AUBURN STUDIES

IS THERE A PROBLEM?

THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS AND RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP FOR THE FUTURE

BARBARA G. WHEELER / JULY 2001

About this Issue

This issue of Auburn Studies focuses on entering master's-level students at theological schools in North America—their ages, genders, social backgrounds, and vocational goals. It also addresses matters of diversity, academic quality and ministerial compensation that are issues in the recruitment and education of future leaders for churches and synagogues.

This study contributes to the Auburn Center's database on theological school students, and it complements "Manna from Heaven?", the Center's 1995 report on student indebtedness (Auburn Studies, No. 3), which was written by Anthony Ruger and Barbara Wheeler.

Single copies of this issue of Auburn Studies are free. Multiple copies are available for the cost of printing, mailing, and handling—typically $5 per copy. This issue, plus detailed appendices for the Student Survey, and all back issues of Auburn Studies are also available on the web at www.auburnsem.org. To be placed on the mailing list of the Center for the Study of Theological Education, or to request copies of Center publications, write to CSTE at Auburn Theological Seminary, 3041 Broadway at 121st St., New York, NY 10027, or via e-mail at cste@auburnsem.org.

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IS THERE A PROBLEM?

THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS AND RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP FOR THE FUTURE

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Are today's students less, or more, qualified than their predecessors for theological study? What can seminaries and religious bodies do to assure excellence among future ministers, priests and rabbis? This report on the current generation of master's-level theological and rabbinical students examines these questions in light of survey data and makes recommendations about assuring quality in the future.

The profile of seminary students has changed dramatically in the last half century. On this almost everyone agrees. Fifty years ago, virtually all students studying for graduate ministry degrees in North America were white men who had recently graduated from college. Today, the average age is much higher; women are present in substantial numbers in most schools and are the majority in some; and racial and ethnic diversity has increased.

There are sharp differences, however, about how to evaluate these changes. One group of observers believes that there has been a steep decline in quality, in the level of ability of theological students and their capacity for ministry. Some trace this decline directly to the demographic changes, especially the increase in average age. The "brightest and best" college graduates, they argue, no longer enter the ministry, and some of the older students are persons who failed at their first career or occupation. Others attribute the problem of quality at least in part to broader cultural and

educational changes—less emphasis on reading, writing, and the study of the humanities in high school and college, for instance.

A second group disagrees. They maintain that the quality of theological students has changed for the better. In the view of this group, the uniformity of theological students in the past limited their potential for ministry. Today's more varied group of students brings resources, including maturity and diverse social perspectives, that will strengthen the ministry overall.

One group of observers believes that there has been a steep decline in quality, in the level of ability of theological students and their capacity for ministry. A second group disagrees.

Who is right? Has the quality of theological students increased or declined? To document accurately the extent of change in the characteristics of seminary student bodies, and to test the competing hypotheses about what the changes mean, the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education designed a survey of students who had entered master's-level programs in North American theological and rabbinical schools in the fall of 1998.

THE AUBURN SURVEY OF THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS

In the spring of 1999, a survey instrument was sent to 10,254 entering master's-level theological students; 181 questionnaires were returned marked "addressee unknown." The report that follows is based on 2512 usable responses, or 25 percent of the total mailed.

This study is the first comprehensive survey of theological students, but other data are available for comparison. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) gathers basic demographic information from its member schools about their students (number of students per program, gender and race of students). This information was especially helpful in determining how representative the respondents to the Auburn Survey were of the total population. ATS also administers a student questionnaire available to schools that pay a fee to participate and receive information about their own students compared with others. The Auburn survey borrowed some questions from this instrument and from questionnaires used in studies of law and medical students in the 1990s.[1] The findings from those studies that provide relevant comparisons with the results of the Auburn Survey are included.

In the report that follows, information about students' backgrounds and vocational decisions is provided first. Then the vexing questions of quality are addressed: Are theological students good enough to meet future needs for religious leadership? How can theological schools and the religious bodies they serve recruit the most promising candidates for their ministries?

Summary

The Auburn Survey documents that students entering theological schools today are—as so many have observed—older than students are reported to have been in the past. On average they are much older than students entering medical and law schools, which have collected recent data describing their students. Women, who were a tiny percentage of students in the early 1970s, now make up about one-third of the entering student body, and as much as one-half in some religious sectors. Racial and ethnic representation is comparable to that in other professional schools, but African-Americans and Hispanics are significantly under-represented compared with their presence in the general population.

Much of the evidence suggests that most of today's students come to theological school from a congregation rather than a campus. A majority of students make their decisions about theological study and ministry relatively late, after college graduation, and they do not major in subjects in the humanities that in the past were recommended as relevant pre-seminary study. Campus activities and figures have less influence on their career choice than do involvements in congregational life, clergy in congregations and parishes, friends and spouses. Entering students are graduates of a very wide range of undergraduate institutions: there appear to be very few colleges that consistently "feed" students to theological schools.

Theological schools are not highly selective (data from other sources show that half accept 87 percent or more of those who apply). A majority of students apply to only one school. Only a handful say that they were not accepted by their first choice of seminary. The quality of the institution and its theological position and denomination are prominent considerations for most. For a minority, financial considerations and location are important.

Students come to theological schools in pursuit of numerous professional goals. Though 80 percent say that their goal is a "religious" profession or occupation, fewer (60%) plan to be ordained, and ministry in a congregation or parish is the primary goal of less than one-third of students. Other forms of ministry to groups and organizations, counseling and chaplaincy are also attractive, and more than a quarter of students are headed for teaching, social service, or administration.

I. Theological Students:

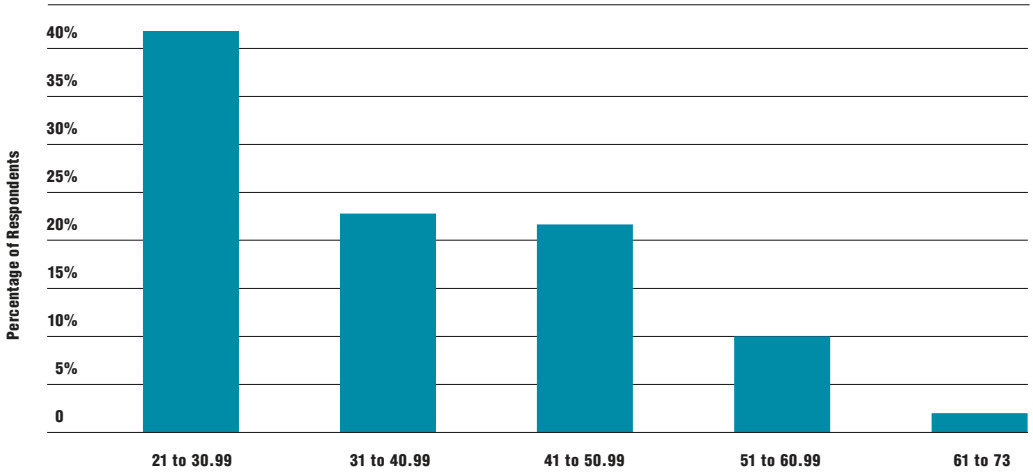
Their Backgrounds and Plans for the Future

Who attends seminary, how do they get there, and what use do they hope to make of their education? A summary of the Auburn Survey's findings on these topics is provided below, followed by more detailed information on students' backgrounds, paths to seminary, and vocational goals.

