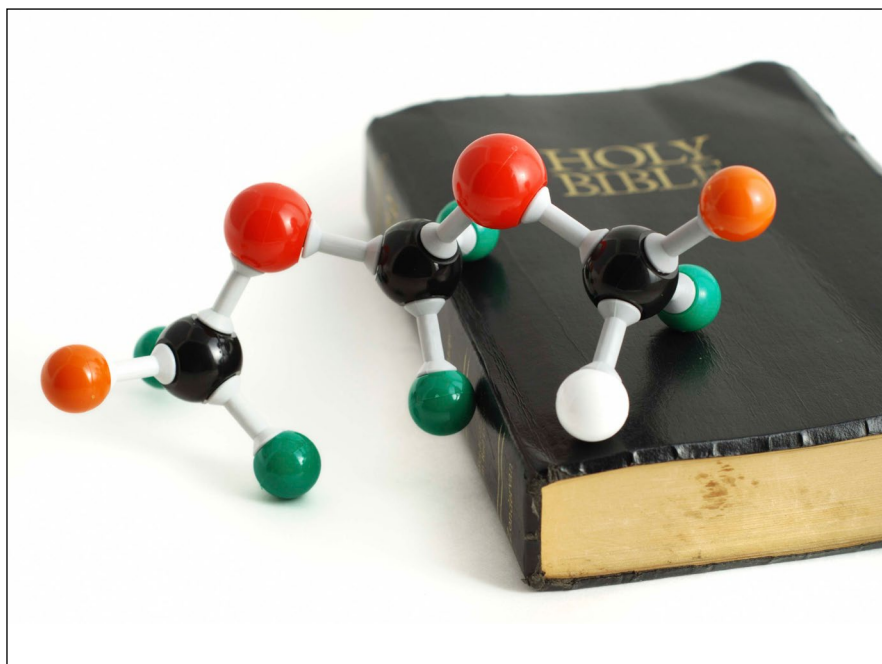


Engaging science in seminaries: 10 things our faculty are telling us

BY DEBORAH H.C. GIN
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Are seminary graduates adequately prepared to engage our modern, scientific culture in their various ministries? What are they learning during their years in seminary about how faith and science intersect? To what extent are faculty engaged in scientific topics in their teaching and research? Are seminaries providing support for faculty and students who are interested in pursuing scientific topics?



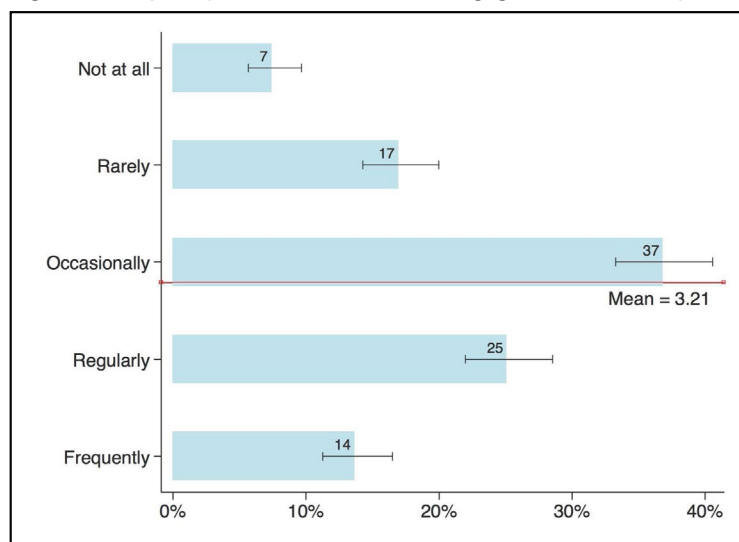
In fall 2015, The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) was the recipient of a research grant from the John Templeton Foundation to study science engagement in North American Protestant seminaries. As part of this project, ATS gathered input from 739 faculty at 186 member institutions who shared their perceptions about the extent of science engagement in the classroom, pedagogical resources, student interest in scientific topics, potential controversies at the intersection of faith and science, science and faculty scholarship, and institutional support for pursuing scientific topics. The findings of that in-depth study are briefly summarized here.¹

1 *More than half of faculty surveyed teach or discuss science or science-related topics in the classroom with students.*

1. An in-depth report on this empirical research will be published in a forthcoming issue of the ATS journal *Theological Education* 50, No. 2.

