

**Excerpts from the
2020 ATS Coordination Program Report for the Lilly Endowment
Theological School Initiative to Address Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers**
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Objectives

The purpose of the ATS coordination grant is to support schools receiving grants through the Theological School Initiative to Address the Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers by providing expertise, resources, research, and opportunities for collaboration. The coordination grant facilitates sharing what is learned from individual schools both with other participating schools and with the broader body of theological schools. Each project becomes more effective by learning from others during the process, and together they develop and contribute to a body of knowledge and skill that is providing resources for many other schools involved in theological education.

2020 Project Activities and Resources

Black Student Debt Research Project

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 Black students in graduate theological schools. Structured around money autobiographies and focus groups, the Black Student Debt Research Project was designed to hear from the students themselves their challenges and suggested solutions to their financial struggles.

The first phase of the project involved contracting with 10 graduate theological schools to each collect money autobiographies from five of their students. The money autobiography questions were drawn from existing money autobiographies used by ECFFM Schools and after a literature review on Black Student Debt. They were designed to gain more information on educational debt, the current work and financial context of students, their financial history, and their theology of money.

In Fall 2019, participating schools gathered their five students for focus groups to further explore issues raised in the money autobiographies. Questions focused on the following:

- The relationship between God's provision and their call to ministry
- The role of denominations and congregations in financially supporting black students
- The role their seminaries played in preparing them for the financial realities of ministry
- How seminaries can assist black students with their financial struggles

The final report was completed in early 2021.

Dissemination of Research and Learning

The ECFFM Coordination Program continues to disseminate research in a variety of ways including presentations at ATS events, articles in *Colloquy* and *In Trust*, and the listserv/Engage ATS communities. In 2020, presentations were made at the following ATS events:

- Online Modules focusing on Educational Debt
 - New Faculty Workshop (September 2020), Self-Study Workshop (Fall 2020), School for New Deans (December 2020)

- CARES Act and Federal Student Loans Webinar (Heather Jarvis, May 2020)

In addition, in 2020 Chris Meinzer, COO at ATS developed an online course focusing on Mission and Money which addressed the financial challenges to institutions at the onset of COVID-19. The course was offered as part of the ATS Biennial Meeting and again in Fall 2020.

Sustaining the Work in ATS and Beyond

During the summer of 2019, ATS developed a new chapter for its Strategic Information Report. For those schools that use the ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire, this chapter will include detailed information on educational debt at their institution as well as comparable benchmarks from schools of a similar size and ecclesial family. This new chapter was sent to all ATS schools in spring 2020, including those not currently using the student questionnaires. A sample was included in last year’s report.

ATS has been participating in several ongoing conversations related to topics that emerged as part of the ECFM Initiative including:

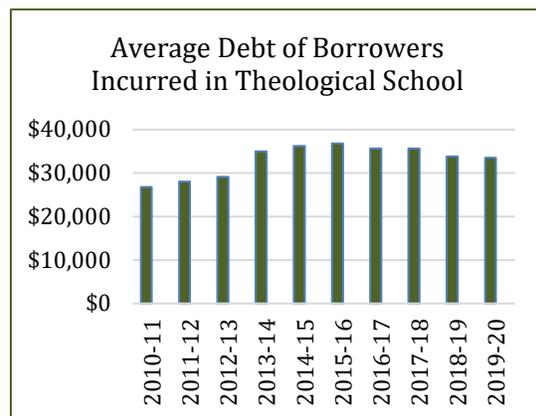
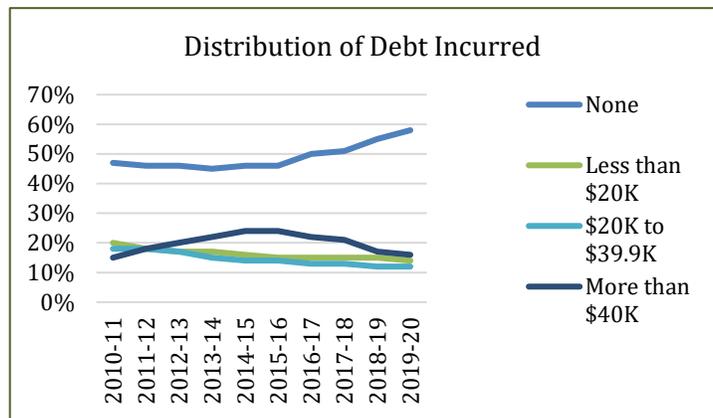
- Participation in the Clergy Health and Wellness Network hosted by Duke University School of Divinity
 - ATS will have a role on the advisory committee for an upcoming “Field Guide on Caring for Clergy”
- Bivocational Ministry Consultation hosted by Lancaster Theological Seminary
 - Jo Ann Deasy and Velma Love will be contributing a chapter on Black Students, Debt, and Bivocationality in a forthcoming book

Key Learning and Impact

Impact on Debt from 2014 to 2020

In 2020, we saw the average of amount of educational debt incurred in seminary continue to decline for the fourth straight year. From its peak in 2015, average educational debt has decreased by \$3,300. In addition, the percentage of students borrowing to pay for seminary has continued decrease as well. Since 2015, the percentage of graduates who reported borrowing in seminary has decreased by 12% and the percentage borrowing over \$40,000 has decreased by 8%.

