

ATS graduates report more distance learning, lower debt, and high satisfaction

By Jo Ann Deasy

Each year, about 60% of ATS schools use the ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ) to survey their graduates. In 2020, the GSQ was completed by more than 4,500 graduates representing about 30% of graduates in ATS

schools. Insights from these graduates provide valuable data to help institutions evaluate their programs and to help ATS identify and resource emerging trends in theological education.

Increases in distance learning

The COVID-19 pandemic required most schools to cease in-person courses as of March 2020. For some schools, this required a major shift to emergency remote learning, but many were poised and ready to meet the challenge. Over the last six years, the percentage of ATS member schools with approved comprehensive distance

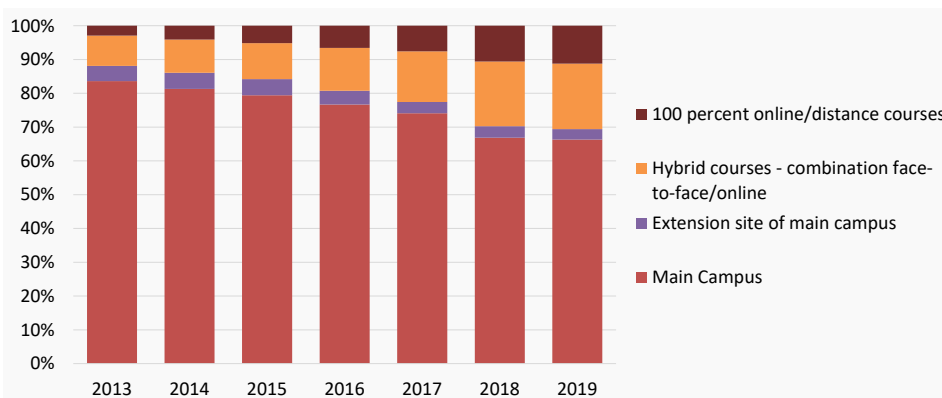


education programs increased from 37% to 70% and in 2019, more than 40% of students were enrolled in at least one online course.¹

In the 2019–2020 ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ), almost 30% of graduates reported having taken at least one course fully online and 40% reported taking a hybrid course. More than 30% of graduates reported completing a majority of their classes in fully online or hybrid formats.

1 A complete list of ATS schools currently approved for comprehensive distance education can be found on the ATS website. For more on the shift to online learning, see *Colloquy Online* articles written by Tom Tanner: "Being where? The shift from campus to offsite to online" (2018), "Online learning at ATS schools: Part 1—Looking back at our past" (2017), and "Online learning at ATS schools: Part 2—Looking around at our present" (2017). Data is from the ATS/COA Annual Report forms.

Majority Educational Context Graduates 2013-2014 to Present



Source: GSQ Total School Profile Table 13, GSQ Question 16a

Have you ordered your Entering Student Questionnaire?

ATS is currently taking orders for the fall 2020 ATS Entering Student Questionnaire. Order this [free resource](#), on the ATS website.

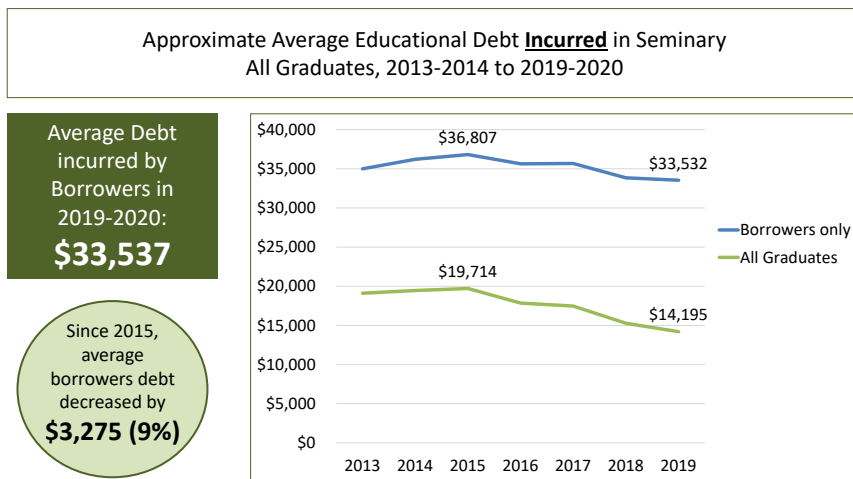
Questions about extension sites, fully-online courses, and hybrid courses first appeared in the ATS student questionnaires in 2013. Over the last seven years, distance learning in ATS schools has become much more diverse and complex. Starting in fall 2020, the student questionnaires add questions related to the physical location of students and their frequency on campus to help assess the impact of both delivery system and frequency of proximity on the educational experience of our graduates.

