

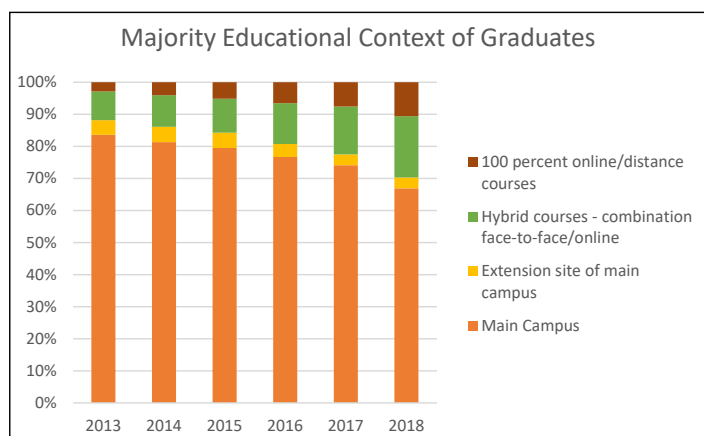
# Lower debt, more hybrid courses, and shifts in vocational goals: A report from the 2018–2019 ATS graduates

By JO ANN DEASY

Each year, ATS schools gather feedback from thousands of graduates about their experiences in theological education through the ATS Graduating Student Questionnaire. Their feedback has helped us track trends in educational debt, online learning, and the vocational goals of students. They provide graduate perceptions of their experiences of theological education, and these perceptions help us to evaluate our institutions to improve and enhance how we accomplish our missions as theological schools. Below are ten highlights from this year's graduating class.

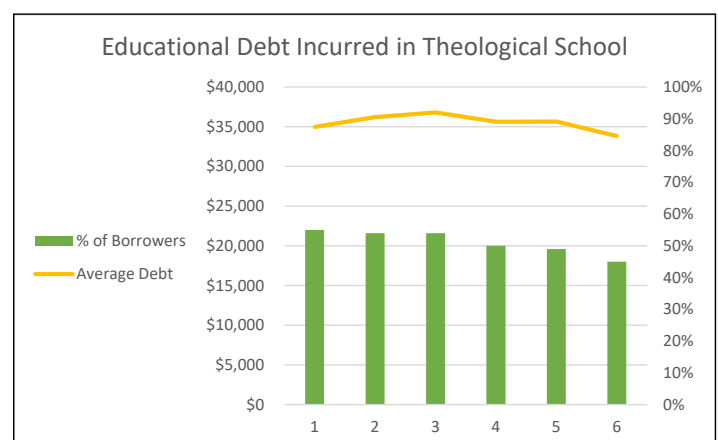


**1. The number of graduates reporting that most of their classes were “hybrid” (a combination of face-to-face and online) has increased by 10% in the last six years.**



In 2018–2019, 19% of graduates reported that a majority of their courses were “hybrid” and another 11% reported that a majority of their courses were 100% online.

**2. Graduates who incurred educational loans reported the lowest average amount in the last six years.**



In 2018–2019, graduates reported borrowing on average just under \$34,000. This is a decrease of almost \$3,000

in the last three years. Not only has the average debt decreased, but fewer students are borrowing. In 2009, 57% of graduates reported borrowing for theological school; that percentage dropped to 45% in 2018–2019. We've seen a similar decrease in those graduates borrowing \$40,000 or more.

**3. When asked about personal growth, graduates continued to rank theological schools as most effective in developing their enthusiasm for learning, respect for their own religious traditions, self-knowledge, self-discipline and focus, and trust in God.**

There are some differences in ranking depending on the ecclesial family of the school from which a student graduates. Graduates from mainline schools ranked concern for social justice, empathy for the poor and oppressed, and respect for other religious traditions over self-knowledge, self-discipline, and trust in God. Graduates from Roman Catholic schools ranked ability to live their faith in their daily lives in the top five over self-discipline and focus.

Graduates in online programs also ranked items differently. They generally ranked every item as more effective than their counterparts in campus or hybrid programs.

**4. Older graduates tended to rank theological schools as more effective in facilitating spiritual growth.**

	20-29 year olds	30-39 year olds	40-49 year olds	50 yrs or older
Ability to pray	3.4	3.5	3.7	3.8
Ability to live faith in daily life	3.8	4	4.1	4.2
Strength of spiritual life	3.7	3.9	4.2	4.3
Trust in God	3.9	4.1	4.2	4.3

1 = Not at all effective 2 = Not very effective 3 = Somewhat effective 4 = Effective 5 = Very effective

While graduates ranked some of the items above quite low, overall they still felt like they had grown spiritually in their programs and that their faith was stronger when they graduated.

**5. Graduates continued to rank theological schools as most effective in helping them grow in the following skills: thinking theologically, using and interpreting scripture, working effectively with both women and men,**

**relating social issues to faith, and knowledge of church doctrine and history.**

There were slight differences by degree programs, with MA academics listing knowledge of Christian philosophy and ethics in their top five, MA professionals including interacting effectively with those from other contexts, and DMin graduates naming leading others and teaching well.

