

Graduating Student Questionnaire reveals more about ATS graduates in third year of COVID-19

BY CHRISTOPHER M. THE

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 1,000 more students participated in the most recent ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ) compared to two years ago. Having more member schools represented provides an increasingly accurate picture of the landscape of theological education within the ATS membership.

Peppered with lively questions and commentary from attendees, ATS hosted a [webinar](#) this month that discussed highlights from the [Total School Profile report](#) of the 2021–2022 Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ 2022)—the third set of students to graduate during the COVID-19 era. Released in mid-July, the GSQ 2022 report reflects responses from 5,558 graduates from 141 participating member schools. These (voluntary) student

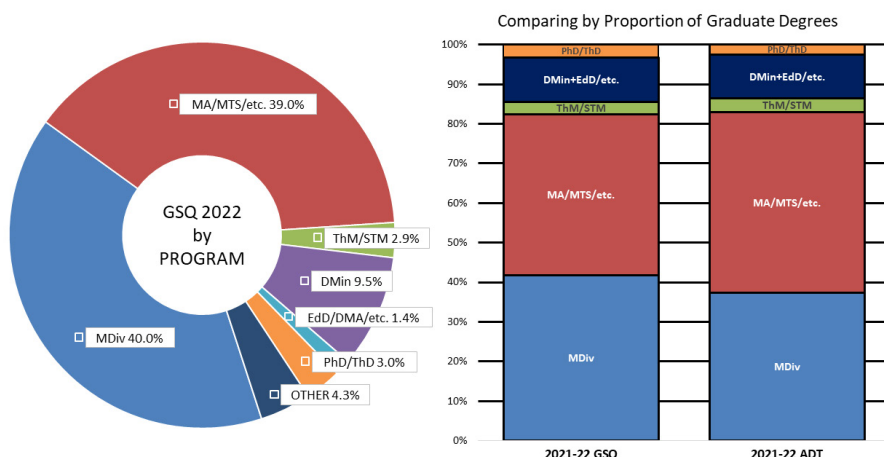


responses supplement the institutional information found in the [Annual Data Tables](#) (ADT) that ATS publishes online each spring. By considering GSQ data together with ADT data, member schools can make indirect comparisons that provide much needed texture to school reported information, while also framing student responses within various institutional factors.

Degree proportions

Relative alignment can be seen when comparing degree proportions of the GSQ 2022 with the latest ADT completions reported by ATS schools in fall 2021. While the GSQ data appear to be relatively well representative of the collective ATS student body, some variations in the data persist. Participants in the GSQ 2022 would overrepresent the MDiv by roughly 4.5 points (41.8% vs. 37.4%) and may underrepresent MA-level graduates by nearly 5 points (40.7 percent vs. 45.5 percent) when compared to completions reported last year (see Figure 1). This means that feedback provided by MDiv graduates

Figure 1: Comparing Degree Proportions of 2021–22 GSQ and 2021–22 ADT



Source: 2021-22 GSQ Total School Profile, Table 1 (adjusted); 2021-22 ADT, Table 2.14

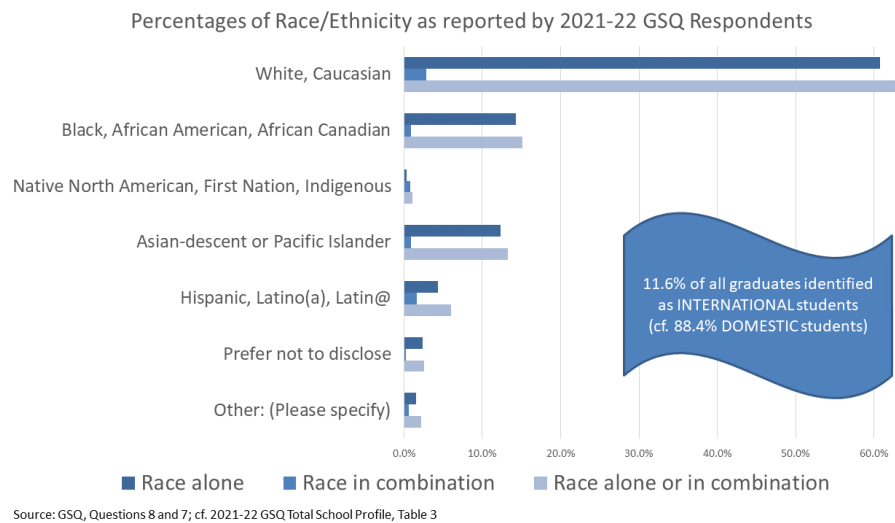
“weighs” more in the aggregate and less so for MA-level graduates—all other proportions varied by less than 1%.

To generate Figure 1, ATS reviewed all programs marked as “Other” and identified any student responses that matched one of the six degree program categories defined in the ATS *Standards of Accreditation* (Standards 4 and 5). (Email [Christopher The](mailto:Christopher.The) to see what your graduates may have identified as “Other” programs—schools can request unidentified raw data for a sharper analysis than what can be shown in the Total School Profile report.)

Race/ethnicity, international, and gender status

The 2020 revision of the ATS Student Questionnaires included improvements for visualizing data like race/ethnicity (3.8%) and international status (11.6%) in increasingly nuanced ways, as shown in Figure 2. How might the overall make-up of multiracial/multiethnic and international student status of GSQ 2022 respondents invite a deeper understanding of the ways your own graduating students self-identify?

Figure 2: Disaggregating Race/Ethnicity and International Status in GSQ 2022



Because international student status can now be mapped with race/ethnicity, member schools may compare these volunteered trend data with their own institutional data.

