

# ATS schools continue to address economic challenges facing students

By JO ANN DEASY

*This past year, ATS graduates reported the lowest educational debt in more than a decade. In 2021, only 39% of graduates reported incurring educational debt while in seminary, down 15% in the last five years, and the lowest percentage of borrowers since we began collecting educational debt data in the early 2000s. Only 13% of 2021 graduate reported borrowing more than \$40,000, the lowest percentage of high borrowers in the last 13 years. The average debt incurred by graduates in 2021 was \$32,500, down over \$4,300 since 2015.<sup>1</sup>*

## **Lowering educational debt**

In an era where students are increasingly borrowing to fund their education, this is something to celebrate. It is due, in no small part, to the work of 67 schools that were part of the Theological School Initiative to Address the Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers (ECFFM). The ECFFM Initiative, funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and coordinated by ATS, was launched in 2013. It focused on education, research, institutional change, and collaboration to address the economic challenges facing students, including the challenge of educational debt. When the grants ended, we wondered if the work done through this initiative would continue. Had these schools created sustainable approaches to addressing educational debt? Had they shifted their cultures around finances? Now, two years after the completion of most



grant projects, we are pleased to report that the trend of lower educational debt continues.

In our 2020 analysis of the impact of the grant, we noted a greater decrease in debt among MDiv students and a greater decrease in borrowers among MA Professional students. Among those schools participating in the initiative, women students saw the larger decrease in average debt, but only 44% of men students borrowed versus 52% of female students. While older students are more likely to borrow than their younger colleagues, the grant had the greatest impact on students in their 40s who saw their average debt drop by \$6,900.

## **Addressing Black student debt**

Race and ethnicity continue to have a great impact on educational debt levels. Asian and Pacific Islander students saw a large decrease (20%) in the number of borrowers, but average debt among those who borrowed

<sup>1</sup> Data from the 2020–2021 ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire. Data from the questionnaire are available on the ATS website: [Total School Profile Reports](#) | The Association of Theological Schools ([www.ats.edu](http://www.ats.edu))

actually increased by \$6,000 since the beginning of the initiative. Multiracial and Black Non-Hispanic students saw the largest decrease in those borrowing more than \$40,000, but Black Non-Hispanic students still have the highest percentage of borrowers (72%).

The grant helped focus our attention on the significant impact systemic racism has on the finances of our Black Non-Hispanic students. In the second year of the grant, a peer group met to learn from one another about how they were addressing educational debt among their Black students. In spring 2019, ATS launched the Black Student Debt Research Project for the purpose of better understanding the factors that contribute to educational debt among our students. In April 2021, we published a [summary of that report](#) that included five recommendations. In order to address educational debt among Black students, schools must continue to track and research educational debt and compensation for Black students and alums; examine financial aid and scholarship practices; provide robust financial planning resources; design a curriculum that addresses financial challenges; and expand the financial ecology of the both the students and institution.

### ***Addressing the broader financial ecology***

While the grants have ended, work on the initiative continues through the ATS coordination program and the more recent ATS [Organizational and Educational Models Project](#) (OEM). The OEM project launched a series of think tank sessions in 2019 including one to address the financial models of theological education that included leaders from many of the ECFFM-participating schools. ATS continues to address the financial models of theological schools through its [“Mission and Money”](#) program and its leadership education programs.

Through the coordination program, ATS launched a new newsletter titled *Strengthening the Ecology: A Newsletter on Mission and Money*. Focusing on resources from ATS, the broad ecology of theological education, and beyond,

the latest newsletter addressed faculty and finance, including faculty salaries and educational debt, teaching faith and finances, and equipping faculty to contribute to discussions about budgets and funding. To be added to the mailing list, email [Carola Molinares](#), ATS conference coordinator.

ATS has also been participating in two projects that include aspects that address the financial challenges facing future ministers. The first is a Bivocational Ministry Consultation that was hosted by [Darryl Stephens](#), director of the Pennsylvania Academy of Ministry and project director for “Educating for Thriving Bivocational Ministry” at Lancaster Theological Seminary. Stephens has been researching and [writing about bivocational ministry](#) and is currently editing a volume devoted to the topic due to come out in early 2022. ATS will be contributing two articles to the book based on our research. The consultation included many schools that worked on researching and supporting bivocational pastors as part of their ECFFM grants.

ATS staff are also part of the [Common Table Network](#), a national network of diverse stakeholders interested in clergy and congregational well-being. Sponsored by Azusa Pacific University, the Wesleyan Church, the Duke Clergy Health Initiative, and the Ormond Center at Duke University Divinity School, this network gathers regularly to address holistic aspects of clergy health, including financial wellness. As part of the network, ATS continues to make connections among financial wellness, clergy health, and theological schools. ATS is also serving on the advisory board for a new clergy wellness field guide being developed by the Ormond Center.

### ***Next steps***

ATS is committed to continuing to support schools as they address the economic challenges facing their students and institutions. Work will continue through OEM, leadership education programming, and other ATS initiatives. In addition, ATS will be developing some new

resources for theological schools building upon the rich learning from this initiative. These resources will contribute to and expand what is currently available on the [ECFFM webpages of the ATS website](#) with a focus on case studies and effective practices for institutions.

Any questions about the work ATS is doing with the economic challenges facing students may be directed to Jo Ann Deasy, ATS director of institutional initiatives and student research.



---

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