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# Character and Assessment of Learning for Religious Vocation: Interpreting Protestant Student Voices

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*ABSTRACT: This article presents research regarding Protestant MDiv student characteristics affecting the way students receive their education. Researchers conducted interviews at seven Protestant seminaries, including fifty-nine students and fifty-one faculty members. Some characteristics affecting students' education include: educational background, desire to connect faith and life, knowledge and ministry preparation, fear of burn-out, and thinly stretched resources. Many students report that seminary gave them a new framework. Some believe seminary was a transformative agent. The connections between seminary education and leadership preparation are still underdeveloped in some schools.*

## The project

What are the characteristics and convictions that ministry degree students bring into Protestant ATS member seminaries? How do these characteristics and convictions influence how students receive their seminary education? How are students shaped by their seminary education? These are the foundational questions that we pursued in our research, which is a piece of the larger ATS project on the Character and Assessment of Learning for Religious Vocation. In this article, we will present our research method and the basic questions we asked. Then, while presenting the findings from the research, we will also suggest to faculty members and administrators possible implications of the research for their schools.

## Research method

The ATS executive director and program staff, in consultation with the Catholic and Protestant school investigators, composed a list of nine Protestant seminaries that were invited to participate in the research. The seminaries reflected the Association's diversity: freestanding and university related, denominational and nondenominational, racial/ethnic, and geographic. Due to unforeseen circumstances in the life of one investigator, he withdrew from the project, prompting our removal of two schools from the list. Unfortunately, one of those was the only Canadian representative.

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Research took us to each of the seven remaining schools to conduct and tape interviews with individual students, with deans and presidents, and with faculty groups. In preparation for the visits, school staff invited eight to ten second- and third-year students in the MDiv program to be interviewed. We asked deans to select students to include gender and racial/ethnic diversity, plus any other diversities salient at the school. Students completed a written survey prior to the visit. The primary form of data gathering, however, was in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Each interview was tape recorded, with the interviewee's permission, and later transcribed. We interviewed students individually for about fifty minutes each, taking the same amount of time with the dean (and, on occasion, the president). We interviewed faculty in small groups for about seventy-five minutes each. In total, we interviewed fifty-nine students (six to eleven per school, including twenty-nine women and thirty men). The fifty-nine students included eleven African Americans, seven international students, two Native Americans, and one Asian American. We also interviewed fifty-one faculty members, plus the deans.

Below are the basic questions we asked. We would like readers to know the content we sought. This study is, of course, but a sampling of ATS schools. The questions might profitably be used by schools in focus groups with their own students and faculty members.

Qualitative research, with open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews, does not lend itself well to percentages, as in "82.5 percent of respondents answered A and 17.5 percent answered B." Consequently, in order to present findings, we looked for repeated words, concepts, and patterns. Then, using our best judgments, we imagined categories in which to present findings. We seldom use percentages, but each response we report is a composite response, representing multiple persons, in multiple schools. We include quotes that we believe fairly represent a group of respondents.

### ***The interviews: Student questions***

Interview questions were composed in consultation with ATS staff and the Catholic investigators. We probed in areas we thought would best elicit data relevant to our questions regarding student character and conviction as these affect and are shaped by theological education. The basic questions, not including follow-up questions and derivative questions, were:

- ◆ Tell us about the journey that brought you to seminary.
- ◆ Thinking back to the first term, how well prepared did you feel to be here, what were the major transitions, and who and what helped you make the transitions?
- ◆ Tell us about your educational experiences here: a particular educational experience, outstanding courses and teaching, and less powerful courses and teaching.

- ◆ For what kind of leadership are you preparing, what is required for that kind of leadership, and how has your education contributed to your preparation as a leader?
- ◆ Has seminary challenged your core beliefs and convictions? When you compare your beliefs and convictions when you entered seminary with where you are now, what has been affirmed? What has changed?

### ***The interviews: Faculty and dean questions***

From faculty and deans, we were most concerned to learn:

- ◆ What is your sense of your students, the joy you find in them, the concerns you have for them, the way they understand their vocations?
- ◆ Tell us how you understand your vocation as a professor in a theological seminary.
- ◆ What seems to be working well in your teaching?
- ◆ What issues and concerns do you have regarding teaching the students at your school?
- ◆ Tell us about how you understand the church for which you are preparing students.
- ◆ How do you understand seminary education as leadership education? How do you think your understanding is congruent with or differs from what denominational and congregational leaders are asking for in seminary graduates?