Lowering educational debt

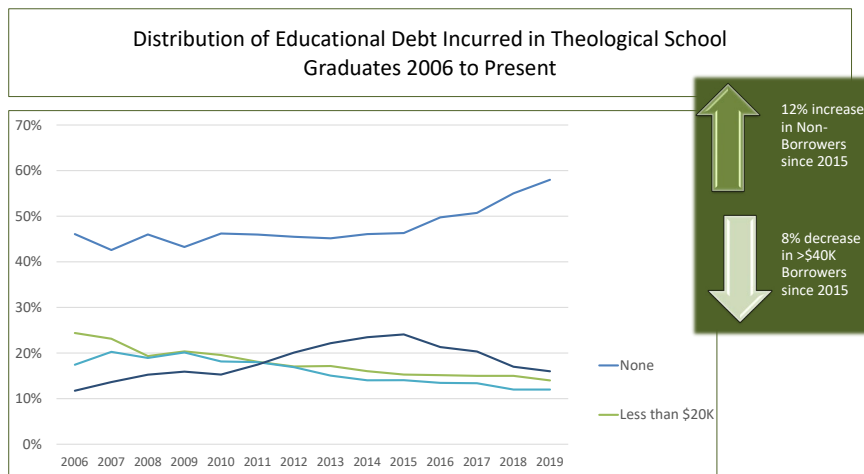
For the fourth year in a row, ATS graduates reported both a decrease in the percentage of students borrowing and the average debt of borrowers. In 2019–2020, just over 40% of graduates reported incurring educational debt while in theological school and the average debt of borrowers was ~\$33,500. We believe much of this decrease is due to the work of the Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers initiative. ATS estimates that since the Initiative was launched by Lilly Endowment Inc. in 2013, ATS graduates have decreased total borrowing by almost \$75 million.²

While debt continues to decrease, it also continues to disproportionately impact particular groups of students. In 2019–2020, Black/non-Hispanic and Native North American/First Nation graduates reported borrowing on average \$42,500—over \$11,500 more than their white counterparts (avg. \$31,000)—while Hispanic/Latino(a) students reported borrowing \$34,000. This is particularly troubling given early reports

of the economic impact of COVID-19 in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center, 60% of Hispanic/Latino(a) adults and 44% of Black/African American adults reported job or wage loss as a result of COVID-19 versus 38% of White/Caucasian adults.³



Source: GSQ Total School Profile Table 7, GSQ Question 13b



Source: GSQ Total School Profile Table 7, GSQ Question 13a

² The cumulative impact of the ECFM Initiative was first reported in November 2019. For more on the initiative, including resources to address educational debt at your institution, see the ATS website.

³ “Financial and health impacts of COVID-19 vary widely by race and ethnicity,” by Lopez, Raine, and Budiman, Pew Research Center’s *Fact Tank: News in Numbers*, May 2020.

Overall satisfaction with theological education

ATS graduates continue to highly rate the effectiveness of theological schools in facilitating personal growth and the development of various skill areas. When asked to rate areas of personal growth, graduates ranked theological schools as “effective” or “very effective” in facilitating growth in 13 of the 14 areas. The highest ranked areas were “enthusiasm for learning,” “respect for my own religious tradition,” “self-knowledge,” “self-discipline and focus,” and “trust in God.” The one that was ranked somewhat less effective? “Ability to pray.”

When asked to rate various skill areas, on a scale of 1 to 5, graduates ranked theological schools as “effective” or “very effective” in developing 13 of the 20 skills areas.

| Skill Area | Average Rating |
|---|----------------|
| Thinking theologically | 4.5 |
| Using and interpreting Scripture | 4.4 |
| Working effectively with both women and men | 4.2 |
| Relating social issues to faith | 4.2 |
| Knowledge of church doctrine and history | 4.2 |
| Working effectively in my own religious tradition | 4.2 |
| Awareness of the globalized context of ministry | 4.2 |
| Ability to teach well | 4.1 |
| Ability to interact effectively with those of other cultural and racial/ethnic contexts | 4.1 |
| Knowledge of Christian philosophy and ethics | 4.1 |
| Ability to preach well | 4.0 |
| Ability to lead others | 4.0 |
| Ability to interact effectively with those of other religious traditions | 4.0 |
| Ability to give spiritual direction | 3.9 |
| Ability in pastoral counseling | 3.9 |
| Knowledge of church polity/canon law | 3.8 |
| Ability to conduct worship/liturgy | 3.8 |
| Ability to integrate insights from science into theology and ministry | 3.8 |
| Ability to integrate ecological concerns into theology and ministry | 3.7 |
| Ability to administer a parish | 3.5 |

