National Science Foundation. Their work is well-published, among such internationally recognized presses as the University of California Press, Oxford University Press, the University of Chicago

¹ Watermark Insights, “The Retention Dilemma with Graduate Programs, (February 11, 2022), <https://www.watermarkinsights.com/resources/blog/the-retention-dilemma-with-graduate-programs>; S.M. Chrzanowski, R. Poudyal, “Attrition in Graduate School Versus Other Health Professional Programs: Etiologies and Solutions,” *Medical Science Educator*, (December 19, 2018) 29 (1): 329-33; <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8368922/#:~:text=in%20American%20graduate%20schools%20is,graduation%20rates%20remains%20multi%2Dfaceted>. Stem Master’s level students leave programs at higher than 50%, while MBAs complete at a 90% rate, according to the Council of Graduate Schools, “Master’s Completion Project” 2013 available at : <https://cgsnet.org/project/masters-completion-project/> ; BeMo Academic Consulting, “Graduate Student Retention Strategies,” (March 31, 2023), <https://bemoacademicconsulting.com/blog/graduate-student-retention-strategies>.

Press. Faculty serve on journal editorial boards, and multiple faculty have dual appointments at Lehman College and the CUNY Graduate Center.

As the self-study notes, MALS classes have been taught within 25 different programs, however a preponderance of classes are taught in seven. While some MALS faculty are already teaching master's level courses, many teach independent studies or undergraduate courses tailored to MALS students' needs.

MALS faculty indicate a high degree of commitment to it. They appreciate working closely with students on independent studies, capstone projects, and theses. This is clearly additional labor for faculty, but they enjoyed the experience of collaboration with those able to conduct more sophisticated research. Faculty were attentive to the additional considerations required to transform an undergraduate course into a graduate level course. Faculty find MALS students not to be "passive consumers" but active in developing their curricula and pursuing questions of interest to them. They felt they had a "duty of care" to MALS students (along with their undergraduates) though some were uncertain if this commitment was seen or valued by the college. Formal recognition of faculty's contributions is critical. If the program grows, more will be asked of faculty, and more faculty will have to participate.

Faculty indicated the need for more support in moving students from basic analytic skills such as summary, to more sophisticated analyses; such support should be directed to graduate students. Lehman currently offers no tutoring support for writing or research targeted to graduate students. And there is no professional development available specifically to faculty in the graduate programs, which faculty would welcome.

The MALS Advisory Council has not met since the pandemic faculty observed, and to enhance faculty engagement and ensure leadership continuity in the program this seems an important concern. Faculty and students overwhelmingly articulated the value of the support and guidance provided from the current MALS director. But faculty are committed to the long-term sustainability of the program and suggested leadership development for its continued success.

Enrollment plans: About 40% of MALS students are Lehman College alumnae according to the director. Working students would be unwilling to risk limited time and financial resources on a program that was not vital to their intellectual and career interests. Given the college's presence in the Bronx its reputation is critical, and the high proportion of Lehman alumnae indicate a program with a strong connection to its local community that can be built upon.

Benchmarks have been set to double enrollment. Enrollment Management is planning an extensive marketing plan for the college's graduate programs that will leverage mail, email, and text campaign to targeted lists of students (GRE, Lehman Alumni, CUNY Alumni, and prospects generated via our College App software) according to Interim Vice President, Richard Finger. The college will soon launch an online marketing campaign which includes paid searches and social media marketing.

The program must determine whether current resources within the program are adequate for such growth, and whether more support will have to be provided to faculty to incentivize their contributions to undergraduate classes, independent studies, and even capstones, the last two of which receive a .5 credit toward future course release. And, of course, doubling the enrollment would be far more demanding of the director who provides advisement and mentoring to students, so the SCPS might have to provide additional administrative support to this position, and another Lehman school and department would have to provide reassign time to sustain a deputy director's position.

Assessment: Assessment of the MALS program is in the beginning stages. The program is considering an e-portfolio system to conduct assessment. Overseeing e-portfolios are incredibly labor intensive, and the College and the School should determine how to corral resources so these ambitious plans do not fall on faculty alone to develop and evaluate. As described in the self-study, the current plan will take several years to configure this e-portfolios system, so there is ample time to revise assessment plans and develop alternative structures for summative assessment as the program moves forward.

Conclusion and Recommendations: Lehman College offers a low-cost master's degree, that provides significant personal and community results—alumnae further their careers both in and outside the academy with the degree. The MALS program is well woven into the Lehman community and even the larger Bronx community as students, staff, and alumnae promote the program. The program is incredibly diverse, with nearly 90% of the students being Latino or from the African diaspora, and four-fifths being women. The student body evidences substantially higher diversity than the college's undergraduate programs.

The MALS program offers a caring environment, where students are personally and intellectually nurtured, and such nurturing translated into real gains for them and the community. As an external reviewer it was clear to me that Lehman College's articulated mission, vision, strategic plan and institutional goals were being met by this program.

