

How 2015 graduates are faring

*What they're
telling us that
schools can use*

BY JO ANN DEASY

[The 2014–2015 GSQ Total School Profile](#) provides a wealth of survey data about graduating students: educational debt, satisfaction with their seminary experience, and vocational plans and goals. A look at the highlights of graduate responses to the questionnaire may help schools ask probing questions to improve current teaching and learning, student services, recruitment, and field education and career placement.

This year's total school profile encompassed 175 programs (64% of member schools) and 6,102 graduates (42%) at ATS member schools. They constituted a representative cross section of member school demographics in terms of age, race/ethnicity, gender, educational context, and degrees earned.

A FEW HIGHLIGHTS TO CONSIDER

Demographics

- **The GSQ respondents represent an increasingly older cohort of students.** Since 2011, the percentage of students over 55 responding to the GSQ has increased from 11 percent in 2011 to 16 percent in 2015. This increase in older students has been matched by a significant decrease in students under 25, which dropped from 11 percent to 5 percent (326) between 2011 and 2014–2015.
- **The diversity among GSQ respondents continues to increase.** While students identifying as white (non-international) have dropped from 75 percent in 2008–2009 to 63 percent in 2014–2015, the percentage of respondents identifying as black (non-Hispanic) has risen from 13 percent to 17 percent.

Hispanic and Asian graduates have remained fairly steady between 3–4 percent and 8–10 percent respectively.¹

Educational debt

- **Debt continues to be an issue for some, but not all, graduates.** The percentage of students graduating without debt has increased slightly since 2013–2014, from 45 percent to 46 percent, but the percentage graduating with debt over \$40,000

also has increased from 22 percent to 24 percent. MDiv students accrue more seminary debt than do students in academic or professional MA programs, partly due to the longer MDiv degree. More than half of all MDiv graduates reported seminary debt of more than \$10,000. Older MDiv students also report that they accrued more debt than younger students. The debt levels in FIGURE 1 do not include undergraduate or consumer debt, which are generally higher for younger students.

- **Debt continues to vary greatly by race/ethnicity as well as by gender, with black/non-Hispanic students and female students being most impacted.** While 54 percent of graduates overall accrue some debt in seminary, more than 80 percent of black students

1. These statistics may be a bit difficult to interpret since two new categories were added in 2013–2014. In 2014–2015, 5 percent of students chose not to disclose their race, and 2 percent identified as multiracial. According to the US Census Bureau, the population in 2013 was 63 percent white (non-Hispanic), 13 percent black, 17 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent Asian.

FIGURE 1. Student debt incurred in seminary by race and gender, all degrees, 2013–2014 and 2014–2015

