

# Revised ATS questionnaire shows new data related to online learning, work, ministry plans

BY JO ANN DEASY

*This fall, more than 5,500 students representing over 130 ATS schools completed the newly revised ATS Entering Student Questionnaire.*

*The questionnaire captures the experience of the first class of students to enter theological schools during the pandemic, and provides new data related to the work and ministry plans of students both during and after completing their theological degrees.*



## **Online or on campus?**

The current global pandemic caused many—but not all—schools to offer all coursework online, as reflected in data from this sampling of entering students. Just under 50% of students reported that they would be taking all their classes online and less than 15% of students reported that they would be living on or within walking distance to campus. While the largest grouping of students reported all online courses for the fall, about one-third of students were still planning to be on campus on a weekly basis for courses, community, or cocurricular activities. This may reflect a number of schools that were able to create an intentional socially-distanced community for all or part of their student body.

## **Educational backgrounds and call to seminary**

Entering students continue to bring a wide range of undergraduate degrees with them to theological school. Fall 2020 students were able to “select all that apply” to better reflect dual or multiple undergraduate degrees.

The result was an increase in students reporting they had completed a degree in religious studies or theology (32% vs. 25% in 2019).

Just under half of all entering students completing the questionnaire this fall (45%) considered going to theological school before or during college. This is down from 55% in 1998. Categories for this question were clarified and expanded in 2020. New data shows that an additional 12% of students considered theological school in the first two years after graduating from college. The largest increase since 1998 is among those considering seminary after two or more years of work (40% in 2020 vs. 30% in 2013). Most of that increase has occurred in the last three years.

Fall 2020 data shows that about half of those—20% of all entering students—considered theological school after ten or more years of work. Because we also know that 60% of entering students (83% for MDiv) come with recent leadership experience in the local church, it might be worth exploring recruiting strategies that reach out to active lay leaders.

## Educational debt

Approximately 40% of entering students reported bringing educational debt with them to theological school this fall, and an additional 20% reported bringing some type of non-educational debt. The new revision of the questionnaire increased the maximum debt range reported by students, with 7% reporting educational debt of \$80,000 or more. Educational and non-educational debt brought to theological school has steadily increased over the last seven years. Using debt ranges from the 2013–2019 revision of the student questionnaires, our data show that both the average educational debt and the average non-educational debt brought by borrowers increased by about \$4,000 in the last year. This is similar to increases from previous years.

Increases to the upper debt ranges reported by students meant that the average educational debt brought to seminary by borrowers increased as well. Using the new ranges from fall 2020, we estimate that borrowers brought, on average, \$37,300 in educational debt with them to theological school. As in previous years, black students brought the highest levels of debt reporting an average educational debt level of \$52,300—an increase of \$6,500 from 2019. Black students continue to represent the highest percentage of borrowers as well, with two-thirds reporting educational debt brought to seminary.

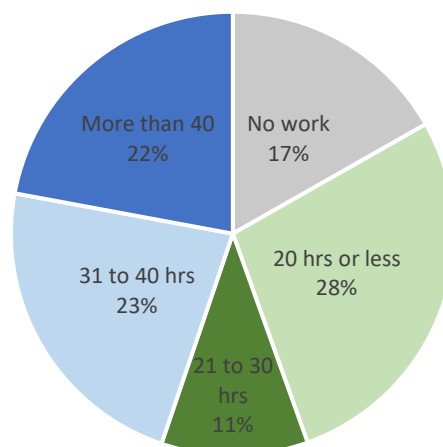
When looking at different age cohorts of students, we find the biggest increases in educational debt brought to theological school among those in their forties who saw average debt increase by \$6,800. Those with the lowest increase in average debt brought to theological school? Students in their twenties who saw an increase of just \$800 from 2019.

## Work plans during seminary

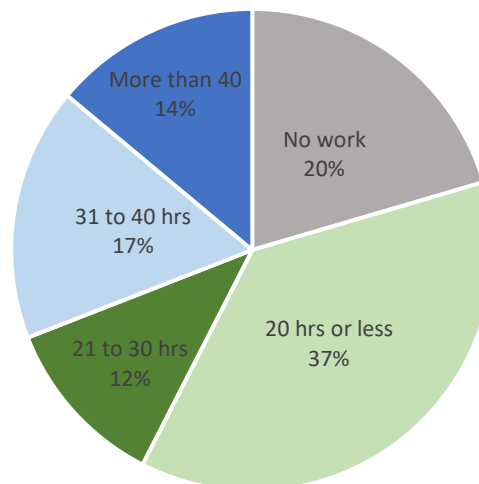
In fall 2020, we made slight changes to the question related to the hours that students were planning to work while in seminary. The results were quite striking. In previous years, we measured the upper range of

work experience at 20 hours or more. In fall 2020, we increased that upper range to 40 hours or more. The results, as seen in the pie charts below, were surprising.