## **Findings**

In the following, we ask the reader to keep the following twin judgments in mind: *Given the amount of stress students suffer, an amazing amount of learning is occurring.* And, *given the amount of stress faculties suffer, an amazing amount of education is being offered.* We could write the entire article about the stressors in seminary life. They are legion. There may be an ATS school where students have the *leisure* to learn and faculties have the same to learn, conduct research, and teach—but not among those we visited. Time, energy, and attention were all stretched, with schools and students operating at a very high burn rate. Personally, we were impressed by how much good education seems to be taking place in each school.

### ***Best fun quotes—with a serious point***

In determining findings from qualitative, interview research, it is important to present the typical responses rather than those that are most interesting to the researchers. We have done our best to follow this rule. The following quotes, while stated in a humorous way (the emphases are ours), colorfully typify thoughts and sentiments we heard often:

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- ◆ “Begin with the practical courses. Never begin with Greek!” **Students enter seminary with different interests and can experience resistance within a rigorously sequenced curriculum.**
- ◆ From a student who thought more of seminary education should be focused on spiritual formation: “There are a lot of people that, when you say you don’t need two full years of systematic theology, *it is just like you called and said their mother is ugly.*” **This comment exemplifies a conflict, not only a creative tension, between students’ experience of seminary as formation for ministry and intellectual preparation for ministry—as if these are two separate and not wholly related forms of education.**
- ◆ A student who self-described as “liberal orthodox evangelical”: “I love to rest in orthodox confessions of the church *while not necessarily saying those things have to be normative.*” **Students customize their education, to receive it on their own terms.**
- ◆ A faculty member, who found he needed to be very specific about assignments: “The first time I assigned a research paper to do some research on the Ten Commandments, I asked the students to look at twentieth century scholars. I must not have been clear enough because a lot of them chose Dr. Laura’s book on the Ten Commandments!” **A common faculty observation, if not complaint (and, at times, a complaint from students who begin seminary with an undergraduate religion degree), is that students arrive at seminary with greatly differing levels of preparation for being there.**

### **The student experience**

#### ***Preparedness, transitions, and helps***

A major objective of this research project was to find out how students’ backgrounds (values, education, work experiences) influenced their learning at seminary. One question we asked was to what extent they felt prepared as they entered seminary. Students come from a diversity of academic and social-cultural backgrounds, and each level of preparation presents a particular set of challenges in the initial transition to seminary life.

**Second-career (nontraditional) students.** Second career students often feel a deep sense of personal inadequacy in their first semester. They frequently wonder if they can handle the academic demands of theological study, especially if they had been away from school for ten or more years. One student confided that seminary “made me very nervous.” Another student felt helpless, preoccupied by a single thought through the first few weeks of class: “. . . am I grasping what I need because everything is flying at me?”

A second struggle is the challenge of balancing home and study. One student, a father, commented, “I just needed to keep sanity about me so I can learn.” Another student who is a homemaker, wife, and mother of a child recalled how she broke down one day.

I know that I became very frustrated at times. I remember one incident where I was in my kitchen, I had just gotten home and my husband . . . came in and I was just sobbing in the kitchen. He said, "What's wrong?" And I said, "I just need a moment of breakdown, then I'll be all right."

Many of these students report having very supportive spouses and family. Students shared how their spouses believed in them and willingly shared many of the duties of housework and parenting so they could study.

Some nontraditional students felt a little out of place in the classroom because, in their perception, they are older than the typical seminary student. However, they also claim that their maturity and life experience gave them an edge. They realized that they bring a different and often valuable perspective to class discussions. Indeed, younger students often looked to them for guidance, advice, and support because of their maturity.

Despite these transition challenges, nontraditional students are determined. Come what may, these students were adamant about completing their theological studies. With a clear sense of God's call, they wanted to be theologically prepared for the tasks ahead. Many of these students felt a deep sense of contentment and peace in what they have undertaken.

Most schools provided some kind of writing seminars to help them adjust to academic studies. One school developed a six-week course on writing and academic study, which students valued highly. Another school had a writing center that provided tremendous resources in research and writing. Students also deeply appreciated feedback from professors for their first assignments.