Ratings did vary somewhat by degree program and the vocational goals of graduates. It is interesting to note that the skill area ranked lowest by graduates, parish administration, is also what was named most frequently as a competency relied upon in their work in a 2016 study of ATS alums. Other competencies frequently cited included spiritual disciplines, theology, pastoral care and counseling, and preaching.⁴

Online learning and personal growth

The Graduating Student Questionnaire revealed some interesting differences in the ways graduates who completed a majority of their coursework on a main campus rated the effectiveness of their institutions in facilitating personal growth versus those who completed a majority of their coursework in other contexts including fully-online, extension sites, and hybrid courses.

Top Answers: Personal Growth

| Main Campus | All Other Contexts |
|--|--|
| Enthusiasm for learning (4.3) | Enthusiasm for learning (4.4) |
| Respect for my own religious tradition (4.2) | Respect for my own religious tradition (4.3) |
| Self-knowledge (4.2) | Self-knowledge (4.3) |
| Empathy for the poor and oppressed (4.1) | Trust in God (4.3) |
| Insight into troubles of others (4.1) | Self-discipline and focus (4.3) |
| Respect for other religious traditions (4.1) | Ability to live my faith in daily life (4.2) |
| | Self-confidence (4.2) |
| | Strength of spiritual life (4.2) |

Overall, students outside of the main campus tended to rate the institution as more effective in facilitating personal growth. Those on the main campus rated the institution as more effective in facilitating inter-personal growth while those in other contexts tended to rate inner-personal growth more highly. The results suggest that different delivery modes may have different formational strengths.

⁴ More on the competencies cited in the 2016 Mapping the Workforce survey of ATS alums can be found in “Mapping the workforce: what competencies do ATS alums need?” by Debbie Gin, *Colloquy Online*, September 2018. A full report on competencies is also available on the ATS website.

Vocational goals of graduates

Approximately 60% of students completing the ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire in 2019–2020 reported plans to serve in a congregation. That number jumped to just over 70% for MDiv graduates. A majority of those planning to serve in congregations plan to be pastors, priests, or ministers, including solo, lead, associate, and assistant roles.

Of the 40% of graduates planning to serve outside of congregations, about one-third plan to serve in other formal ministries including missions, social justice, campus ministry, military chaplaincy, and hospital chaplaincy. About one-fifth plan on teaching or pursuing further graduate studies.

The 2016 ATS Workforce Mapping Survey showed that while 60% of graduates planned to serve in congregations, only 40% of alums were actually working in congregations one and five years after graduation.⁵ And while fewer than 10% of graduates reported plans to teach or pursue further studies, almost one-quarter of alums reported actually serving in educational settings.

Gender, citizenship, and race/ethnicity all impact where and how graduates plan to serve. Female students (52%) are much more likely to plan to serve outside of congregations than their male counterparts (32%). They are

also less likely to already be serving in a congregation at graduation (27%) versus male students (40%). When it comes to citizenship, US and Canadian students are less likely to plan to serve in congregations (59% and 53%, respectively) than students with other citizenships (70%). When it comes to race/ethnicity, Black/Non-Hispanic students (45%) were much more likely to be planning to serve bivocationally than their white counterparts (25%).

Starting this fall, the ATS Graduating Student Questionnaires will include more questions about the vocational context of students including credentialing, volunteer ministries, and bivocationality.

Conclusion

Data from the ATS Graduating Student Questionnaires continue to provide a representative sample of what is happening in ATS member schools highlighting high student satisfaction, decreasing educational debt, and the changing vocational goals of students. Trends at your institution may reflect or differ from these larger trends and may be places where new trends are emerging. The more institutions and students participate in the ATS student questionnaires, the better we'll be able to identify these emerging trends and continue to provide resources to equip you as you fulfill your missions to serve communities of faith and broader public.

⁵ More on where alums are serving can be found in "Where are graduates serving? New Insights from the Educational Models Alums Workforce Survey" by Jo Ann Deasy, *Colloquy Online*, April 2018.



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