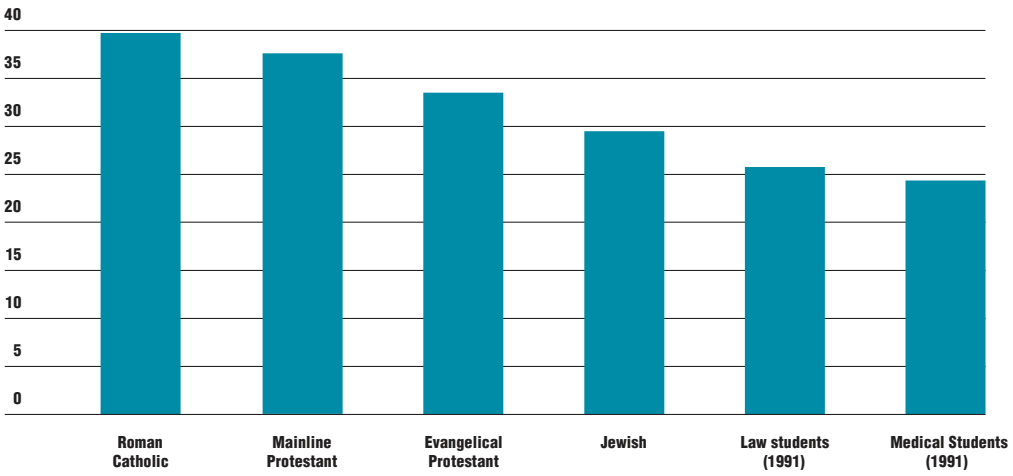
AGE

Theological students are much older than they used to be. Statistical data from earlier years are not available, but the trend in recent decades has been clear.

Student Age by Decade



Mean Age of Entering Students by Religious Tradition of School



The mean age is quite high—about 35 years.[2] Some schools are now reporting that the average age of their students is declining, but it is not yet possible to tell whether this trend is widespread or will continue.

Over half of all students (58%) are over the age of 30. (The median age is 33). As the first chart on page 4 shows, the largest single group by decade is the "young" students—the 42 percent who are 30 and under—but they are not the majority.

As the second chart shows, *there is considerable variation in student age by religious tradition.* Rabbinical students, who on many measures look more like the "traditional" theological students of an earlier day, are the youngest. Students in Roman Catholic seminaries are the oldest.[3]

Theological students are much older than medical and law students. The mean age of entering medical students in 1996 was 24.3 years. The mean age of entering law students in 1991 was 26 years.

GENDER

According to data collected by the Association of Theological Schools from its member institutions for 1998, about *35 percent of all students in accredited Christian seminaries are women.* The percentage of women has been steadily rising, so we assume that in the 1998 *entering* class the figure was somewhat higher than this (though not as high as the percentage of the Auburn sample—47%—that is female; women were much more likely than men to return the Auburn questionnaire). Using weighted figures, we estimate that women are about half of students entering mainline Protestant institutions in 1998 and about 30 percent of students entering Roman Catholic and evangelical schools.

Overall, theological schools have lagged behind medical and law schools in women's enrollment. Women were 43.5 percent of entering law students in 1991 and 43 percent of entering medical students in 1996.

RACE

More than three-quarters of theological students are white/European-American. Compared with their presence in the general population of North America, both African-Americans (less than 9% of the theological student population) and Hispanics (only 3%) are significantly underrepresented.

Some schools are now reporting that the average age of their students is declining, but it is not yet possible to tell whether this trend is widespread or will continue.

Comparisons with other professions are tricky. In 1991, 82 percent of law students were white/European-American, but the percentage of minorities has very likely increased over the decade. Medical students are much more diverse than law or theological students (only 65% were white/European-American in

1996), but a significant part of the difference is the large numbers of students from other parts of the world educated in North American medical schools.

MARITAL STATUS

About half of theological students enter seminary married or in partnership. As might be expected, students in Protestant seminaries are more likely to be married than those in Roman Catholic seminaries. Those in *denominational* Protestant institutions (mainline or evangelical) are more likely to be married than those in independent institutions.

Of those who are married, almost three-quarters have a spouse employed full- or part-time.

Over 40 percent of all the students who responded report no dependents other than themselves. Of those who report dependents, the average, in addition to the person reporting, is 2.3.

Because law and medical students are so much younger, on average, than entering theological students, they are predictably more likely to be single. Only about 20 percent in the 1991 survey of law students and in the 1996 survey of medical students reported that they are married or in a permanent partnership.

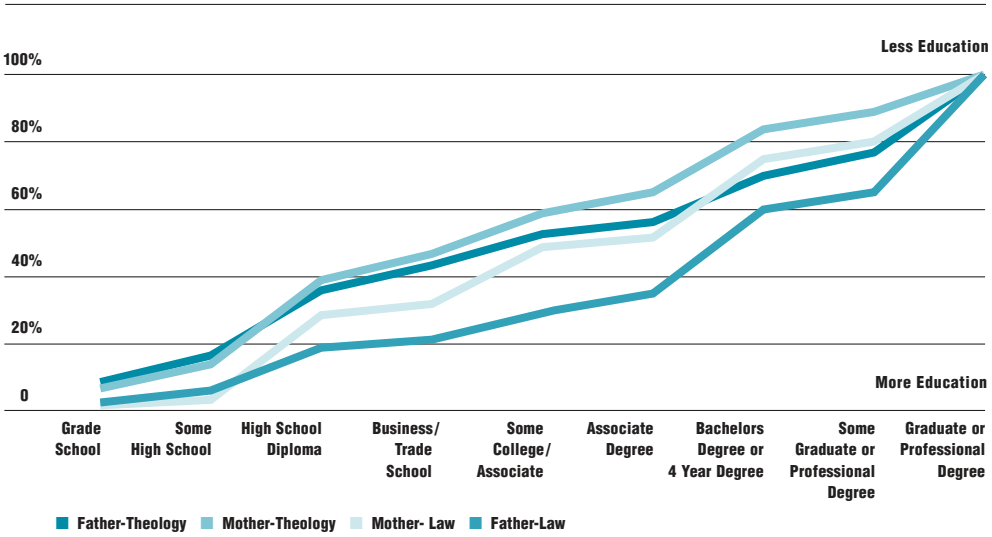
PARENTAL EDUCATION AND OCCUPATION

Theological students come from the middle of the class spectrum. About two-thirds of their fathers (64%) and almost as many mothers (61%) have education beyond the high school level. Almost half of fathers (44%) and about a third of mothers (35%) have a college degree (Associate or Bachelor's) or higher. About half the students' families of origin are "white collar." Half the fathers' principal occupations were professional, executive, administrative, or managerial (this group includes teachers and clergy, each 7 percent of the total group of fathers). About one-fourth of the mothers (27%) have occupations in this group.

Medical and law students come from better-educated families: 88 percent of medical students' fathers have education

Cumulative Percentage of Parents' Highest Educational Level

Theology and Law Students Compared



beyond the high school level. Law students' fathers are also highly educated: 80
percent have education beyond the high school level. The graph on page 6 compares the educational levels of law and theology parents. The lower the line on the chart, the higher the level of education. As the chart shows, law fathers are the most highly educated; law mothers and theology fathers are similar in educational levels; theology mothers have the lowest educational levels (E.g., 38.5% of theology mothers ended their education with a high school diploma or less; fewer than 20% of law fathers ended their education with a high school diploma or less.)

Half of all students have switched denominations or faith traditions before enrolling in theological school. Even more evangelicals have done so; relatively few Roman Catholics have.

Family tradition seems to play a significant role in the theological students' choice of profession. Almost one-third (31%) say that they have a close clergy relative. Students in Protestant schools (35% in evangelical and 32% in mainline ones) are more likely than those in Roman Catholic (19%) or Jewish institutions (11%) to say that they have a clergy relative. The influence of family tradition does not, however, seem to have been direct. Those who do have a clergy relative are no more likely than others to say that "desire to please family" motivated them to attend theological school.

Family tradition operates in other professions too. Entering law students (1991) are almost equally likely to have a close relative in the legal profession (29% have a spouse, parent, grandparent, or sibling in the field). Medical students also are likely to have parents in health fields.

CHURCH AND DENOMINATIONAL BACKGROUND

Theological students come from churches of all sizes. More than a third say that the church "most influential" in their formation was urban; almost equal numbers report that it was rural/small town (30%) or suburban (28.5%). Roman Catholic and independent Protestant (both evangelical and mainline)
schools' students are less likely to be drawn from rural/small town churches.