Many students talked about the value of a good support group during this time of transition. In one school, the administration formed "Ministry Study Groups" in the first year of study. These support groups lasted for two years. With one faculty and one local pastor as resource persons, group members learned to share, pray, and care for one another each week. Members shared their faith journeys in the first year and discussed case studies from their field experiences in the second year. In one institution where this structure was in place, students often alluded to the immense pastoral benefit of this regular small group experience through the initial transition period.

**Students with science, engineering, and business backgrounds.** Students with science, engineering, or business backgrounds face a different set of transition problems. A major challenge is writing a theological paper. Students from science and engineering backgrounds are more familiar with the "certitude of the sciences" and thus they wrestle with the "ambiguity and philosophical approaches" of theological studies—an epistemological challenge. Business majors are not exempt from this challenge. One student, who wrote and supervised the implementation of major business proposals before coming to seminary, shared that she had to rewrite her papers many times. What she found hardest was the demand to think theologically about what she was writing.

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The provision of writing centers and detailed feedback by caring and understanding professors were important helps. Students also mentioned meeting with peers over lunch at school. These often serendipitous meetings become helpful learning sessions. One student shared that she would always bring a bag lunch on the day of her lectures, so she could review, discuss the lessons, and get excellent insights.

***Students with liberal arts and humanities backgrounds.*** While these students have the important skills of reading, writing, and critical thinking, they grapple with a different set of adjustment issues. Some struggle deeply with the critical orientation to textual and theological studies. One student shared how listening to a funded lecture series in the seminary in her first year shattered her confidence in seminary studies. The visiting scholar presented an “academic, threatening perspective to faith” (the scholar presented the resurrection as a perceived event). However, students with an early disorienting experience judged that, in time, professors understood their struggles and helped them “reclaim faith.” Students realize that the goal was not to dismantle faith but to encourage a “meaningful ownership of faith.” Many students expressed that they appreciated the exposure to various theological perspectives and the “stretching experience.” They said they preferred going through the crucible in school, rather than when they are outside facing the congregation and public.

***Students with Bible and religion backgrounds.*** The most common struggle with this group of students in their transition period is that introductory courses, covering methods and material already familiar to them, did not challenge them.

One student remarked, “I was very frustrated by what I felt were a lack of challenge and the almost regressive teaching.” Another mentioned that much of the introductory biblical and theological courses were “repetitive and redundant.” One student even questioned why she was in seminary “because it felt a lot like a step back.”

These students were unaware of any significant attempts, either by professors or by the administration, to help them. These students did offer that they realized the professors had to cover basics in order to bring less well-prepared students up to speed. Students who were best prepared, academically, to be in seminary felt more academically challenged only in their second or third years.

***International students.*** As international students adapt to the foreign culture and sometimes harsh weather, they often grapple with entirely new social values (e.g., individualism and the relative freedom of women in church and society). However, their great struggle is working with the English language, and, in their perception, they often take double the time to complete reading and writing assignments.

The greatest helps for them are writing centers (previously mentioned) and understanding professors. They especially appreciate professors who empathize with their struggles and provide encouragement. One international student who was part of a “ministry support group” shared that this was one of the most important supports in the first months of very challenging seminary life. That

being said, there was surprisingly little mention of supportive on-campus peer relationships.

### ***Outstanding teaching and learning***

Which factors make for effective teaching and learning? We wanted to learn about the varieties of learning events and how professors, from a student perspective, shaped their educational landscape for effective teaching.

***Connection to real life.*** In this section of the research, we were expecting to find factors such as professors who were adept with a variety of teaching methods or have a practical understanding of learning styles. However, what emerged from student reflections was somewhat surprising.

The most common factor cited in outstanding educational experiences was a professor's ability to connect learning to real life. One student, speaking for many in our interviews said, "My criterion is, How will I be able to use this in the parish?" But the connection to life involved far more than immediate usefulness, and student reflections on connection to life crisscrossed the curriculum. In fact, many examples were from foundational biblical and theological studies.