Very few faculty (7%) report they never address these issues, while about 1 in 7 (14%) say they address these issues “frequently.” Most faculty are somewhere between these two extremes.

Figure 1. Frequency of classroom science engagement (all faculty)



Source: Engaging Science in Seminaries Survey, 2016

2 Faculty in fields that are more applied or interdisciplinary (e.g., ethics and religious studies) are more likely to report classroom science engagement. Areas of study such as Old and New Testament, Biblical languages, or preaching are less likely to report engaging with scientific issues in the classroom.

3 For many faculty, and especially those with expertise in areas like pastoral care, scientific engagement relies heavily on the social and behavioral sciences. Of the types of science engaged in the classroom, the social sciences (sociology and anthropology) come in on top, with 73% of faculty including these topics, followed by psychology (behavioral science) at 56%. The next most common disciplines are the life sciences (biology, genetics) at 45% and cosmology (astronomy, astrophysics) at 38%. These fields have relevance to theological issues of creation and are likely addressed within these contexts. Faculty rely very little on fields like physics, earth science, medical science, or engineering/technology, in part because they feel less prepared to address them.

4 Theological identity does not seem to impact classroom engagement with science. Faculty who identify as evangelical score comparably to those who strongly identify with the label of mainline Protestant. Likewise, those who claim they are theologically conservative are no different in their engagements of science from those who are theologically progressive.

5 On the other hand, position on origins does seem to matter. Theistic evolutionists are the most likely to engage in science and want more of it, while Young Earth creationists (5%) are the least likely.

6 Faculty who have some type of graduate training in science (about 15%) are considerably more likely to address science in the classroom. The training they report is overwhelmingly in the social and behavioral sciences

(73%). Psychology, sociology, and anthropology were frequently mentioned by seminary faculty in the survey. About 21% reported that they had training in one of the natural sciences. The remaining (10%) had training in mathematics or engineering.

7 In general, identifying characteristics of the seminary do not seem to affect average rates of engagement with science. No great differences emerged between small and large schools, freestanding and embedded schools, mainline and evangelical Protestant schools, or the gender and racial distribution of students and faculty.

8 Faculty at seminaries with 15 or more degrees (about 8% of seminaries) are more likely to engage science in the classroom. Seminaries with three or fewer degrees (a little less than a quarter of seminaries) are less likely.

9 The majority of faculty (69%) are happy with the amount of time they spend on science in the classroom. Most of the remainder wish they could devote more time to these topics (27%). Only 3% would like to spend less time on these topics.

10 Seminary faculty tend to use conventional pedagogical methods such as discussions, lectures, and readings to engage science. They do express interest, however, in new classroom tools such as short video clips and interactive websites to help supplement classroom learning.

Where do we go from here?

Although science engagement is occurring at a number of levels, faculty express concerns when it comes to student preparation to deal with science in their future ministries. Only 20% believe that their students are “well prepared” for this.

Slightly more than half of the faculty indicate that their schools could be doing more to improve engagement

with science. And they have suggestions. The most common involve changing courses and curriculum. A number of faculty suggested cross-disciplinary projects (especially with scientists), lecture series, conferences, forums, or colloquia.

Somewhat surprisingly, very few faculty members directly mentioned issues of human origins when they advocated for specific topics, wanting to expand the science and faith conversation beyond the creation/evolution issue to include topics ranging from environmental issues to sexuality.

Yet more than half of faculty clearly see interest in these issues by their colleagues. Likewise, the vast bulk of faculty feel institutional support for addressing scientific issues in both their teaching and scholarship. Nearly three out of four (74%) agree that teaching that addresses scientific issues is supported.



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