

Seven things we've learned about today's theology students: Highlights from the 2015–2016 Entering Student Questionnaire

BY JO ANN DEASY

Who are today's theology students? What type of church experience do they have? How were they prepared academically? What compelled them to attend a theological school? What compelled them to choose your school? What are their hopes and dreams for the future? The results of this year's Entering Student Questionnaire (ESQ) are in, and they reveal some trends to consider.



1. An increasing number of students are experiencing a call to attend a theological school after two or more years of work experience.

Just over 50% of students completing the Fall 2015 ESQ first considered going to theological school before or during college, but an increasing number of students are waiting. This is particularly true in MA Professional and MA Academic programs, where the percentage of students who first considered theological education after working jumped considerably between 2006 and 2015—from 29% to 44% for MA Professionals and from 22% to 33% for MA Academics.

Gender, race/ethnicity, and citizenship had an impact on students when they first considered attending a theological school. Male students were more likely than female students to consider attending a theological school before or during college (58% vs. 42%), Asian/Pacific Islander students were more likely to consider it after two or more years of work (35%), and Hispanic/Latino(a) students were more likely to consider it during college (32%). Perhaps the clearest differences related to citizenship. Canadians were most likely to consider attending a theological school after two or more years of work (47%), United States citizens were most likely to consider it in college (32%), and students with citizenship outside the United States or Canada were most likely to consider it before entering college (32%).

2. Pastors, graduates, and friends are still the greatest influencers in choosing a school.

When asked what influenced them to pursue theological education, students ranked a desire to serve others, experiencing a call from God, and an opportunity for study and growth as most significant. But having experienced a call, they turned to trusted sources to choose the school they would eventually attend, with 22% naming a pastor or religious superior, 16% naming a school website or a web search, 15% naming a graduate, and 13% naming a friend as what most compelled them to find out more about their schools.

Having spoken with their pastors or searched online, potential students used school websites, staff, and graduates to get more information. It is no surprise that younger students were more likely to visit the school and communicate with current students/graduates. Students most valued the quality of the faculty, the curriculum, the academic reputation of the school, and the school's doctrinal position or theological perspective in their choices of a theological school (Figure 1).

3. Students come from a wide variety of educational backgrounds.

The 6,196 students who completed the 2015 ESQ came from more than 1,200 different undergraduate institutions. While a handful of schools have been identified as "feeder schools" for various ecclesial families, the numbers are relatively small for each school. While the feeder schools for evangelical seminaries sent an average of 39 students per year, feeder schools for the other ecclesial families sent fewer than 15 students per year. More than 40% of the ESQ students with undergraduate degrees attended a private, religiously affiliated college or university, although Asian/Pacific Islander students (27%) and students from Canada (22%) were much less likely to attend such institutions.

Undergraduate Degree	MA MDiv	MA Academic	MA Professional	All Students
Religion/Theology/Philosophy*	31%	29%	16%	28%
Natural/Physical Sciences/Technical Studies**	25%	24%	30%	25%
Social/Behavioral Sciences/Education***	25%	26%	35%	27%
Humanities/Fine Arts	20%	21%	19%	20%

*Philosophy is the dominant undergraduate degree for students entering Roman Catholic schools of theology

**Includes degrees such as chemistry, math, engineering, business, communications, and computers

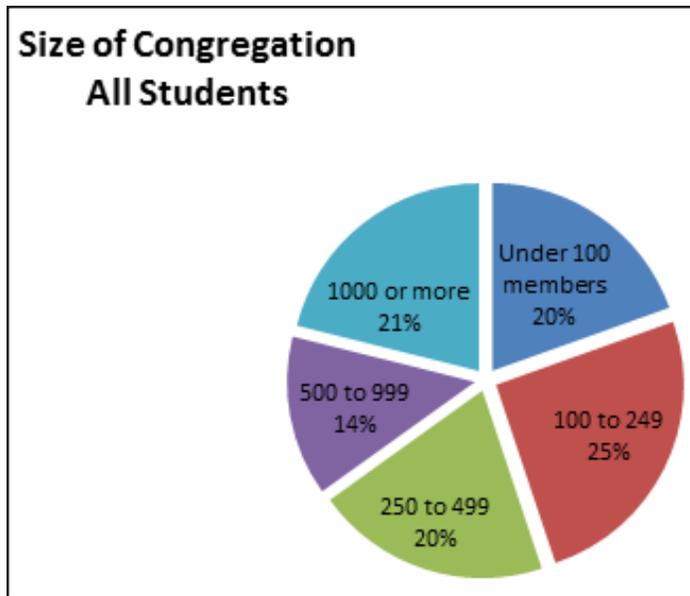
***Includes economics, political science, psychology, sociology, and education

After hearing about this school, how did you gain more information about it? (check all that apply)	% of all entering students	% of all younger entering students
Viewed school website	76%	83%
Communicated with school staff	51%	54%
Visited the school	46%	53%
Communicated with a current student/graduate	39%	49%
Requested information via school website	35%	40%

(Figure 1)