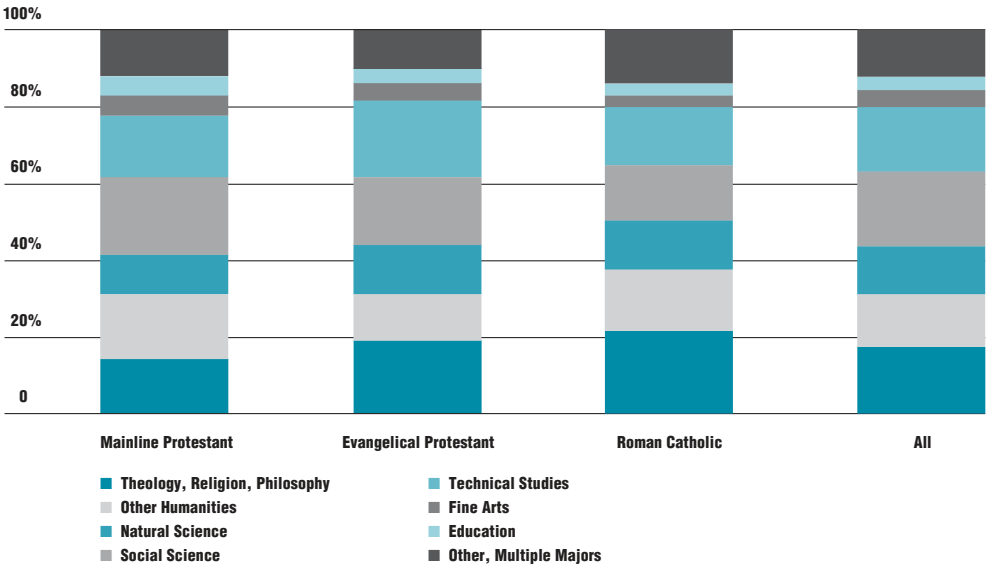
Half of all students have switched denominations or faith traditions before enrolling in theological school. Even more evangelicals (55%) have done so; relatively few Roman Catholics (16%) have.

EARLY EDUCATION

More than 80 percent of the total group of respondents attended a public school at some point in their early education. For Protestants, public education is the dominant mode at all levels. Just over half of students in Roman Catholic theological schools attended religious grade school, and just under half, religious high school.

COLLEGE EDUCATION

College Majors by Religious Tradition of Theological School



There is great variety in students' undergraduate preparation. The 2551 students in our sample hold undergraduate degrees from 1089 institutions. The largest suppliers are public universities, but religiously related colleges, many of them part of institutions that also have seminaries, are also prominent on the list of largest suppliers. Notably absent are private, non-religious liberal arts colleges and universities.

Almost one-fifth report that they attended a two-year community or junior college. The students who did this are markedly older than others (about 39 versus 35 for other students), but otherwise they do not differ in gender, religious tradition, or significantly by race.

COLLEGE MAJOR

Theological students major in a wide range of subjects at the undergraduate level. The majority does not major in the humanities, which by anecdotal accounts is a major change from patterns several decades ago.

One-third of students report that they have majored in theology, philosophy, religion, or "other humanities." An additional 10 percent majored in one of these areas in conjunction with another major.

Men's and women's patterns of college majors are markedly different. The most common major for men is technical studies (business, communications, computers); for women, social, natural or behavioral science. Men are much more likely than women to have majored in theology, religion, or philosophy (22% men; 14% women), but women are much more likely

to have majored in one of the other humanities (13% men; 18% women).

Patterns of college major also differ by religious tradition. Students entering Roman Catholic schools are most likely to have majored in a religious or other humanities subject, and mainline Protestants are least likely to have done so.

BEFORE SEMINARY

The majority of theological students did not enter theological or rabbinical school immediately after college graduation. In fact, only one student in five entered seminary immediately after college. Men are more likely to do this than women, and Hispanics (33%) are more likely to enter immediately than any other group.

On average, entering theological students have been out of college ten years (the mean year of graduation is 1988), though the median year of college graduation is more recent: 1993.

What did students do in the interval between college graduation and seminary? Most of them (62%) worked full- or part-time. One-quarter of entering students (including some who worked) have a graduate degree. Rabbinical students (44%) and Roman Catholic schools' students (36%) are more likely to hold advanced degrees than Protestants, and mainline schools' students (28%) are more likely to have them than evangelical schools' students (18%).

THE SEMINARY DECISION: OTHER PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL OPTIONS

Almost half of entering theological students say that they have considered other professional options than ministry. Social work/psychology (13%), and graduate study in the humanities and education (10% each) are most often mentioned. Law school (7%), business school (6%) and medical training (3%) are less often mentioned.

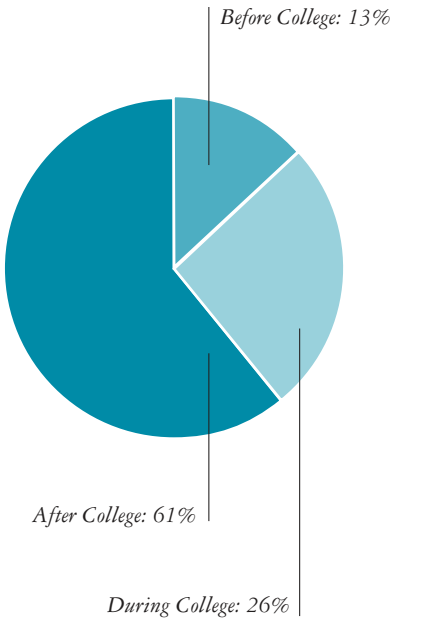
Very few, however, actually apply in other fields: only 14 percent say that they did so.

THE SEMINARY DECISION: TIMING

The majority of theological students decided after college to go to seminary or rabbinical school.

Time of decision correlates with the age of the student entering seminary. Students in evangelical schools (32%) and rabbinical schools (31%), who on average are younger, are more likely to have decided during college; Roman

When did you decide to go to theological or rabbinical school?



Catholics (the oldest students) are least likely to have decided during college (18%) or before. Women (who as a group are older) decide later and Hispanics markedly earlier than others.

Entering theological students first considered a religious occupation or profession at an average age of 24.7 years; law students first considered law school at 19.8 years.

THE SEMINARY DECISION: INFLUENCES

Current associates—clergy in a parish or congregation, friends, and spouse or partner—have more influence on the decision to go to theological school than do campus contacts (which for most of these students, who have been out of college for an average of ten years, may be quite remote) or family of origin. There are no significant differences by religious tradition or gender in these reports about sources of encouragement.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE SEMINARY

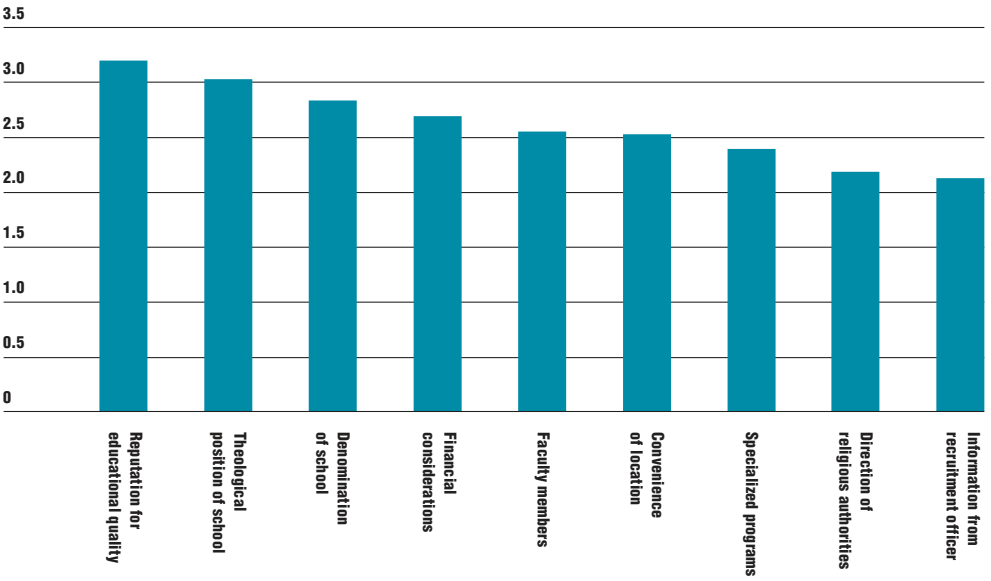
Students' past and present activities, beyond work, study and family, were and are concentrated in local congregations. Students report high levels of involvement in congregational activities such as worship, teaching in congregational programs, youth ministries, and small group ministries. They report relatively low levels of involvement with other activities, including campus ministries in college and civic and community activities.