ATS analyzed data from the ATS Graduating Student Questionnaires comparing decreases in average educational debt, the percentage of borrowers, and the percentage of those borrowing over \$40,000 for Masters students by degree program, gender, age, and race/ethnicity. We also compared data from the ECFM schools with overall averages.



The ECFFM initiative seemed to have the most impact on MDiv students who saw average debt decrease by over \$4,000 in ECFFM schools (\$3,750 for all schools). The average debt among the MA Professional and MA Academic degrees saw little change. Through the ECFFM Initiative, though, we have learned to look at two data points when considering debt: average amount borrowed and percentage of borrowers. MDiv students saw a decrease in borrowers by 13% (both in ECFFM schools and overall).

The biggest decrease in the percentage of borrowers was among MA Professional students at ECFFM schools (24% vs. 12% overall). MDiv students at ECFFM schools also saw those borrowing over \$40K decrease of 12% (11% overall). Among MA Professional students at ECFFM, those borrowing over \$40K decreased by 11% (vs. 4% overall).

Female students saw the largest decrease in average amount borrowed (\$4,500 in ECFFM schools) bringing their average debt almost equal to that of their male colleagues. However, less male students borrowed (44% vs. 52% of female students) and that gap widened slightly during the ECFFM initiative.

The greatest decrease in the average amount borrowed by age were among students in their 40s and 50 or older whose average debt decreased by \$6,900 and \$5,100 respectively in ECFFM schools. Students in their 40s saw the greatest impact from the ECFFM initiative. Students in their 40s also saw the greatest decrease in students borrowing over \$40K. That being said, older students are still more likely to borrow higher amounts than their younger colleagues.

Race/ethnicity proved to be the most complicating factor related to average debt and percentage of borrowers. Several groups (Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino(a), and Native North American/First Nation) saw large increases (\$6,000 to \$11,000) over the last six years at ECFFM schools. For the Native North American students, the data is less reliable given the small number of respondents. For Asian/Pacific Islander students, this data is countered by the largest decrease (20%) in the percentage of borrowers. Multiracial and Black students saw the largest decrease in those borrowing over \$40K. However, Black and Native North American students still on average borrow more than their colleagues (\$45,600 and \$42,000) and more Black students borrow (72%).

With a few exceptions, ECFFM schools generally saw more decreases than in ATS overall. It is clear, though, that the emphasis on educational debt brought by this initiative has had impact far beyond the participating schools. Data have also revealed that in terms of the intersection of race/ethnicity and educational debt more work needs to be done.

Next Steps

Throughout 2019 and 2020, a majority of grantees completed their projects. This also meant major transitions in the ECFFM community as project leaders shifted to new work, embedded their work within their institutions, or saw their roles come to an end.

The Role of ECFFM

The Organizational and Educational Models Project (OEM) will focus more on institutional costs. It will not, however, provide specific support for those people who are on the ground working with students on financial literacy and wellness. We have noted the need for a culture shift around the issue of money, the need to break the code of silence, and the need to do more than just lower tuition. This cultural work will require a unique type of support that is not currently present within OEM.

In addition, ECFFM focused more on the broad ecology of ministry and the role of theological institutions within that ecology. There was an emphasis on collaboration and extending partnerships with congregations and denominations as well as financial experts in universities and outside of the academy. In 2020, we were not sure where this particular emphasis might fit into ATS programming. As we write this report, however, it is becoming clear that some of this work may fit well into the coordination work that ATS is proposing as part of the Lilly Endowment's new Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative. This would allow for continuity of leadership within ATS.

Surveying Participants

In November 2020, ATS surveyed ECFFM grantees to gauge their interest in continuing the work of the initiative. We received responses from 62 people representing 40 ECFFM participating schools. The respondents were asked about areas of future engagement around the themes of the initiative. The results were as follows:

- Participate in strategic conversations about next steps in this work (85%)
- Receive a quarterly newsletter with research, resources, and events (85%)
- Participate in an online community (61%)
- Help develop capacity building events to equip schools (37%)
- Teach, present, or write on topics related to the ECFFM (31%)

In March 2021, ATS sent out their first quarterly newsletter to those on the ECFFM contact list. In addition, ATS relaunched their online community focused on ECFFM and widened the audience to include anyone interested in these topics. The new open community and newsletter were renamed "Strengthening the Ecology," to reflect the integral role that collaboration has played in addressing the financial needs of seminary students and to encourage a holistic approach to addressing educational debt.

In June 2021, ATS will host a series of virtual strategic conversations about next steps in the work of the initiative.

In Summer and Fall 2021, ATS will be working on the final report for this initiative. We'll conduct a final analysis of the effectiveness of the project that will include looking further into ATS data on participating schools as well as a qualitative survey of participating schools to gain feedback on the sustainability of the work and the impact of the coordination work. ATS will also gather stories from ECFFM participants who embodied various key aspects of the grant.