Table 1: Percentage of GSQ 2022 International Students by Race/Ethnicity

Asian-descent or Pacific Islander	47%
White, Caucasian	19%
Black, African American, African Canadian	16%
Hispanic, Latino(a), Latin@	9%
Other: (Please specify)	7%
Prefer not to disclose	2%
Native North American, First Nation, Indigenous	<1%
TOTAL	100%

For example, Table 1 shows this year’s distribution of all responding international student graduates according to any racial/ethnic identifications they reported.

“Prefer not to disclose” remains an available response for the questions regarding race/ethnicity and gender, while the option of “Other” invites respondents to specify further. The majority of the GSQ 2022 write-in responses for “Other” gender (0.7%) included “Trans” and “Nonbinary,” even as multiple comments offered by students attest to the ongoing limits of the language on the GSQ. Regarding the write-in responses for “Other” race/ethnicity (1.6%), it may come as no surprise that student

responses reflected the wide breadth at ATS member schools—mainly in terms of varied nationalities, spoken languages, and expressions of diversity that “is a visible sign of God’s intention for humanity” (as articulated in the [core values of ATS](#)).

Educational debt

ATS women and men students bring similar amounts of debt to seminary, but women continue to report higher proportions of student loans borrowed (16% vs. 10%). They borrowed more than \$40,000 in 2021-22, with 59% (vs. 68% of men) reporting no student debt incurred for the year. Breaking out by both gender and race/ethnicity, the reported average levels of student debt incurred

annually invites further reflection of how every member school performs in such areas (see Figure 3). As schools analyze their own data, they may see how factors like gender and race/ethnicity impact educational debt levels incurred by graduates of their programs.

The two racial/ethnic groupings with the highest levels of educational debt in 2021–22 each reported borrowing more than \$45,000 on average for the year. Of those borrowers identifying as “Native North American, First Nation, Indigenous,” nearly 30% reported incurring more than \$40,000 in student debt—although the number of unique students in this category is very low. Of those borrowers identifying as “Black, African American, African Canadian,” one out of every three graduates reported borrowing \$40,000 or more in student loans this year—thus continuing a significant decrease from a 2016 peak (of more than half of such borrowers).

Across all borrowers participating in the GSQ, the average amount of student debt incurred for the 2021-22 academic year was \$34,533 (compared to \$34,720 last year). The combined number of graduates who reported borrowing at least \$40,000 in 2021–22 is just under last year’s then-historic low (13.2%), at 12.9% of respondents. Consequently, the overall trendline shows an encouraging cumulative decrease of 11 points, comparing historically to the peak for this range (24.1% in 2015–16).

This year’s graduates reported historic lows across several expanded annual borrowing categories—up to \$19,999 (down to 13.4%), between \$20,000 and \$39,999 (down to 9.8%), and \$40,000 or more (12.9% as mentioned above). Financial information volunteered by

the most recent graduates of participating ATS schools suggests that student debt levels have improved for at least a fifth straight year. From these self-reported data, we see a rising number of graduates not incurring any annual debt, growing favorably to nearly 64% of respondents graduating in 2021–22 (compared to 61% last year, about 50% five years ago, and 46% ten years ago).

Conclusion

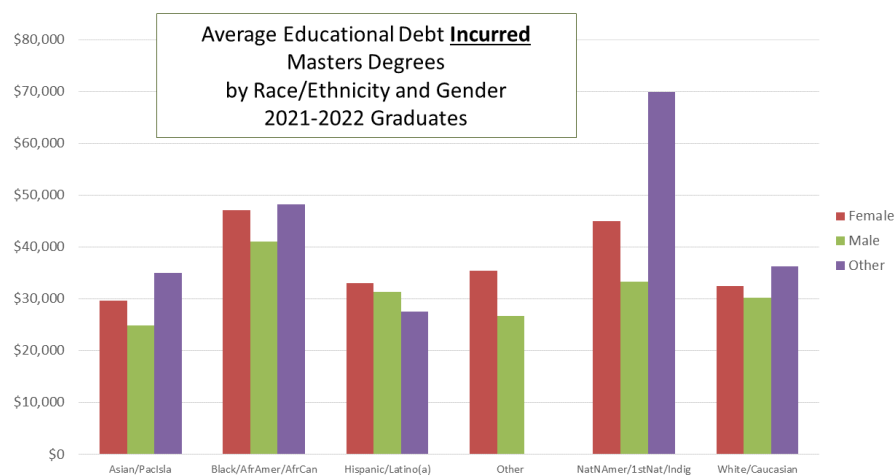
The revised ATS Student Questionnaires are now much more adaptable for schools and increasingly accessible for students, yet translation work continues—versions of the revised GSQ written in Spanish, Korean, and Chinese will be vetted by select groups of member schools in the

coming year. If your school is interested in the translation process, please email Christopher The or Debbie Gin.

Please email Meghan Niskach to set up the GSQ and/or the ESQ (Enter-

ing Student Questionnaire)—offered at no charge as a member benefit—or the AQ (Alumni/ae Questionnaire). In addition, join Engage ATS (the Association’s online community) and subscribe to the “ATS Student Questionnaires” community. If you are interested in how to use and interpret student data to better inform your institutional planning and evaluation processes, please email Christopher The.

Figure 3: Intersecting 2021–22 Student Debt Reports of Master’s Degree Graduates



Source: 2021-22 GSQ Total School Profile, Table 7b; GSQ, Questions 5, 8 and 13b



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