CHOOSING A SEMINARY

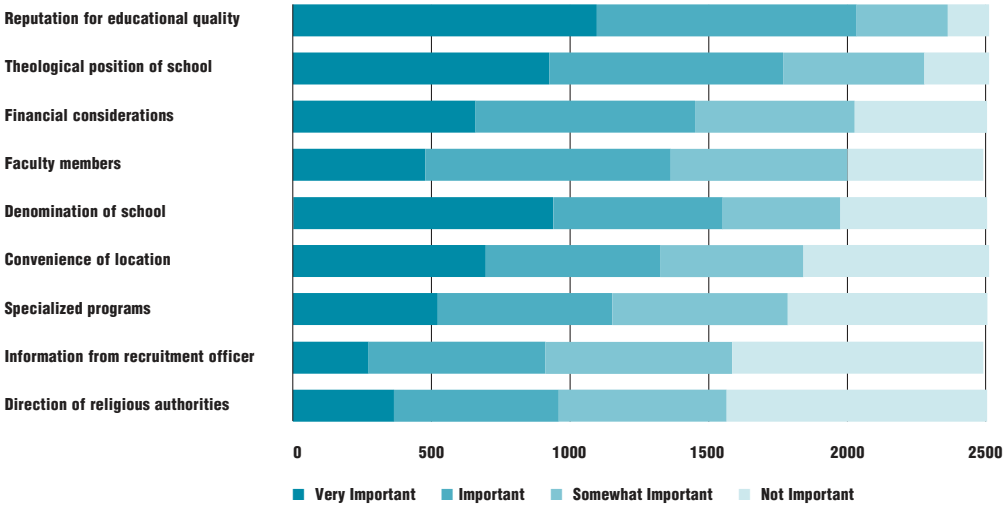
Seminary admissions are not highly competitive. *Almost all theological students (90%) report that they are attending their first choice of institution.* Location and finances are the principal reasons that students are not attending their first choice school. Only 15 percent of those not attending the first choice school (or

Factors in Seminary Choice—Mean Score

1–non important; 2–somewhat important; 3–important; 4–very important



Factors in Seminary Choice—All Students



about 1.5% of the total sample) report not being accepted by the first choice school.

Two-thirds of the entering students report that they applied to only one theological school—the one they are currently attending. Those who do apply to other institutions apply, on average, to two of them. Of the theological students who applied to more than one institution, more than three-quarters (77%) say that they were admitted to at least one other school.

By contrast, more than 85 percent of law students made multiple applications. On average, law students apply to 4.4 schools in addition to the one they are attending. Only 46 percent of law students are attending their first choice of school; 87 percent of those not attending the first choice say that it is because they were not accepted.

Respondents report that reputation for quality, theological position, and denomination were the most decisive factors in their choice of institution to attend. The bars in the figure on page 10 show the average importance students assigned to various factors in rank order. By this method, it appears that the character of the school matters most to most students. As the rank order in the figure above indicates, however, financial considerations and the presence of particular faculty members are ranked higher than denomination when the order is calculated based on how many assigned any importance at all to particular factors. This suggests that these factors are of some but not always highest importance to many. The "very important" rank order is also different. Using it, denomination and location rise in rank order: to those to whom these factors matter, they matter a lot.

WHERE STUDENTS LIVE

Three in five of all students (60%) live on or

close to the campus. Women are slightly more likely than men to be commuting from a distance, and those who commute from a distance are, as might be expected, much older than others: their average age is 40; the average age of those on or near campus is 34. The religious tradition and type of school makes no difference in the percentage of students commuting.

WORK DURING THE FIRST YEAR

Entering theological students work, on average, 11 to 15 hours a week. The same percentages (28%) do not work at all or work more than 25 hours a week.

Only 27 percent of entering law students work at a paying job, compared with 72 percent of theological students.

DISABLING CONDITIONS AND HEALTH

About 7 percent of theological students report disabling conditions. This is more than twice the self-reported rate (3%) for law students. Some of the difference is age related, but the youngest theological students are also more likely than law students to report disabilities. Theological students also rate themselves lower on "physical health" than do law students.

FUTURE PLANS

The great majority of entering theological students (80%) say that they will pursue a "religious occupation or profession," and a majority is planning to be ordained (49%) or already is ordained (12%).

There are significant differences by groups.

Half of the women respondents but less than one-third of the men (29%) are not planning to be ordained or are unsure of their plans.

As the table below indicates, there are marked and significant differences in entering students' ordination plans among schools of different religious traditions.

Entering theological students report a wide range of specific vocational goals.

Just over one-third are headed for congregational ministry.

There are significant differences by gender: men are more likely than women to want a position in congregational ministry. Women are more likely to say they "most want" a position in another form of ministry such as youth work or missions, or in counseling or spiritual direction.

Rabbinical students (56%) and those in mainline Protestant schools (40%) are more likely to say that they are headed for congregational ministry than are students in Roman Catholic seminaries (35%) and evangelical Protestant seminaries (28%).

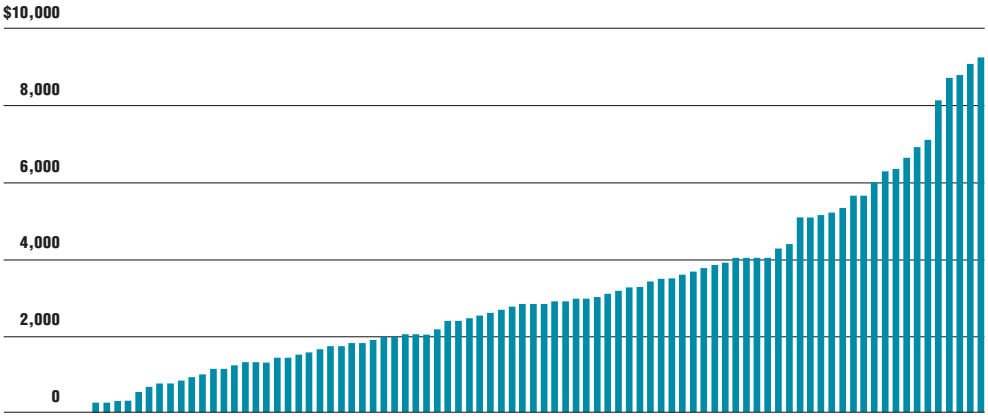
FINANCES

The majority of theological students say

Are you/do you plan to be ordained?	Jewish	Mainline Protestant	Evangelical Protestant	Roman Catholic
Yes/already am	*96%*	*68%*	*53%*	*50%*

Dollar Amount of Current Year Educational Loans

Average amount by school



Each vertical line is the average amount borrowed at a particular school (Schools with 10 or more respondents)

that their financial condition is adequate or better, but some theological students have substantial, even acute financial need. About one-third of entering students have a recent history of low earnings, less than $15,000 in the year before enrollment (these include students who were in college the year before, about one-fifth of the total). Three-quarters have no home equity, and almost half plan to work more than 15 hours a week in their first year. Over a third say that their finances are "inadequate" or "very inadequate." Blacks and Asians are more likely to say that their finances are inadequate or very inadequate than are whites and Hispanics.[4]

Debt levels also indicate financial need among at least half the group of entering students. In earlier studies, we found that about half of all theological students borrow to support their seminary studies. The students in this sample—who are just beginning their studies—seem as likely to borrow as those studied earlier, and levels of both prior educational debt and amounts borrowed in seminary appear to be rising.[5]

Men and women borrow at approximately equal rates; so do members of all ethnic groups except Asians (many of whom, as non-citizens, are ineligible for national loan programs in the U.S.). As in our previous studies,

The students in this sample seem as likely to borrow as those studied earlier, and levels of both prior educational debt and amounts borrowed in seminary appear to be rising.

marital status does make a difference: married students are less likely to borrow than single students, and they borrow less on average (and have less prior debt) than single students and especially separated students, a group

that includes single parents, who are often the most indebted students of all. The expected difference for age categories also appears in the data from this survey: younger students borrow more and have more prior debt; older students borrow least and have least prior debt. When, however, amounts of current year borrowing are compared for *borrowers only,* the amounts are remarkably uniform among subgroups. In no case is the average amount borrowed for any subcategory of race/ethnicity, gender, marital status, or age more than a few hundred dollars more or less than the average for all.

