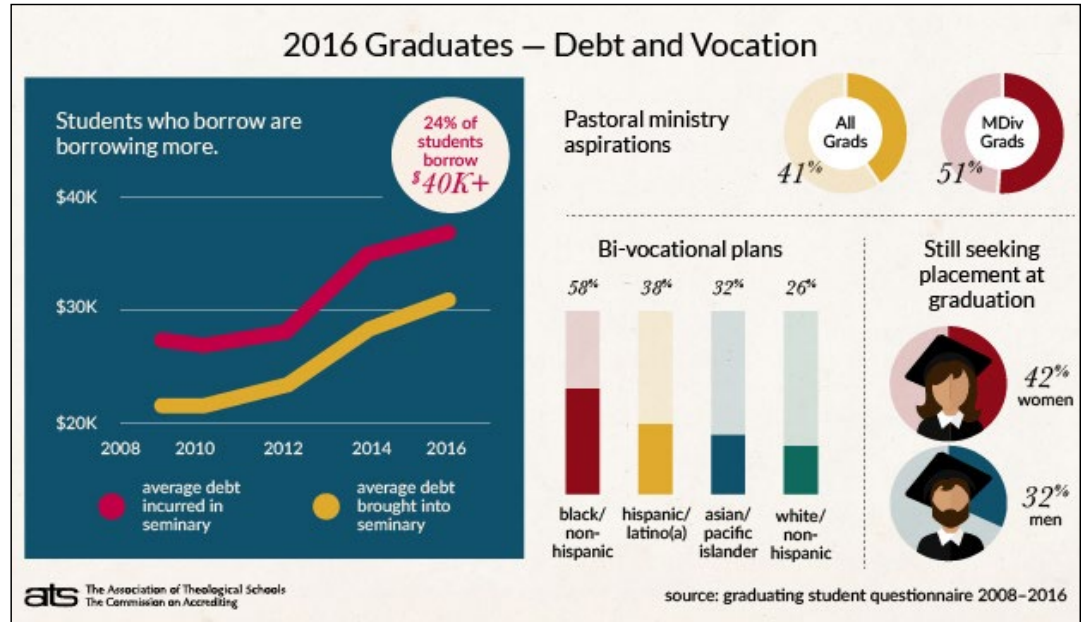


How 2016 graduates are faring

By JO ANN DEASY

The 2015–2016 GSQ Total School Profile provides insights into student educational experiences, personal formation, and vocational goals that can help us evaluate and improve our work as theological educators.



This year, 183 institutions (67% of member schools) used the graduating student questionnaires, reaching 6,293 graduates (43%) at ATS member schools. They constituted a fairly representative cross section of member school demographics in terms of age, race/ethnicity, gender, and degrees earned.

Highlights from this year’s profile reveal some shifting trends and suggest questions that schools might ask about their students and their programs:

Educational Context

- **An increasing number of graduates are completing a majority of their coursework online.** The percentage of graduates who have completed a majority of their coursework in hybrid (10%) or fully online (5%) courses remains relatively small, but the numbers are rapidly increasing, while graduates completing a majority of their coursework as traditional daytime students on a main campus continues to decrease.

Educational Context for a Majority of Coursework	2014	2015	2016
Main campus—traditional daytime classes	4024	3740	3703
Main campus—evening classes	771	743	769
Main campus—intensive courses	387	357	408
Extension site of main campus	279	285	294
Hybrid courses	557	587	655
Online/distance courses	181	244	315
Did not complete > 50 percent in any of the above contexts	97	110	114
Grand Total	6296	6066	6258

- **Younger students are more likely to take a majority of their courses on campus and complete an MDiv degree in three years or less.** Graduates in their 20s are much more likely (81%) to complete their coursework as traditional daytime students versus students 50 and older (42%). They are also much more likely to complete an MDiv degree in three years or less (54% vs. 31% for students 50 or older).

Years to Completion, MDiv Graduates

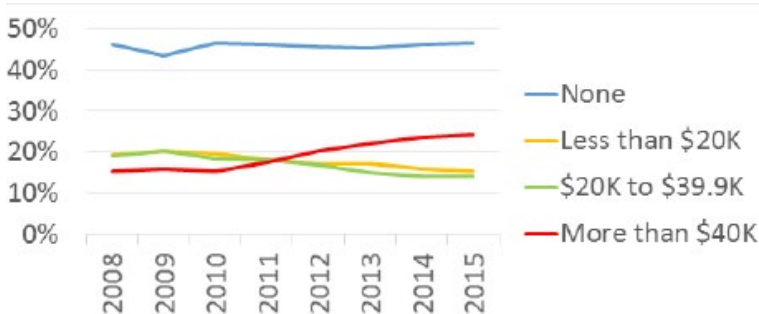
Age by Decade	2 years or less	3 years	4 years	5 years	6 years or more	Total
20s	2%	52%	33%	9%	4%	100%
30s	4%	31%	34%	16%	16%	100%
40s	4%	29%	26%	15%	26%	100%
50 or older	4%	27%	24%	16%	28%	100%

Many institutions are trying new models for theological education, including online courses, intensives, and extension sites. What types of programs are you trying? What types of students are attracted to those programs? Do your new educational models match the demographics of your student body?