One student said of a professor in biblical studies, "The readings and lectures were excellent. I loved that he raised the bar so high and had such high expectations about digging deeply into the Gospels and work at it. Not just mentally, but really engage our whole beings with the text and the Gospel, let it be a mirror into our souls." Several students at one seminary shared how they were deeply influenced by the same theology course, because the assignments encouraged the integration of learning and life. In this course, the professor had students select a theological doctrine for personal study and gave the following assignment:

1. write an annotated bibliography quoting six sources (three ancient and three modern),
2. lift that doctrine in a book of worship they were using,
3. exegete three Scripture texts,
4. incorporate these findings while crafting a sermon.

One student said of this creative assignment, "It was excellent. . . . We had these threads in various pieces of our theological and liturgical development culminating in proclaimed work."

***Frames and lenses for thinking.*** The second most common factor contributing to outstanding educational experiences was a professor's ability to shape a student's perspective. In particular, students deeply appreciated a professor who provided a framework in which students could understand both the discipline being taught and the data of their lives. We often found students using the metaphor of "lens" in their responses. One student said of a Black Church Studies course, "It was a blessing to take that class. It so refocused my lens on how I see the world. Nothing is the same anymore. . . . [The professor] taught us how to think theologically." Another student said of a New Testament course, "that one class just broke me loose to see things now the way they really are." An international

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student described how Spiritual Formation and Discipleship provided the theological bases to interpret his previous, powerful spiritual experiences. He said that in his home country, believers “have the heart for Jesus,” but they “cannot teach you a lot. I could combine them now.”

***The professor’s life.*** A third factor in outstanding educational experiences is that of the life of a professor. Students are positively affected when professors are vulnerable, open, and honest about their own life and faith struggles. One student recalled how a professor was “vulnerable to us through relating personal experiences. This professor was authentic.” Another student described the congruence she discerned in the professor, “. . . and he is a word weaver. He is just a delight to listen to. But because he has a fundamentally godly character, his character comes through. . . .” Students appreciate professors who are not just a store of information but are fundamentally human.

One thing that I really enjoy is when the professors share that they are human. If they were in the parish, that they share stories that relate to the texts and the Bible or some theology. . . . Rather than just be there as someone who is just going to teach, but someone with a heart, rather than someone who just has a wealth of information.

***The professor’s passion.*** Another factor in powerful educational experiences, perhaps the one mentioned most often, is the passion teachers bring to their classes. One student said, “He was impassioned . . . never a moment that he did not connect . . . maybe not even ten minutes would go by when he did not forcefully remind us what is at stake with theological reflection.” Students often share judgments with one another regarding who the best teachers are on a seminary campus. Indeed, sometimes students would go so far as to say that a seminary experience is incomplete without a class with a particular professor, because he or she is so deeply passionate about the subject. One student commented:

. . . [Professor’s name] is one that everyone talks highly of. . . . What makes him that way is that he has an obvious passion for his teaching. I couldn’t imagine (whether you disagree with him or not), I couldn’t imagine not enjoying his class because (1) he makes the topic interesting and (2) he really loves what he is presenting and is really passionate about that.

Another student commented, “If he believes strongly in something, then I need to decide if I am going to take hold of that as well.” We found this quotation particularly interesting because passion for a subject not only makes teaching powerful, but it can also get a student interested enough in a subject to consider its importance in the overall theological curriculum.

***Broad pedagogical repertoire.*** Certainly, an important factor in powerful learning experiences is a teacher’s pedagogical repertoire. Students notice a professor who is adept with a variety of creative approaches in class (students cited use of media, lecture, discussion, small group, and visuals). They appreciate *pedagogy that engages them actively* in the process of learning. One student highlighted a powerful learning experience with her New Testament class. “She

wanted us to dig into the text so we could unearth all the surprises ourselves.” In a class on preaching, one student said, “. . . in learning how to preach, we felt we had just been preached to and filled . . . students come out and feel fired up about the Gospel.”

**Field education and clinical pastoral education (CPE).** Field education and CPE were noted as powerful learning experiences, because students were “taking the knowledge and putting it to use.” These learning modes emphasize engaged learning, application, reflection, and integration. One student said that “doing fieldwork was very powerful; it was taking something from class and using it.” Another commented that field education was a place to “digest” a lot of what she was learning. One student said that the CPE experience revealed that the “things I was learning in class actually related to the lives of people.” In addition, some students reported that field education powerfully affirmed their pastoral vocation; field ed provided an experience in which to practice theory learned in the classroom.