**6. A majority of graduates (80%) agreed or strongly agreed that their theological schools tried to be diverse and inclusive communities. A majority (80%) agreed that individuals of other faith traditions were respected at their schools.**

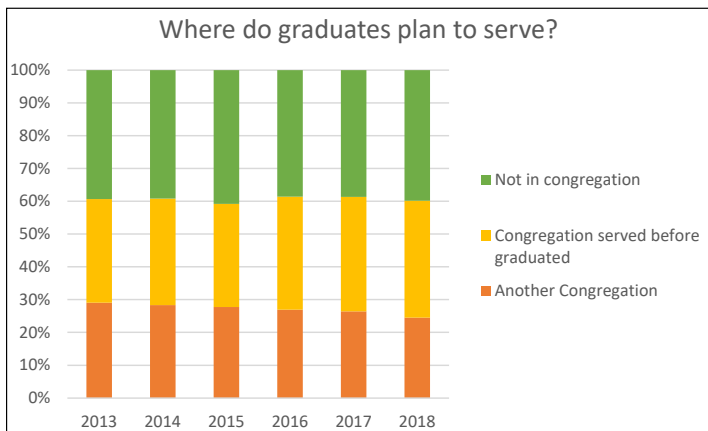
Almost three-quarters of graduates also believed that their schools were effective in preparing them to interact with those from other cultural and racial/ethnic contexts. Just over 70% believed that the schools had been effective in preparing them to interact with people from other religious traditions.

**7. Graduates continue to cite experiences in ministry, interactions with students, and their own personal life experience as three of the most important influences on their educational experience.**

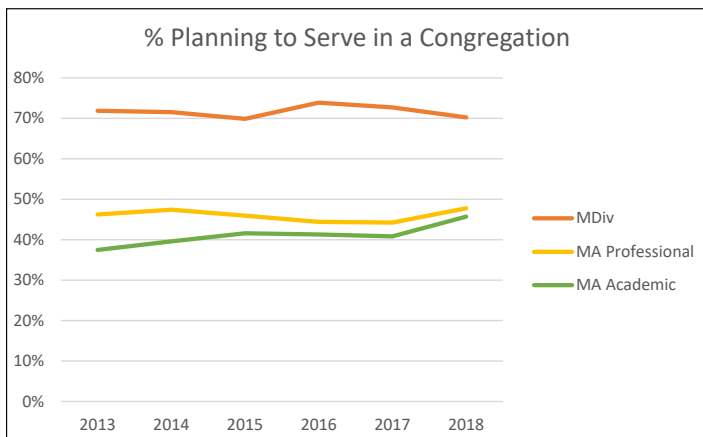
These are, of course, in addition to faculty and curriculum which are assumed to be *the* most important influences. These three remain the top influences for all students regardless of various demographics or institutional differences. These were followed by introduction to different perspectives. The final spot in the top five varied among different student groups and included spiritual direction/formation, programs of social justice or advocacy, and multiethnic/cultural contacts.

**8. The percentage of graduates planning to serve in congregational ministry has remained fairly steady at 60% over the last six years.**

The percentage for MDiv graduates has hovered at just over 70%.



The one area where we have seen an increase in graduates planning to serve in congregations is in MA academic programs (37% in 2013 to 46% in 2018–2019). Among those who are planning on congregational ministry, an increasing number are already in those positions upon graduation.



Among the 2018–2019 graduates, Native North American/First Nation (74%), Asian or Pacific Islander (71%), Visa (68%), and Black/Non-Hispanic (65%) graduates were most likely to plan on or already be serving in congregations. Male graduates (68%) were also much more likely to serve in congregations than their female counterparts (49%).



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

### 9. When not serving in a congregation, where else do graduates plan to serve?

Many end up in other ministry positions. Of the 2,239 graduates who reported plans to serve outside of a congregation, 229 planned to serve as healthcare chaplains and 435 planned to serve in other specialized ministries ranging from missions to social justice to military chaplaincy to campus ministries. More than 380 graduates plan to teach in primary or secondary education, higher education, or seminaries. More than 250 plan to work in social service or another nonprofit agency.

Multiracial (53%), White/Non-Hispanic (42%), and Hispanic/Latino(a) (40%) graduates were most likely to serve outside of congregations. Graduates from Canadian institutions (51%) were also more likely to serve outside of congregations compared to graduates from United States institutions (39%).

While we know where some will serve, 15% of graduates will serve in some “other” vocation and 10% have yet to decide what their vocational plans will be.

### 10. More than one-third of master’s program graduates, including MDiv, are still seeking placement when they graduate.

That percentage increases to over 40% for Black/Non-Hispanic graduates and female graduates.

A small percentage of graduates (around 4%) report completing a degree for personal enrichment. Another 9% or so plan on continuing with further studies.