These complex data can best be summarized as follows: certain groups are more likely to borrow than others (especially African-Americans, single and separated students, and younger students); but those who do borrow are not likely to borrow substantially more than members of other borrowing groups.

Further, all these differences are overshadowed by one other factor: the single strongest predictor of debt seems to be where a student chooses to go to school. As the figure on page 13 shows, average anticipated first-year borrowing ranges by school from 0 to over $9000. (Because this chart includes non-borrowers in the averages shown, the average amounts borrowed by borrowers only would be much higher.)

II. Discussion and Recommendations

Is There a Problem?

What is a "good" theological student? Seminaries share a general definition of quality, though different types and traditions give different weight to various factors. All require adequate prior academic performance (a B average is the common minimum standard) for all their programs. In addition, most look for evidence of good character and interpersonal skills, or the potential to develop them, especially in students headed for ministry, priesthood and the rabbinate. Applicants for professional programs are often required to give an account of their faith, though standards of orthodoxy or religious maturity are rarely imposed on entering students. Similarly, students in Master of Divinity and other professional programs are usually asked about vocational goals; strong interest in ordained ministry is of course welcomed, but fewer institutions now than in the past require that all students in ministry programs be sponsored or approved by ordaining bodies. Finally, most institutions have criteria that apply to the profile of the student body as a whole rather than to individual students. Schools hope that their student bodies will incorporate a variety of experiences and perspectives based on gender, race, ethnic ties, social class, and prior occupations and involvements. Diversity in all these areas is widely

believed to create better conditions for learning and to help religious communities meet their needs for leaders of different kinds.

By this general definition of quality—academic ability, strong character, leadership and interpersonal potential, and religious and vocational seriousness—are students good enough to meet the demands of contemporary ministry? As noted earlier, opinion is divided. One group of critics says that today's students, who are generally older, lack the markers of quality evident in students in the past, who were generally younger. The other says that the age, racial, ethnic, gender and class diversity of today's students brings strengths not available when theological students were more homogeneous.

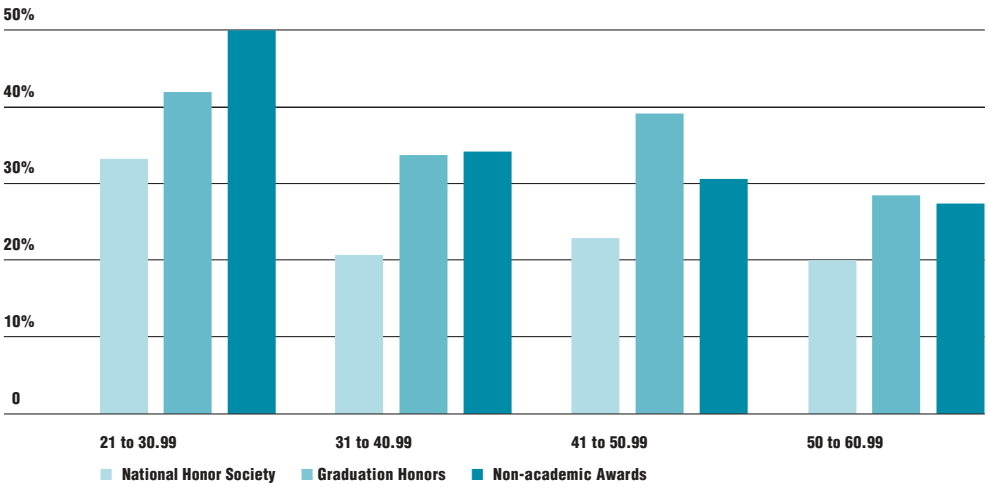
To test these judgments, data from the Auburn Survey were subjected to extensive analysis by comparing groups of students. Younger students (those 30 and younger) were compared with the rest, and men and women, minorities and non-minorities were also compared on a wide range of measures.

The analyses show that the first group of critics is correct that younger students often bring strengths to theological study that older students lack.

The most notable strengths are academic: younger entering students have better records of academic and non-academic performance and significantly higher grade point averages than older students. As the figure below shows, younger students are more likely to have received graduation honors, to have received non-academic awards in college, and to have been elected to a national honor society.

The extra academic strength of younger students is evident even when they are compared with the older students who have completed other graduate degrees. Almost half of all older students but only 10 percent of younger students have earned at least one degree beyond

Percentage Awarded Honors by Age Cohort



the Bachelor's. But younger students are more likely to have achieved academic honors at graduation and to be members of national honor societies even than older students with additional degrees.

Younger students also have more of the kinds of educational training and other background that have long been thought to prepare a person for theological study. They are the students who have made "early" decisions to go to theological or rabbinical schools. Almost two-thirds of them—62 percent—decided to attend seminary before or during college, compared with 22 percent of students 31 and older, and they first considered a religious vocation at 18.5 years of age, compared with 29 years of age for the older students. (On this measure younger theological students resemble law students, who first considered becoming lawyers at 19.8 years of age.)

Younger students are far more likely than their older counterparts to have chosen one of the undergraduate majors usually recommended as the best preparation for theological study: theology, religion, philosophy, and other humanities.

Not surprisingly, then, younger students are more likely to have been involved as participants and leaders in church youth organizations and are significantly more likely to have participated and served in a leadership role in a campus religious organization. Younger students are no more likely than older ones, however, to say that campus religious leaders or teachers played a role in their decision to seek theological preparation.

Younger students are far more likely than their older counterparts to have chosen one of the undergraduate majors usually recommended as the best preparation for theological study: theology, religion, philosophy, and the other humanities. Older students, by contrast, are much more likely to have majored in a scientific or technical subject (categories that include natural science, math, computer science, business, and engineering). Very likely, the principal reason for these different patterns of choice of undergraduate major is that the younger students, as early deciders, selected their majors on the basis of career goals. It is possible, however, that for some younger students the process was reversed: they were steered toward graduate theological study by religion courses they took in college.[6]

So the first group of observers is correct that younger students bring desirable qualities and characteristics that older students lack. By measures such as grades and undergraduate honors, they have higher levels of academic ability; they have the studied the subjects that have traditionally been identified as the best preparation for graduate-level theological study; and they have been influenced by church youth and campus programs, which were often associated in the past with good formation for ministry. Because older students are now the majority, it can be argued that today's students are less able than they would be if the total group included more younger students with the special strengths they bring.

The second group of critics is also correct,

however, that older students bring desirable characteristics that younger students are less likely to exhibit.

Older students, for instance, bring with them to theological study much stronger commitment to ordained ministry and much more interest in serving in congregations, which most seminaries view as the central focus of the educational preparation that they provide. Older students are more likely to be enrolled in the Master of Divinity program rather than other master's-level degrees. Two-thirds of older students (65%) but just over half of the younger ones (54%) plan to be ordained; 40 percent of older students, but less than 30 percent of younger students, say that congregational ministry is their first choice. The discrepancy is even greater for students enrolled in M.Div. programs. Older students are significantly more likely than younger students to designate congregational ministry as their first choice, and younger students to say that they are headed for campus ministry, youth ministry, missions, college and university teaching, or graduate study.

What is the source of older students' deeper commitment to congregational ministry? The survey data do not say for sure, but they do suggest that many older students have become deeply involved in a local congregation in the period since college graduation. They are disproportionately likely to say that they have been "very active" in a worshipping community (73% of older students; 54% of younger students). They also are more likely than younger students to say that a call from God and the desire to lead worship in a congregation are motivations for theological study (though older and younger students' responses to questions about motivation show more similarities than differences, as do their patterns of very limited involvement in civic, community, political, and arts activities).