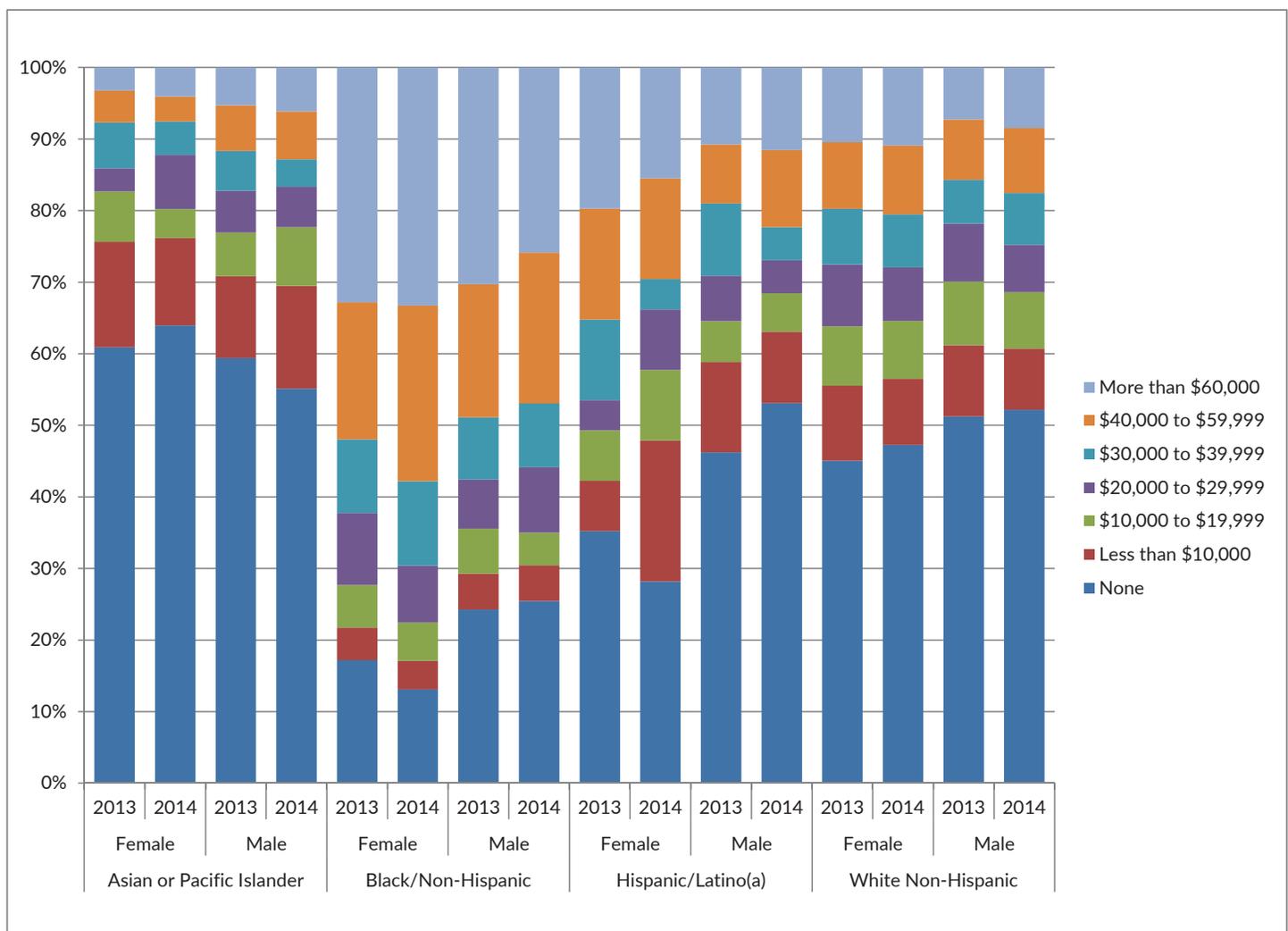


FIGURE 2. Debt incurred by educational context, all students (% by context), 2014–2015

Educational Context for Majority of Degree	< \$10,000	\$10,000 to \$40,000	> \$40,000	Total # of Students
Main campus—traditional	54%	22%	24%	3,730
Main campus—evening	45%	22%	33%	747
Main campus—intensive	73%	16%	11%	353
Extension site of main campus	55%	22%	23%	286
Hybrid courses	58%	18%	24%	585
Online courses	67%	19%	14%	243
Did not complete 50% in any one context	65%	17%	18%	109

accrue debt, with 30 percent of them hitting levels greater than \$60,000. The impact on women students, whether black, Hispanic/Latina or white, is even greater, with the gap in debt levels between black and Hispanic/Latino(a) men and women increasing quite significantly between 2013–2014 and 2014–2015. (See FIGURE 1.)

- **The educational contexts students choose also correlate with the amount of debt they incur before they graduate.** We began tracking students by their educational context in 2013–2014 by asking where they completed the majority of their degree programs. We discovered that, although they represent just 12 percent of the total, *main campus—evening* students were the cohort with the highest percentage (55%) of debt above \$10,000. The largest cohort of graduates, representing 61 percent of the total, is made up of the *main campus—traditional* daytime students. Of these students, 46 percent reported debt in excess of \$10,000, with more than half of those owing more than \$40,000. (See FIGURE 2.)