Educational Debt

- **The percentage of students borrowing has remained fairly steady since 2008, but those who are borrowing are borrowing more.** In the past few years, we have gained a deeper understanding of educational debt among seminary graduates. While the percentage of graduates who incurred educational debt while in seminary since 2008 has remained relatively stable at about 54%, the percentage of students borrowing \$40,000 or more has steadily increased from 15% to 24%.

Educational Debt Incurred, % of All Students 2008–2009 to 2015–2016



Source: GSQ Total School Profile Table 7, GSQ Questions 1 and 13b

In 2008, the average educational debt incurred by borrowers was \$27,000. In 2015, the average was \$36,800. African American students are most impacted by educational debt in theological schools. In 2015, the average educational debt incurred by African American graduates who borrowed was \$46,300.

- **An increasing number of graduates are bringing educational debt with them to seminary.** The percentage of students bringing educational debt with them to seminary has increased from 37% to 42% since 2008. In 2015, students who did bring debt brought \$30,700 on average.

What impact is debt (both brought to and incurred in seminary) having on your students and graduates? Is it impacting retention? Time to completion? Vocational goals? How are you addressing issues of debt in the admissions process? How is your institution striving to make theological education more affordable for students?

Educational Effectiveness

- Graduates perceive theological education as increasing their enthusiasm for learning, respect for their own religious traditions, and self-knowledge.

However, graduates also consistently ranked the ability to pray and vocational clarity as the bottom two, although their ratings were fairly high (3.5 and 3.8 on a scale of 1 to 5).

- Older students perceive theological education to be more effective in facilitating spiritual growth. It is interesting to note that ratings regarding the ability to pray and strength of spiritual life vary by age with younger students less satisfied with the ability of theological education to facilitate growth in these areas.

	20-29 years	30-39 years	40-49 years	50 or older	All graduates
Strength of spiritual life	3.638	3.854	4.029	4.206	3.913
Ability to pray	3.289	3.401	3.640	3.772	3.507

1 = Not at all effective 2 = Not very effective 3 = Somewhat effective 4 = Effective 5 = Very effective

- Graduates perceive theological education to be effective in helping them think theologically, but somewhat ineffective in preparing them to administer a parish. Ratings regarding specific skill areas vary by degree programs, but the ability to think theologically, the ability to use and interpret scripture, and the ability to relate social issues to faith consistently rank in the top five. The chart below lists the skill areas that were in the bottom five for students who graduated with an MDiv degree:

MDiv Graduates	
Knowledge of church polity/canon law	3.9
Ability to give spiritual direction	3.8
Ability to integrate ecological concerns into theology and ministry	3.7
Ability to integrate insights from science into theology and ministry	3.6
Ability to administer a parish	3.4

1 = Not at all effective 2 = Not very effective 3 = Somewhat effective 4 = Effective 5 = Very effective

Do younger students rate your institution as more or less effective in facilitating spiritual growth while in seminary? How might this be addressed?

Denominations and congregations are increasingly calling for ministers who are effective administrators and leaders. What is the role of theological education in preparing future ministers for these roles? How is your institution preparing students?

Vocational Goals and Placement

- **Students graduating from theological education continue to pursue pastoral ministry in significant numbers**, with 41% of all graduates and 51% of MDiv graduates planning on serving as pastors, priests, ministers, or associate/assistant pastors in congregations. Another 20% of MDiv graduates plan on serving in a congregation in some other role.
- **Gender and race/ethnicity impact whether or not a graduate will pursue congregational ministry.** Asian/Pacific Islander and International MDiv graduates, along with Hispanic/Latino(a) graduates, are most likely to plan on ministry in a congregation or parish (79%, 87%, and 78%). Asian/Pacific Islander, Black/Non-Hispanic, and International MDiv graduates are more likely to already be serving in or to be returning to a congregation at graduation (45%, 41%, and 54%) than White/Non-Hispanic graduates (23%). Female MDiv graduates (38%) are more likely than male MDiv graduates (22%) to pursue ministry outside of a congregational setting.
- **Black/Non-Hispanic students are much more likely to be planning on bi-vocational ministry (58%)** than are Asian/Pacific Islander (32%), Hispanic/Latino(a) (38%), or White Non-Hispanic (26%) students.
- **Female students were less likely to have been offered a job at graduation (42%) than were male students (32%).** Among those seeking placement, those most likely to have been offered positions were International (50%), Asian/Pacific Islander (50%), and Native North American/First Nation (62%) graduates. Those least likely to have been offered a position were Hispanic/Latino(a) (57%) and Black/Non-Hispanic (66%) graduates.

What percentage of students at your institution are pursuing pastoral and/or congregational ministry? Does this match the vision and mission of your institution? The expectations of your constituents?

Which students in your institution are most in need of help with placement? How can you target career/vocational services to better fit the needs of these students?



Jo Ann Deasy is Director, Institutional Initiatives and Student Research at The Association of Theological Schools.