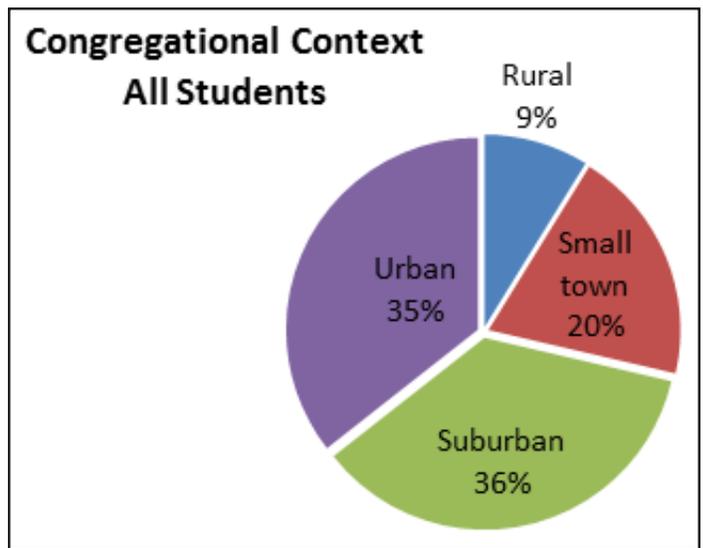
4. Likewise, students continue to come from a wide variety of church settings.

Since 1996, a majority of students (more than 80%) completing the ESQ have reported being active in their congregations in the two years prior to attending a theological school. And the percentage of incoming students holding local church leadership positions has increased from 49% in 1996 to 63% in 2015. But the nature of those churches varies considerably in terms of both context and size.



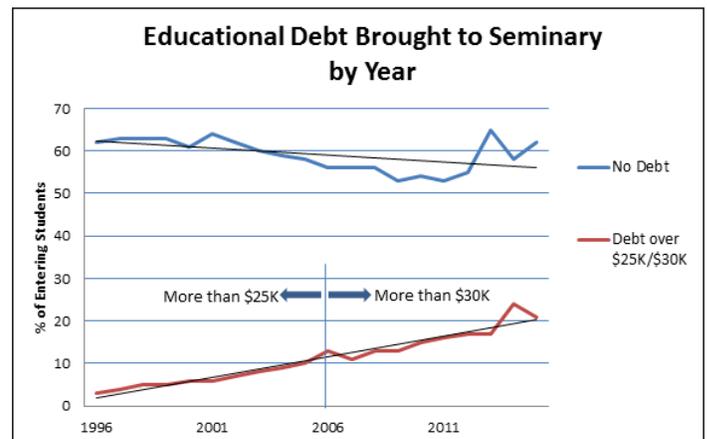
The percentage of students coming from rural, small town, urban and suburban settings has changed very little since 1996. Among fall 2015 ESQ students, those more likely to come from urban congregations were black/Non-Hispanic (57%), Hispanic/Latino(a) (49%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (45%).

In terms of size, during the past 20 years, the number of students coming from congregations of less than 100 members has increased slightly from 13% to 20%, and those coming from mid-sized to large congregations (250 to 999 members) has decreased from 40% to 34%.



5. Students are bringing increasing amounts of educational debt with them to theological schools, yet the number of students entering with NO debt has increased slightly since 2011.

Since 1996, the average debt level of students has increased dramatically. That year, 82% of entering students answering the ESQ reported bringing educational debt of less than \$10,000, while only 3% of students reported educational debt of more than \$25,000. In 2006, 13% of students reported educational debt of more than \$30,000. In 2015, that number increased to 20%, with 7% of fall 2015 entering students reporting educational debt in excess of \$60,000.



6. *Work is one of the ways students are planning to address debt.*

In fall 2015, 30% of full-time students reported plans to work 20 hours or more per week while attending a theological school, while 22% planned on not working at all.

7. *As they enter theological schools, more than 40% of MDiv students plan on pastoral ministry.*

For many years, ESQ responses suggested that students were no longer attending theological schools in order to pursue pastoral ministry. In 2013, the question on the ESQ was changed to add categories of parish/congregational ministry as well as a large number of new vocational options including associate or assistant pastor, priest, or minister. The changes have contributed to significant changes in the data regarding vocational goals. Today, 32% of all entering students and 44% of MDiv students are anticipating pastoral/parish or associate pastoral/parish ministry. Students may be understanding ministry in a much broader way than a few decades ago, but large numbers are still planning on serving in pastoral ministry, and an even higher percentage are planning on serving in a congregation in one form or another.

How do these trends compare to those of your own institutions and what do these trends mean for your recruiting efforts, your educational programs, and your financial aid/work study strategies?

The Entering Student Questionnaire represents the input of 6,196 students (37% of all ATS entering students) from 174 schools (64% of ATS member schools). While the respondents represent a cross-section of ATS constituents, there is a slight over-representation of evangelical seminaries (55% of respondents vs. 44% of schools), women (42% of respondents vs. 34% of students), and students in their 20s (45% of respondents vs. 32% of students).



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