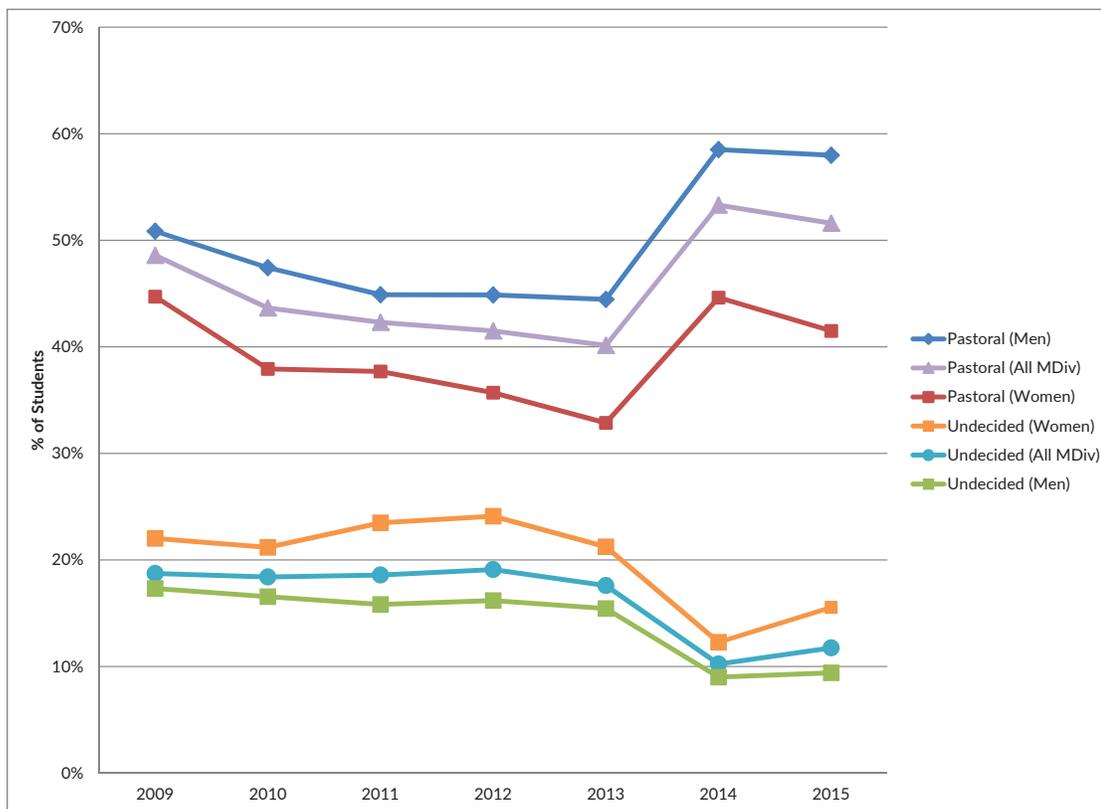
Vocational goals

- **More than 70 percent of all MDiv graduates indicated that they would be seeking or have already attained positions in local congregations,** including roles as pastors, priests, associate pastors, lay ministers, ministers of youth, Christian education, music,

and administration. More than half of the MDiv students intend to take leadership roles as pastors, priests, or associate pastors in local congregations. The percentage is higher among men (58%) than among women (41%). While this percentage varies by ecclesial family, across all ecclesial groups the percentage of men pursuing pastoral ministry is greater than the percentage of women. (See FIGURE 3.)

- **About 31 percent of graduates are or expect to be bivocational, and another 18 percent report considering bivocational ministry after graduation.** Bivocational ministry plans vary greatly by race/ethnicity, with 54 percent of black/non-Hispanic students vs. 24 percent of white/non-Hispanic students planning on bivocational ministry after graduation. (See FIGURE 4.) Age also has an impact on plans for bivocational ministry with only 20 percent of 20–25 year olds planning on bivocational ministry versus 35 to 36 percent of 40–55 year olds.
- **Almost 50 percent of professional MA graduates indicated that they would be seeking or have already attained positions in local congregations,** with 20 percent intending to serve as pastors or associate pastors. For both MDiv and professional MA graduates, alternative vocational settings include community and social work, teaching, institutional chaplaincies, further graduate study, counseling, and an ever-expanding range of expressions of ministry.

