

Three practices to promote your DMin program

BY DEBORAH H. C. GIN

Findings from a survey of ATS DMin directors¹ conducted last year suggest three practices for schools to consider with their DMin programs. These practices relate to delivery, student preparation, and resources.

1 Use cohorts.

Many schools (nearly two-thirds of survey respondents) use cohorts for their DMin, and now we have evidence indicating that it improves the graduation rate. The average graduation rate for all 150 ATS schools with DMin programs is around 55%—among the lowest for all ATS degree categories (see "[What a Difference a Decade Makes](#)"). The survey found that a DMin program's graduation rate is related to whether the school uses cohorts, where a group of students progress together through the program. We defined graduation rate as the number of DMin students who graduated within six years and then divided schools into four categories: schools where 0–25%, 26–50%, 51–80%, or 81% or more graduated in six years.²

We then compared schools that reported using cohorts versus those not using cohorts. Figure 1 illustrates how a much greater percentage of schools that use cohorts had more students who graduated within six years of starting.

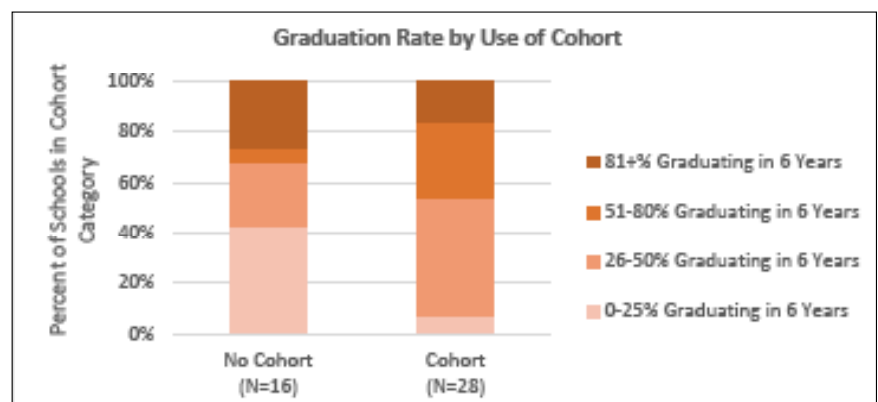


Figure 1: Graduation Rate by Use of Cohort

¹ This survey was conducted as part of the work of the Doctor of Ministry peer groups of the ATS Educational Models and Practices project.

² As a reminder: in this analysis, graduation rate for each school is computed as the percentage of students who began their DMin programs in 2009–10 and graduated within six years.

Similarly, the challenge posed by the degree's six-year maximum is also related to whether a school uses cohorts. More than 75% of the schools that do not use cohorts felt the six-year maximum duration was a significant challenge (yellow bars in Figure 2), as compared to about 43% who use cohorts. It should be noted that a large percentage (46%, light blue) of the cohort schools do acknowledge the six-year limit is a "minimal challenge." In both analyses, the differences are statistically significant; the relationships are valid.

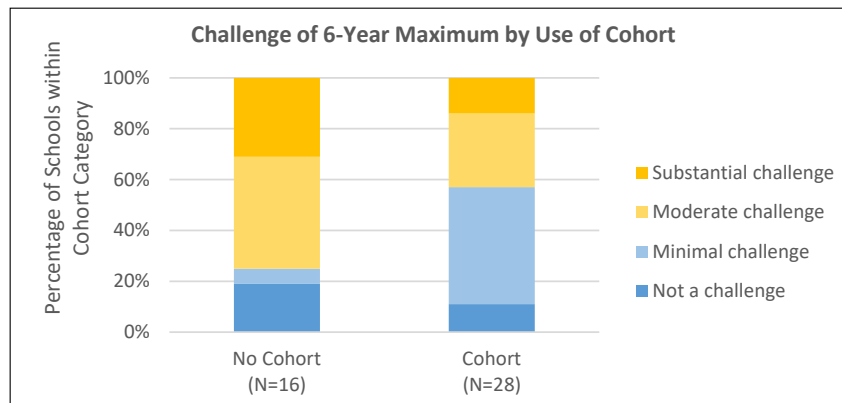


Figure 2: Perceptions of 6-Year Maximum by Use of Cohort

Schools using cohorts are fairly representative of the ATS database (by embeddedness vs. freestanding, denominationality, and size), with a slight over-representation of evangelical and under-representation of Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools.

2 Pay attention to the role of the MDiv.

Questions continue about the viability of the MDiv or whether it remains the gold standard for DMin preparation. According to the survey, the number of students entering with an MDiv is related to student preparedness: schools that have higher numbers of students entering with an MDiv were more apt to report better student preparation for integrating ministry and theology.

We separated the schools into four categories: low (where 30–59% of students reportedly entered with an MDiv), mid (60–79% with MDiv), high (80–94% with MDiv), and highest (95% or more with MDiv). Figure 3 shows the distribution of preparedness across the varying school types. Differences across school type are statistically significant, with skewing toward better preparedness among schools that have more MDiv students. At the same time, schools in the lowest category report virtually the same percentage of students who are “well prepared” or “very well prepared” (63% combined) as schools in the highest category (66% combined).