All Students



Full-Time Students



More than 20% of students are planning to work 40 hours or more while earning their degrees. While that percentage decreases for full-time students, almost one-third of full-time students plan to work more than 30 hours per week. Given this work environment, what does it mean for students to “prioritize” their theological education? Why are they making the choices to work so many hours? Is it financial need? Is it a desire to continue serving their communities? How is theological education

connected to call? Is it preparation? Continuing education or something in between? This new data suggests that more research is needed in this area.

### Ministerial work during theological school

Entering students were asked a similar question about ministerial work while in seminary. About half of all entering master's degree students reported being currently engaged in ministerial work when starting their degrees and most of them (80%) plan to continue that work while earning their degrees. The newly revised questionnaires allowed us to better understand what ministerial work might look like for these entering students. In fall 2020, 40% of those continuing in ministerial work will do so in a full-time paid position; 25% will serve in part-time paid positions; 25% will serve in part-time volunteer positions; and 10% will serve in full-time volunteer ministerial positions while earning their degrees. As the chart below shows, there were significant differences by race/ethnicity.

	Paid			Volunteer		
	Full-Time	Part-Time	Paid Total	Full-Time	Part-Time	Volunteer Total
Asian-descent or Pacific Islander	28%	22%	50%	39%	11%	50%
Black, African American, African Canadian	27%	16%	43%	34%	23%	57%
Hispanic, Latino(a), Latin@	30%	24%	54%	33%	13%	46%
Native North American, First Nation, Indigenous	26%	37%	63%	26%	11%	37%
White, Caucasian	44%	32%	76%	20%	3%	23%

### Vocational and formation goals

When asked about the type of position they anticipated upon graduation, the top vocational goals were pastor/priest/minister (24%), youth work (9%), associate pastor/priest/minister (9%), licensed counselor/psychologist (7%), teaching or administration in a theological school (6%), and hospital/hospice/healthcare chaplain (6%). About 20% of students were unsure what their positions would be. For MDiv students, more than 45% intend to serve as a pastor or associate pastor.

When asked more broadly about future work settings, 55% stated an intention to work in a congregation, 35% in an educational setting, 30% in a faith-based nonprofit, and 25% in a healthcare setting.

Almost 30% of students plan on holding multiple positions upon graduation, with two-thirds of those planning on one of their paid positions being in ministry. Percentages are higher for Black/African American/African Canadian (50% multiple positions), Hispanic/Latino(a)/Latin@ (40%), and Asian-descent/Pacific Islander students (35%).

In fall 2020, we added a new question about volunteer ministry after theological school. One quarter of students anticipated holding an unpaid ministerial position after graduation. Of those anticipating unpaid ministry, 22% anticipated a position as pastor or associate pastor, 15% in youth work, 7% in Christian education, and 7% in new church development/evangelism. One quarter were unsure. When considering unpaid ministry by race/ethnicity, just over 30%

of Asian-descent/Pacific Islander, Black/African American/African Canadian, and Hispanic/Latino(a)/Latin@ students were planning on unpaid ministry versus 20% of Native North American/First Nation/Indigenous and White/Caucasian students. There

was also a direct correlation between age and plans for unpaid ministry—only 20% of entering students in their twenties planned on unpaid ministry versus 30% for those in their sixties and 40% for those older than 60.

### Conclusions

The newly revised student questionnaires have provided us with significant new data related to online learning, work, and ministry plans of entering students. More time will be needed to analyze the data and determine whether this new data reveals emerging trends or reflects

the unique experience of this particular class of students who entered in the shadow of COVID-19. As such new data emerges, it will be important for us to look deeper at differentiation by race/ethnicity, age, and gender as well as institutional factors such as ecclesial family, size, and funding structures.

New data also requires us to seek new stories. More information is needed from our students to help us better understand the choices they are making, the

circumstances they are facing, and its impact on their understanding and experience of theological education. As new data emerges at your institution, I would encourage you to talk about it with your students, to gather small groups to learn more about their experiences, and to compare it to other data being collected at your institution to help us better support the success of students as they seek to meet the goal of completing a degree in theological education.



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