FIGURE 3. Vocational goals of MDiv students at graduation by gender



Pastoral ministry = pastor, priest, or minister of a congregation; associate or assistant pastor (for 2014 and 2015); supply ministry; and interim ministry.

Undecided = unsure (parish) (for 2014 and 2015) and undecided (nonparish)

NOTE: The dramatic increase in graduates pursuing pastoral ministry in 2014 is impacted by changes to the graduating student questionnaire which added "associate or assistant pastor" to the list of vocational goals.

- **Almost 40 percent of academic MA graduates indicated plans to serve in a congregation.** Male academic MA graduates are more likely to consider congregational ministry (47%) versus female graduates (28%), and MA students over 50 years of age (48%) are more likely than students in their 20s (26%).

Satisfaction with the experience

- Experiences in ministry, personal life experiences, and interactions with students rank among the most important influencers on the educational experience among both on-campus and online students. This is in addition to the influence faculty and course

FIGURE 4. Considering bivocational ministry by race and ethnicity, 2014–2015

	Asian or Pacific Islander	Black/ Non-Hispanic	Hispanic/ Latino(a)	Native North American/ First Nation	White Non-Hispanic	Total
Yes	32%	54%	32%	29%	24%	31%
Unsure about being bivocational	18%	19%	18%	26%	18%	18%
No	46%	23%	41%	35%	48%	43%
No plans to do ministerial work	4%	4%	9%	10%	10%	8%

work have in the lives of our graduates. Perhaps surprisingly, spiritual direction/formation or other faith-building events/activities tied for the second most significant influencer among students who completed a majority of their degree online.

- **Graduating students across all masters’ degree programs rated schools most effective in facilitating the student’s “ability to think theologically.”** Differences among degree programs tended to reflect the varying emphases among degrees, with MDiv students highly rating the effectiveness of preaching preparation and academic MA students rating most highly areas reflecting thinking or knowledge.
- **Satisfaction ratings showed significant similarities between traditional, on-campus and online graduates.** Quality of teaching, accessibility of faculty,

class size, the quality of the library, and accessibility of administrative/staff support received high marks from both on-campus and online graduates. Cocurricular resources were rated at the bottom of the satisfaction ranking for both groups: career and vocational counseling, student debt and counseling, housing, health and wellness, food service, and childcare.

- **Only 10 percent of graduates reported using their school’s placement services, but a majority of those students (85%) rated the services as helpful.** Of the 90 percent who did not use placement services, 30 percent indicated that it was because they were already employed and 28 percent because they were not aware of them.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AS YOU REVIEW THE DATA FOR YOUR SCHOOL

Demographics

How do the demographics of our institution reflect or challenge the trends found in ATS member schools? How do the particular demographics of our constituency impact our recruiting strategies and educational models?

Debt

Which groups carry the highest and lowest levels of debt at our school?

What might be the contributing factors? Scholarship distribution? Balance of work and education? Systemic issues such as race or gender? Denominational affiliations?

What is a manageable debt level for our students? How will we measure this?

How does our approach to managing educational debt connect to our school’s mission?

Satisfaction

How satisfied are students with their experiences at our school? Do they match learning outcomes and mission? Were there any special circumstances (e.g., conflict or crisis on campus, transition in personnel, significant changes in curriculum) that impacted student satisfaction levels? What areas need improvement?

Vocational goals

Where are our graduates heading? What do

they tell us about various pathways into ministry?

Are graduates achieving their goals? Do their goals match our mission? Do they match the learning outcomes of our degrees? What can we do to help?

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

These findings and more were presented in the [GSQ webinar](#) on August 26. Looking ahead, the annual [ESQ/GSQ/AQ Workshop](#) in November will both train those new to the instrument and provide opportunities to discuss issues of data and interpretation.



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