Older students contribute considerable racial and gender diversity to the total population of theological students. Older students are more likely to be female and more likely to be African-American than younger students. No doubt the "backlog" of women who did not attend seminary earlier because their presence was not welcome is still bolstering seminary enrollments of women at the higher end of the age spectrum. In the case of African-Americans, it is very likely that the vigorous recruitment efforts of other professions are proving effective in the younger group. Other evidence from the Auburn Survey, such as the large numbers of already-ordained entering students in the older group of African-Americans, strongly suggest that theological schools are much more successful in recruiting African-Americans who did not have the opportunity for further

Older students contribute considerable racial and gender diversity to the total population of theological students. Older students are more likely to be female and more likely to be African-American than younger students.

study after college than they are attracting those who do have that opportunity.

It is important to note that the older students who contribute the most to making student bodies as a whole more diverse—women and minorities—contribute the least to the gap in academic ability. Even though women, African-Americans and Asians are older than other students, there are no significant differences between them and other groups on various measures of academic performance.

The most dramatic difference between the older and younger groups is level of social class. The educational levels of parents, a standard indicator of social and economic class, are markedly different for younger and older theological students. Eighty percent of fathers of younger students have some education beyond high school; only fifty-three percent of fathers of older students have that much education. The differences for mothers are comparable. On this variable, younger theological students closely resemble law students (whom they also resemble in age), about four-fifths of whose fathers also have education beyond high school, and their parents are almost as well educated as medical students' parents.

The findings from the Auburn Survey strongly indicate that there is a problem. Although some students in each group have the full range of abilities and characteristics that define "good" students, many students come to seminary with limitations.

There are additional indications that older students are less likely to come from families where advanced education is the norm. They are less likely to report that their spouses are supportive of their vocational choice. Despite the fact that they have had more years in which to do so, older students are less likely to have considered attending another kind of graduate school—law, medicine, social work, and especially doctoral work in the humanities or sciences. (The only graduate schools that older students considered at the same rates as younger ones are business and education.) They also are less likely to have applied to other professional schools and to have been accepted by them.

There are further strong indications of class difference. Older students are more than twice as likely to have attended a vocational or technical high school or a two-year or community college as younger students, and much less likely to have attended a private, non-religious grade and high school. And they are less likely to say that the congregation most important in their formation was a suburban one, and more likely than younger students to say that an urban one was.

Other differences between the two groups may also be linked to class status. Though younger students are much less likely to be married than older ones, and although marriage in this and other Auburn studies is closely associated with students' economic comfort levels, younger students are much more likely to be full-time students (90% are full time, compared with 74% of older stu-

dents), suggesting that they have found the means—from family or perhaps the prospect of future wealth—to pursue theological study without simultaneously working full-time.[7] Older students are less likely to live on or close to campus (49%, compared with 75% of younger students). Older students are also less likely to say that they have adequate time for study.

In summary: both groups of theological students have strengths. The older students who now dominate theological education bring dimensions of quality, especially commitment and diversity, that younger students lack. Younger students are better prepared academically.

Still, the findings from the Auburn Survey strongly indicate that there is a problem. Although some students in each group have the full range of abilities and characteristics that define "good" students, many students come to seminary with limitations. Older students' previous academic work often has not been strong or has not served as the most helpful preparation for theological study. In many cases their religious commitments, though intense, are not long established. Younger students often lack interest in and commitment to ministry, especially congregational ministry, and although they more often grew up in religious communities, they are currently less involved in church life. Some students in both groups have all these deficits. And yet most theological schools, in order to maintain enrollments, accept almost all applicants who meet a minimum standard. This poses a great challenge for theological schools—to educate students who are not "good" by the school's criteria. And it also poses a danger to religious communities. Because seminaries are not selective and dismiss very few students for any reason except non-completion of work, any student who does not have very serious academic or behavioral difficulties before or during seminary can find a school to attend and graduate from. Thus religious communities cannot assume that a professional degree from an accredited theological school guarantees genuine promise for ministry.

Recommendations

How can theological schools and the religious communities whose leaders they educate attract more students of the kind they most want?

There are no easy answers to this question. Below we suggest steps that theological schools and the religious groups they serve may take. These will require sustained efforts, including collaborative ones, and dramatic success is not guaranteed. Beyond these steps, something even more difficult is required: changes in a culture that is generally unfavorable to organized religion and the profession of ministry. We acknowledge the great difficulty of bringing about cultural change, but we also strongly urge those who care about ministry to consider ways that they work together to create a better

climate for religious leadership.

WHAT SCHOOLS AND RELIGIOUS BODIES CAN DO

(1) Recruit more recent college graduates. This survey shows that younger students bring some of the dimensions of quality that theological schools and religious communities are seeking, especially intellectual strength and strong educational backgrounds. As a number of religious officials point out, younger students are also desirable simply because, if they enter and remain in church service, they will serve many more years than older students, thus "repaying" more of the investment in their education that seminary training represents. The benefits of a larger pool of interested recent college graduates from which to recruit are obvious: if more college students can be persuaded to take an interest in theological study, schools will have the opportunity to select and support those who combine the academic ability characteristic of younger theological students with qualities that are rarer in this age cohort, such as interest in the ministry and religious depth.

Because other professions have been seriously considered and chosen by many college graduates and ministry often has not, some persons who might make good religious leaders are lost to the profession.

It is very evident that theological study and ministry fare poorly as today's college graduates choose professions and sites of further study.[8] By the time that the average theological student begins to think about theological study or a religious profession (at age 24.6 years) the average medical student is already in medical school and the average law student has taken the LSAT exams. In other words, most future lawyers and doctors are already set on their professional course before most future ministers have begun to consider theirs. Because other professions have been seriously considered and chosen by many college graduates and ministry often has not, some persons who might make good religious leaders are lost to the profession. Thus there are compelling reasons for those concerned about "quality" in the ministry to devise ways to get college students to consider ministry as an option.

Institutions that have tried to do this have found that it is not easy. There is a great deal of religious and "spiritual" interest among contemporary college students, but campus religious life is complex and diffuse. The Auburn Survey shows that religion professors and campus chaplains do not have much influence on students' decisions to attend a theological school. (This is true for younger students who are involved in campus religious organizations as well as for older students who did not belong to such groups.) At the same time, however, younger theological students do report that they joined and led college religious organizations. Thus theological

schools that do a better job of contacting and informing the leaders and members of campus groups about the profession of ministry and the option of theological study may increase the size of their recruitment pools.

Substantially greater success with college students, however, will probably require theological schools (either singly or in denominational groups) and their religious partners to make major, long-term investments in recruitment. Other professions have had great success with programs of "early identification"—summer and co-curricular programs that involve students in the activities of a profession during high school and early college years. Foundations have recently sponsored a few such programs for prospective theological students. Denominational and other clusters of institutions will have to continue to make these opportunities available in the future if they want to promote theological study and ministry as real choices for college students. Such programs are especially important for mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics, the traditions that have had the most difficulty attracting younger students, and for any theological schools that want to recruit younger women and African-Americans—the groups that are scarcest in the student bodies of most schools.

Substantially greater success with college students will probably require theological schools and their religious partners to make major, long-term investments in recruitment.

Will financial incentives help to recruit more younger students? Younger students do report greater financial need than the older group, and they borrow more. But they do not rank financial considerations high on the list of factors that dictate the choice of a seminary—financial factors are less important for them, in fact, than for older students. From this it is possible to conclude that special awards and merit-based grants will probably be less effective in increasing the pool of younger applicants than the recruitment and early identification programs proposed above.

(2) Offer special support to very able older students. Intensified recruitment of younger students promises to increase the quality of students in theological schools, but exclusive focus on younger students would be a mistake.

The younger students who now gravitate to theological schools are, as previously noted, less diverse than older students are; they are also less likely to be interested in ordination and ministry. The special recruitment efforts suggested above might in the long run yield more diverse and committed younger students, but for a long time to come these qualities are likely to be brought by older students. The fact of the matter is that a significant portion of today's older theological students are drawn from the population of college graduates whose parents did not finish (or in half the cases, even begin) college, and who themselves, for lack of encouragement and financial resources, probably did not have the option of graduate study when

they finished college. Later theological study is for some of them a first opportunity to become a professional.[9] These students do bring with them some problems and deficits, including fewer years to use their training in ministry. But they also bring to seminary a wide range of social experiences, including knowledge of the social worlds of many church members that younger students, with their class advantages, may know little about.

