Placement: it’s the age old question asked with new urgency. “What do you want to be when you grow up?” What sort of work do your students want to do, and where are those positions? It’s a question that has become increasingly complex of late; most schools aren’t able to assume a conventional parish ministry track for the majority of their students, and the current economic climate has done little to cultivate the flourishing of alternative opportunities. If, as Dan Aleshire suggested in his 2009 SPAN presentation, that who to admit to seminary is the “$100,000 question,” then how that degree finds professional expression after students graduate is the question’s postscript.

Chances are that some investigation into the state of your school’s placement and vocational counseling services is warranted. Schools already using the Student Information instruments (Entering Student, Graduating Student, and Alumni/ae questionnaires) have a wealth of diagnostic information at their fingertips. A careful reading of your school’s results can help determine where your school can celebrate or improve its work in matching students with employment relevant to their degrees and congruent with their best hopes.
Tracking professional plans

Begin your inquiry by comparing the professional plans for your incoming students with those of your new graduates. First, check your school’s data in table 22 of the Entering Student Questionnaire (ESQ) to see what students anticipate as their full-time work upon graduation. Do their intended plans as reported in the ESQ match the degree programs and outcomes intended by your school? Are their expectations and your curricula a good match? How many of them chose the option “undecided?”

Next, compare the ESQ results to those in tables 20 (MDiv students) and 21 (all other degree programs) of the Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ). Do you notice any significant shifts in their professional plans as compared to the ESQ results? Do they expect to do work for which your school has trained them? Pay particular attention to the number of students who selected “undecided”; how do these numbers compare to those in the ESQ? Finally, benchmark your school’s results against the GSQ Total School Profile posted annually on the ATS Web site. How do your scores compare against the sample of other ATS member schools? If your school also participates in a denominational report, how do your ratings measure against those of your peers?

Aggregate reports like the Total School or denominational profiles can help place your school’s results in context. Overall, interest in congregational ministry has been declining among entering students over the past decade. Nevertheless, it continues to be the single most popular professional path for students, and interest in it increases during students’ time in seminary. In 2009, however, 20 percent of the respondents marked “undecided,” and it has ranked as the second most popular choice for a decade. While professional indecision can certainly be forgiven in new students, graduating undecided students—often burdened with debt—can be cause for great concern. Furthermore, the numbers of undecided and unplaced women as reported in the GSQ tend to be significantly higher than those for men.
Rating vocational counseling and placement services

After reviewing your placement rates, turn to GSQ table 18. Question 20 of the survey asks students to rate the effectiveness of various school resources on a five-point Likert scale. What were the scores given to career/vocational counseling and placement services? How do they compare to the ratings given to other services, particularly those you know not to be strengths at your school? One recent workshop attendee ruefully noted as she read her school’s results, “They rated child care more favorably than they did our vocational and placement services—and we don’t even have child care!”

Inevitably, I hear protests from some schools; “But we are not responsible for placement; that’s handled by the [judicatory, diocese, etc.]!” While this is certainly the case for a number of denominational seminaries, the issue of placement is separate from the issue of vocational discernment. The former matches students with job openings, but the latter addresses the process of determining what sort of position would best match the student’s passions and skills. What does your school do to help your students discern what kind of work and ministry context would be best suited for them? Or, stated in the terms of Standard 7, section 7.4, are you providing appropriate placement assistance and monitoring of your graduates’ placement in light of current trends?

For many students, field education plays some part in facilitating this discernment. Review your results for GSQ tables 16 and 17; if your school follows the dominant trend, then students perceive field education to be a crucially important opportunity to clarify vocation and increase self-understanding. A well-regarded field education program can provide an effective foundation for supporting the work of vocational discernment among your students. How well are you leveraging your field education program and community connections for both discernment and postgraduation placement?

Factoring in the alumni/ae perspective

The Alumni/ae Questionnaire (AQ) can add to this portrait, providing you with a window into the longer-term impact of your placement practices. Designed for use with graduates who have been out of school for five to ten years, the AQ inquires into students’ job histories and satisfaction with the skills and education they received. Turn to tables 15 and 16, which report on your graduates’ current employment settings. Are they functioning in the roles for which they were trained?

Table 14 reports on the number of positions they have had since graduation. While movement from one position to another can indicate good vocational discernment, a very mobile population can be a helpful diagnostic. Pairing these results with tables 23 and 24 can give a sense of how professionally satisfied your graduates are with the preparation they received to do the work they do. Finally, consider AQ tables 27 through 29. Would they do it all over again if given the chance? And how likely would they be to recommend ministry and your seminary to prospective students?

Placement as stewardship

As described in the Commission Standards, the common purpose of MDiv and professional or specialized degree programs is to equip persons for “competent leadership” in their selected ministry context. At its best, seminary education provides an opportunity for students to reflect on, explore, and deepen the ways in which God is calling them to work in the world, a place where, in the words of Frederick Buechner, “your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Seminary education is both professional education and vocational clarification, a matter of ideals and pragmatics; the leadership for which your school educates your students needs a context in which to be exercised. The issue of placement, then, is one of stewardship; how will your students’ capacities become of service to God’s people? How can you support the meeting of your students’ deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger?

ENDNOTES

1. In the 2003–04 ESQ, 28.4 percent of all degree respondents selected parish ministry as their intended full-time profession; in 2009–10, 19.7 percent of respondents did. In the 2001–02 GSQ, 54.5 percent of MDiv men and 51.3 percent of MDiv women selected parish ministry as their intended full-time work; in 2008–09, those numbers had declined to 50.8 percent of MDiv men and 42.7 percent of MDiv women. Nevertheless, among all students, approximately 30 percent of all respondents in the 2008–09 GSQ intended full-time parish ministry work after graduation, following a trend that the number of students interested in full-time parish ministry increases approximately 10 percent during their time in seminary.

2. Among nearly 5,300 respondents to question 20 in the 2009 GSQ, 1,044 marked undecided; of these undecided students, 51 percent were MDiv graduates.

3. In the 2008–09 GSQ, 19.3 percent of all male respondents chose undecided, compared to 30.9 percent of all female respondents.

Helen Blier is director, student information and organizational evaluation for The Association of Theological Schools.