In reading the MALS program's materials, and meeting with faculty, students, alumnae and administrators I would offer several recommendations for consideration in strengthening the program—some of which were already highlighted in the self-study or which were raised in discussion with stakeholders.

MALS Profile and Outreach

- The College raise the MALS program's profile to enhance enrollment and connection to the college. The college website can feature the MALS program, with a particular focus upon alumnae success stories, including career and professional advancement into Ph.D. programs, as well as more specificity on particular capstone or theses to enliven the program to those unfamiliar with it.

- Similarly, inside Lehman the SCPS administration and the MALS director might publicize the program's successes within the school, among faculty and students. This could be done via public communications. For example, the Summer 2023 catalog of SCPS programming only has a line about MALS under Adult Degree Programs. A quarter, half or full-page announcement is a low-cost method that would provide visibility and could generate interest in the program. Similarly, a lecture series (or annual lecture) featuring MALS faculty or invitees of MALS faculty coinciding with one of the core classes could build the program's profile within and outside of the college.
- Given that the program pulls faculty from multiple schools, the SCPS and MALS director should brainstorm ways to incentivize cohesion of the MALS faculty, to enhance their commitment to the program, and build out the number of engaged faculty within departments. This could have the added benefit of increasing enrollment to the program.
- Particular faculty have been tied to successes of the MALS program, for example David Fletcher appeared key in discussions in sustaining an interest in the Advanced Certificate in Human Rights and Transformative Justice. Can the program identify student interests to develop advanced certificates to enhance enrollment in the program and bolster students' skills acquisition, resumes, and career attractiveness once they leave the MALS program?
- Two-thirds of the MALS students come from Lehman College or CUNY. The College should consider how to reach into Westchester County to meet potential graduate students.
- Can the SCPS or the MALS program host workshops to enhance career options through Workforce Education or its work with small business? The synergy between these programs might enhance enrollment and also career options for current students and alumnae.

Assessment

- Assessment has been limited to date. Proposed plans include E-portfolio. My recommendation is that the director work with the assessment head to determine some formative assessment that can move the program forward, with the E-portfolio being long term. Given the labor-intensive nature of developing a system for collecting and evaluating e-portfolios, the college must consider what resources it will provide to faculty to incentivize this work.
- In addition to the first steps listed in the self-study, early assessment efforts can include evaluating graduate-level research requirements in 700-level undergraduate classes to identify key elements that should be included in learning objectives for these courses and assignments.

Curriculum and Student Support

- To build a sense of community among students the program might consider developing and offering an interdisciplinary MALS course offering for students after the core classes.
- A few curricular requirements seemed unnecessarily challenging to working students, and could be reconsidered. The requirement that transfer classes be taken within five

years of enrollment seems unnecessary, and given the age of many students might be a barrier enrollment for those who began master's programs right after their undergraduate degrees, then left these programs.

- The 36-credit load is high for local programs, though it did not appear a barrier to current students. Currently Prior Learning Assessment must connect directly to a students' capstone project but it seems given the MALS program's high credit load you might consider awarding Prior Learning Assessment for any master's level research or inquiry within the domain of liberal arts, particularly given that no more than six credits are awarded.
- Identify academic supports for student engaged in MALS. Some small percentage of students, perhaps one in five, struggle with the workload or analytic skills. While individual faculty or the MALS director provide much support to these students it seemed clear that more advanced tutoring would be of great benefit. Similarly, faculty articulated a bit of "rust" among a small percentage of enrolled students, and the need for additional, targeted support for graduate students in bolstering writing skills. There was concern that graduate students, for better or worse, might be uncomfortable in a peer tutoring relationship where the tutor was younger than they were. Students echoed this concern, if less loudly.
- Faculty thought professional development resources towards building graduate students' research and writing skills would ease their support of the MALS program. Previously Lehman has hosted a Teaching and Learning Commons, and many faculty articulated the positives that such a pedagogical resource would afford.

Institutionalization

- Some standardization and institutionalization is in order. In less than a decade the MALS program has achieved stability under the careful management of the SCPS and the Graduate Director. The changes made to achieve this stability—in core classes, move to a capstone, and the development of 700-level undergraduate classes to broaden the curriculum, among other changes have been critical to the program's growth. Finding ways to formalize requirements in undergraduate courses, not to standardize them, but to set minimum requirements that are easily understood by participating faculty and students is important.
- As part of institutionalizing the MALS program the SCPS should develop a succession plan to transition for when a new graduate director will be needed. Developing systems for sharing data and information such as the spreadsheet of student information, or other logistical support to program can begin now.
- Reconstitute the MALS Advisory Committee which had languished since the pandemic. Consider formalizing role of advisory committee in relationship to college governance and Lehman College administration.