Additional aid for older students would make it possible for them to concentrate their efforts on study, including thefilling of any gaps in their academic preparation, and on ministry practice, including the often-difficult transition from lay to ordained leadership roles.

Vigorous recruitment of older as well as younger students is a good idea. Again, the larger the pool, the more likely that it will contain students who have the full range of abilities that schools and religious communities are seeking. In the case of older students, however, who are already interested in theological study in significant numbers, another strategy may be even more productive: offering special financial support for the best of the older student group. Older students, as already reported, are far more likely than younger ones to be enrolled part-time, to be working full-time or close to it, and to live at a considerable distance from campus. Additional aid would make it possible for them to concentrate their efforts on study, including the filling of any gaps in their academic preparation, and on ministry practice, including the often-difficult transition from lay to ordained leadership roles. Such aid would help them not only to prepare more intensively and probably better for ministry; it would also make it possible for them to finish seminary in a shorter time, thus lengthening their period of professional service. Both effects would increase the quality of theological students and strengthen religious leadership for the future.

(3) Support collaborative recruitment programs. School-by-school recruitment programs do little to expand the pool of potential students. Even the best of them simply draw more heavily from the existing pool.

By joining forces in various configurations, seminaries and religious groups may be able to attract attention of some persons who might otherwise not have considered ministry. Several denominations in cooperation with the seminaries they sponsor have or are planning programs that promote ministry in general. At least two organizations, the recently resuscitated Fund for Theological Education and the Hispanic Theological Initiative of The Pew Charitable Trusts, offer programs of recognition and financial and personal support for able students considering religious professions. For these organizations to make real progress, theological schools and denominations will have to take an interest in and cooperate with

their efforts, especially after initial periods of generous foundation funding come to an end. Theological schools do not have an especially good record of supporting long-term collaborative efforts like these, especially if the resources they require are also needed to meet pressing demands at home.

CHANGING THE CULTURAL CLIMATE

Religion is pervasive in North America, but it is more and more individualized, privatized, and diffuse. Almost all religious organizations except the newest and most effervescent are struggling,

Is low ministerial pay a significant barrier to the recruitment of able persons into the ministry? The Auburn Survey produced significant evidence that it is.

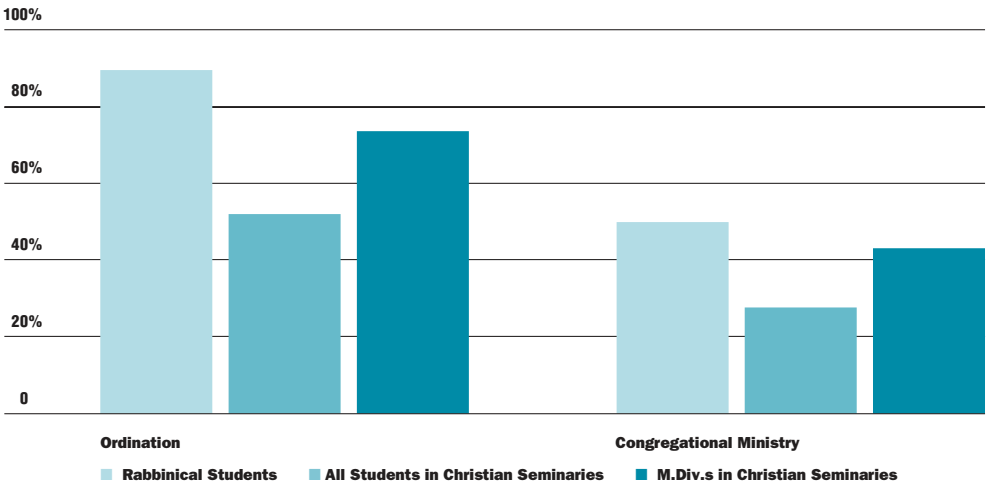
and even those encounter difficulties as soon as the process of institutionalization begins. The marginal status of organized religion is, very likely, the basic cause of the difficulty of attracting leaders for religious organizations. People of ability, especially the young, seek social roles that position them to make a substantial difference. The internal weakness of many religious organizations and their lack of influence in the wider society limit the amount of impact their leaders can expect to have.

Can anything be done about conditions so deeply rooted? Cultural change is never easy and almost always slow, but it is not impossible. We conclude this report by suggesting two high goals, one for religious bodies, the other for seminaries, that address the underlying causes of the problem of quality in ministry.

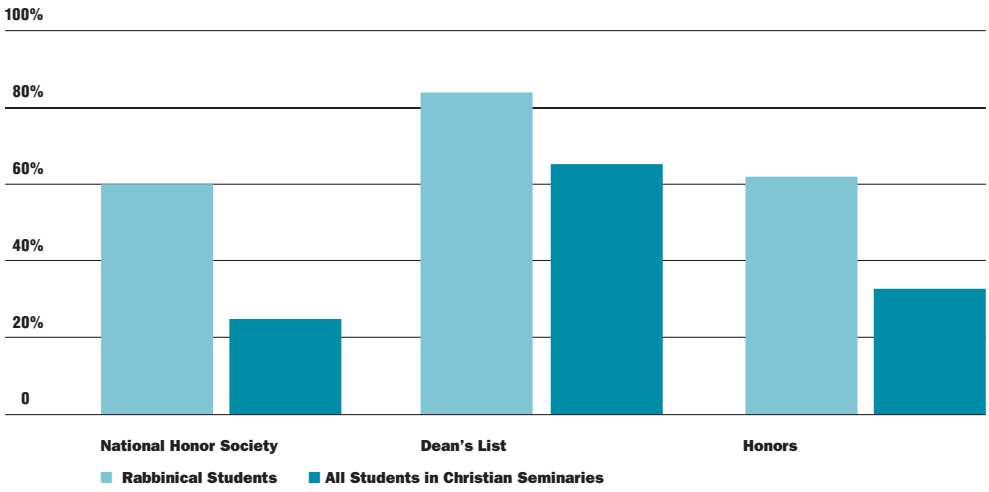
(1) Religious organizations should encourage respect for the profession of ministry, by increasing compensation and other means. The low status of ministry in most religious communities is signaled in a number of ways, including limited professional autonomy in many religious systems, but the most dramatic symbol of the value that religious groups place on the profession is the low pay scale of Christian ministers and most other religious professionals. Even among "altruistic" professions (social work, nursing, education), ministry pays relatively poorly: pay is low in proportion to the length of training, and the ceiling for the best paying positions is quite low. Most religious groups promote the values of simplicity and financial restraint and justify their leaders' compensation as the outworking of such values, but the rates of pay for many religious groups are so low that they make even a simple life difficult. Many ministers cannot afford to contribute to their children's college education or retire themselves with any measure of financial security.

Is low ministerial pay a significant barrier to the recruitment of able persons into the ministry? The Auburn Survey produced significant evidence that it is. The evidence is found in the comparison between rabbinical students

Future Plans: Rabbinical Students and Others



Honors: Rabbinical Students and Others



and others. The rabbinical students included in this survey have not been mentioned often, in part because their small numbers make some statistical comparisons impossible, but more often because rabbinical students do not fit the general pattern of other students preparing for religious professions. The course of study is longer (a minimum of five years) and requires mobility, because a period of study in Israel is part of all programs. Rabbinical students

borrow much more, on average, than do Christian theological students.

Yet despite these apparent obstacles to recruitment, rabbinical students as a group have most of the characteristics of "quality" that that other groups say they want. They are almost uniformly young (the average age is 29), headed for ordained service and seeking positions in congregations (as indicated on the first chart on page 24) and of high academic ability (as shown on the second chart). Compared with Christian students, they are religiously well-trained and enculturated (though leaders in rabbinical schools say that they are less well-grounded than they used to be). A number of factors account for these striking differences, but the higher status of the rabbinate, which goes hand-in-hand with starting salaries as much as twice as high as beginning salaries for Christian ministers, is certainly a key one.