Students' Ability to Integrate by School Type				
	School Type			
	Low—30-59% of Students with MDiv (N=8)	Mid—60-79% of Students with MDiv (N=11)	High—80-94% of Students with MDiv (N=19)	Highest—95%+ of Students with MDiv (N=6)
Minimally prepared	25%	0%	5%	0%
Somewhat prepared	13%	73%	42%	33%
Well prepared	38%	18%	53%	33%
Very well prepared	25%	9%	0%	33%

Figure 3: Student Preparedness by Type of School (as defined by students entering with MDiv)

Should the MDiv be abandoned as a means of preparing students for the DMin? The findings here suggest not, but they also suggest there may be other factors at play in DMin student preparedness beside simply the MDiv. The current Standards of Accreditation require schools to demonstrate educational preparation for student admission to the DMin program. Schools must consider carefully what is appropriate preparation for the advanced professional degree—whether MDiv or equivalence—and how best to measure such preparation—e.g., prior learning assessment—given their respective contexts.

3 Use faculty with empirical research expertise.

Doctor of Ministry programs often “share” faculty with their other programs. We wanted to find out whether having full-time faculty dedicated to the DMin program matters. We found that graduation rate is not statistically related to the percentage of full-time faculty that teach in the program (though it may indeed be related to reputation, perception, ethos, and a whole host of other aspects).

Graduation rate is related, however, to the percentage of core DMin faculty who have empirical (qualitative or quantitative) research expertise. Graduation rates are higher at schools where there is a greater percentage of empirical-research faculty. Figure 4 shows that schools with higher graduation rates on average have 87% of their faculty with research expertise; for schools with lower graduation rates, an average of 71% of their faculty have research expertise.

Percent of Faculty with Empirical Research Expertise by Average Graduation Rate ³	
	Average % of Faculty
Low Graduation Rate (0-50% of Students)	71% (N=18) ⁴
High Graduation Rate (51%+ of Students)	87% (N=26) ⁵

Figure 4: Graduation Rate by Percent of Faculty with Research Expertise

Schools with high graduation rates are slightly over-represented by evangelical and under-represented by Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools, as compared to the ATS database. There does not appear to be an over-representation of research schools in this group.

Bonus: Address attrition carefully.

As an advanced professional degree, the DMin is earned while doing ministry. To be sure, the expectation for “dual immersion”—deep in ministry and deep in coursework—is for the benefit of the student. However, this benefit comes with its challenges.

Respondents were given five textboxes to list the most common reasons students fail to complete their DMin programs. Figure 5 is a picture of the reasons listed in the first box and is presumably what came to mind initially. In this

³ $t(42) = -2.029, p < .05$, Cohen's $D = -.61$ (moderate effect size)

⁴ S.D. = 29.156

⁵ S.D. = 22.609

word cloud, larger fonts represent higher word frequency among responses. Note the equal space that “ministry” and “project” occupy. Indeed, the superimposition of these two words captures well the challenge posed by the dual expectations of the degree program.

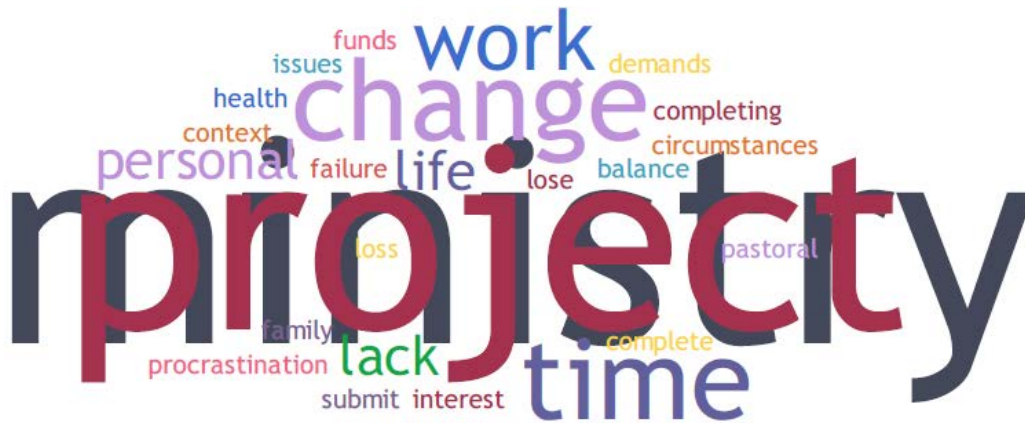


Figure 5: Reasons Students Fail to Complete the MDiv

While this is not new information, the data do provide evidence for the need to attend carefully to this tension inherent in the DMin program. How might attrition, particularly as it relates to completing the project while doing ministry, be addressed in your school’s DMin?

These findings, from a relatively small sample size,⁶ obviously will not fit every school’s situation, but they reveal important areas for conversation in assessing DMin program delivery and effectiveness. What works for one institutional context may not work, or be appropriate, for another. At minimum, the results serve as good discussion starting points for your school.

Questions that schools may want to ask themselves about their DMin programs:

- 1) Does this information make sense in our context? Have we seen evidence that confirms/disconfirms these findings?
- 2) If we haven’t yet confirmed this information for our context, how might we go about finding the information?
- 3) Which of these practices are good for our context, regardless of generalizability? Why?



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⁶ N=44, with a 44% response rate. Just over 150 ATS schools offer the DMin, and directors from 100 schools were invited to participate in the survey.