Compensation is not, of course, the only change required for ministry to gain prominence and appeal. Very likely, the esteem in which Jewish congregations hold their rabbis and the freedom and even encouragement many rabbis are given to be active in civic and cultural life beyond the congregation are attractive features of the job as well. But pay is a sound indicator of how much religious communities care about the quality of their leadership. If Christian religious organizations really care about ministry, they will put their priorities in financial and other concrete forms.

(2) Theological schools should find ways to raise entrance and completion standards for seminary education. The community of theological schools, almost all of which are unselective, should place priority on the question of student quality and look hard for ways to raise standards.

Some of the strategies that work for other professions are not options for theological schools. Seminaries do not form a unitary "system" like medical schools, so strictly limiting the number of schools and places for students in them is not a possibility. And, because so many theological schools are required by charter to accept virtually all students sent to them by a sponsoring religious body, it would be misleading and unfair to publish acceptance rates as an incentive to selectivity in admissions.

The community of theological schools, almost all of which are unselective, should place priority on the question of student quality and look hard for ways to raise standards.

Because of these limits, regulation beyond what the Standards of the Association of Theological Schools already require is not likely to be effective. That does not, however, mean that there is nothing that theological schools can do as a group to address the question of quality. One approach that deserves exploration is the creation of standards for "premium" programs of ministerial education that have higher entrance and completion standards. Such programs, which might take the form of honors tracks within existing programs,

would not require any school to exclude from its basic program students who are sent to them by their sponsoring religious body. Honors tracks would, however, produce some graduates who are identified as especially promising religious leaders. If indeed some graduates were better selected and prepared, they would be in demand for desirable positions, and theological schools would be motivated to recruit and educate more students to graduate from the premium program or track.

Why should schools work together to create premium programs with higher standards? Though schools can offer special tracks and graduation honors on their own (and many do), there is a good argument for standardizing at least the basic requirements and structure of an honors track: schools creating this option and building it into accrediting standards would publicize the existence of the honors track to prospective students and employers, increasing demand for both the program and its graduates.[10]

The possibility sketched here is one suggestion. There may be other ways for the community of theological schools, working together in the Association of Theological Schools, to act together to improve the overall quality of students. Without minimizing the many obsta-

The study was commissioned by The Fund for Theological Education, an organization that seeks excellence in ministry, chiefly by recruiting theological students, with a special emphasis on minorities. The study was conducted by the Center for the Study of Theological Education at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York City. Barbara G. Wheeler, Director of the Center, and Dr. Denna Sanchez served as co-directors of the study.

Further Details of the Auburn Study

All 231 member institutions of the Association of Theological Schools were invited to participate by making available lists of their students beginning professional and academic master's programs in the fall of 1998; 159 chose to do so. In addition, two U.S. rabbinical schools provided student lists. In most cases, questionnaires were mailed from the Auburn Center to student addresses provided by the schools. In a few cases, survey instruments were mailed by schools that chose not to share the names and addresses of their students.

The questionnaires were mailed on February 8, 1999. A reminder card was sent to the whole list of students on March 15, 1999. By the deadline date, May 24, 1999, 2512 usable questionnaires had been returned, for a return rate of 24.8%. (Twenty-one responses were unusable or returned too late to be included.)

cles and difficulties, we strongly urge schools, along with the religious groups they serve, to press on themselves the critical questions: Do we care about the quality of religious leaders we educate? If so, how can we join forces to set higher standards and meet them?

Notes

1. The Law School Admission Council sponsored a comprehensive longitudinal study, the LSAC Bar Passage Study, in the 1990s. It followed 29,000 law students who entered law school in the fall of 1991 through most of the decade. The data on entering students are reported in Linda F. Wightman, et al., "Education at the Close of the Twentieth Century: Descriptions and Analyses of Students, Financing and Professional Expectations and Attitudes," Law School Admissions Council, Box 40, 661 Penn Street, Newtown, PA 18940 (1995), and in "User's Guide: LSAC National Longitudinal Date [sic] file," January 1999. The American Association of Medical Colleges surveyed all medical students entering its member institutions in the fall of 1996 and received usable responses from 15,640, or 96.5%, of the total. The results of the survey are available from the AAMC, 2450 N Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20037-4799.

2. The mean age of the students in Auburn's sample is 35.4 years. Because women students are older than men (36.9 years compared with 34.1 years for men) and are overrepresented in our sample, we estimate that the average age of all students is 35 years.

3. For purposes of analysis, the Auburn Center divides theological schools into five religious "families": Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Anabaptist/Peace tradition Protestant, and Jewish. The mainline and evangelical Protestant categories are further divided by institutional type: denominationally related and denominationally independent. The resulting typology has seven categories. For an explanation of the methods used to assign schools to categories or a list of schools divided by categories, write to the Auburn Center or send a message to

ctse@auburnsem.org.

4. Prior year earnings, however, are actually higher for Blacks and lowest for Hispanics. Prior year earnings correlate with age, and Blacks are older and Hispanics younger than average.

5. Note that it cannot be established that all students who borrow are "needier" than those who do not. Some may borrow for convenience, because subsidized student loans are an inexpensive source of funds. And some groups, such as younger students, may borrow because they are more confident of their financial futures than others. The fact that younger students disproportionately choose to study full-time and not to work, for instance, suggests that this may be the case for some of them.

6. As reported below, there are also striking class differences between the groups of older and younger students. It may be that younger students, who come from better educated and presumably more affluent homes, are free to major in an "impractical" area of the humanities; many older students, by contrast, may have attended college with a strong focus on preparation for a job that pays well.

7. Younger students are less likely than older students not to be working at all (about a third of older students do not work for pay while studying, while only a quarter of younger students are in this category), but they are also less likely to work more than 25 hours a week, which is the pattern for a third of all older students but only one-fifth of younger students. The facts that more older students do not work at all and more also work full-time or close to full-time suggest the cross-cutting factors that seem to be related to students' decisions about work. Some older students, for instance, seem to be more comfortable economically (because they are married and/or to have reduced prior debt); but for others any economic advantage is outweighed by heavier economic responsibilities for family.

8. Previous research, such as a study of Phi Beta Kappa graduates, shows that between the late 1940s and the late 1980s, interest in the ministry among able college graduates plummeted steeply. Howard R. Bowen and Jack H. Schuster, *American Professors: A National Resource Imperiled* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 224-228.

9. It is very likely that in many other periods in the American past, ministry has functioned similarly as an avenue for social mobility.

10. An alternative would be to create a separate "premium" degree program, though those who know the recent history of theological education have reason to question whether it is feasible to try to create second, "better" professional theological degree. The attempt was made once before, with disappointing results. In the 1970s, a small group of schools proposed a four-year basic degree to be offered by a few schools for students who had a higher level of prior preparation than the Master of Divinity degree required. The proposal was unpopular with the majority of seminaries, which were afraid that they would not be accredited to give the new degree and would lose their best students to the few institutions that were offering it. From the conflict that the proposal created, an alternative emerged: a one-year program, now called the Doctor of Ministry degree, that almost all seminaries can qualify to grant and that is offered to those who already hold the Master of Divinity and who have some professional experience. This degree has proved moderately popular, but it has not accomplished what the original group of reformers intended: a higher and more rigorous professional degree for a specially qualified subset of students.

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About Auburn Theological Seminary

Auburn Seminary was founded in 1818 by the presbyteries of central New York State. Progressive theological ideas and ecumenical sensibilities guided Auburn's original work of preparing ministers for frontier churches and foreign missions. After the seminary relocated from Auburn, New York, to the campus of Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1939, Auburn ceased to grant degrees, but its commitment to progressive and ecumenical theological education remained firm.

As a free-standing seminary working in close cooperation with other institutions, Auburn found new forms for its educational mission: programs of serious, sustained theological education for laity and practicing clergy; a course of denominational studies for Presbyterians enrolled at Union; and research into the history, aims and purposes of theological education.

In 1991, building on its national reputation for research, Auburn established the Center for the Study of Theological Education to foster research on current issues on theological education, an enterprise that Auburn believes is critical to the well-being of religious communities and the world that they serve. Auburn Seminary also sponsors the Center for Church Life, to help strengthen the leadership of mainline churches, and the Center for Multifaith Education, to provide lifelong learning for persons of diverse faith backgrounds.

Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education

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