**Discussion and dialogue.** Another factor that was important to learning was the use of discussion and dialogue in class. Students appreciate good discussion because it “internalizes” ideas. One student said that adult learners “do not like to be lectured to without a chance of sharing their opinions.” Discussion also inspires students to explore other possibilities in their search for truth. One student highlighted that at times you are in “discussion and dialogue with people who have such a wide variety of thoughts and experiences.” Another student said, “You walk away with more than just lectures or class materials.”

Perhaps the most striking quotation comes from a student who shared how her professor, through the use of discussion learning, affirmed her humanness. “. . . he allows his students to express themselves . . . it makes me more of a human, more of a person.”

### ***Less effective educational experiences: Student concerns***

We were also interested in factors, from a student perspective, that inhibited learning. Please note that, unless we are clearly making our own comments or presenting suggestions that faculty members offered on the same topic, the following remarks represent student perspectives.

**Unused or excessive readings.** Students mentioned that, with the heavy workload in the seminary curriculum, it is often easy to cut corners. One student said, “I have found that there are ways to push yourself really hard and get far ahead of your classmates if you really want to, and there are ways to slip through the cracks if you want to as well. And I think people do that.” Students requested that professors hold them accountable for their readings. Two suggestions are to weave these readings into the lecture or to get students to discuss their readings in class.

Faculty acknowledged the problem of students not reading their material and expressed some concern. One faculty member shared that she used to require reading notations but she ended up with lots of grading. Perhaps the better

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alternative is still to incorporate readings into the lecture and/or to provide time for students to discuss them in class.

**Content-heavy courses.** Another factor that limits learning relates to “content-heavy” courses, without handles or frames. Students were frustrated that in some courses, there was “so much material concentrated into a very short three-month class,” that professors missed the more important overall themes and stories. One student commented, “There was lots of interesting material in the course, but we were concentrating on memorizing all the dates.” Sometimes, students become so preoccupied with learning data that they have no attention left to do anything with it. One student shared of one course, “There was so much information there and I wasn’t sure how to synthesize it with my theological stuff. . . . It was just kind of know this . . . learn this, and get on with it.” One older student made a poignant comment about her history course. “The part I have found so difficult is that there is just such an incredible amount of reading and writing to do, and my retention is not what it used to be. I mean I have heard young people complain about that too, so I can’t say it is specifically age.” While history was not the only course mentioned here, it was perhaps the most commonly cited in this category.

**Lack of preparation, dated materials, lack of fit.** These were occasional complaints. Students pointed out that a lack of preparation by professors can significantly reduce the quality of the learning experience. This is evidenced in a variety of ways:

1. allowing the class to discuss in ignorance,
2. lack of a clear definition of terms,
3. class that lacks direction and content,
4. class that is disorganized, unstructured, and in which the professor just “rambles” on.

Apart from a lack of preparation, there is the quality of the learning material. Students shared that they were discouraged by professors who issued syllabi that were “three decades old.” Some professors “spoke in Christian clichés of the 1950s. . . .”

Another problem was material that students cannot relate to their own contexts. For example, in some preaching classes, African-American students felt dismissed by the style of preaching the class demanded. Students of Chinese and Latino backgrounds noted that professors were sometimes unaware of the particular contexts and needs of immigrant churches.

**Too little life and ministry mentoring.** We found a discernible voice among students that the seminaries are not paying enough attention to mentoring. They feel that while the seminary claims spiritual formation as one of its major goals, it is more “lip service” than actual reality. The spiritual life of students seems to be compromised as the focus of seminary is often on fulfillment of academic criteria. One student expressed her frustration this way:

What frustrates me the most is being so swamped with work sometimes . . . I feel like my spiritual life has suffered in the process. . . . It has been a pretty common complaint with a lot of students, and I have heard that from clergy in general. You get so sucked into the work load that you have that it is so easy to neglect those things. . . . I feel there is not enough built into the program to sort of foster more of that spiritual development. I think there is more lip service paid to it than there is actual attention given to it.

Another student, aware of some of the pitfalls associated with the seminary experience, did extensive reading before he enrolled as a student. What he saw confirmed what he read.

. . . what I saw were these first-year students entering seminary with these bright eyes, full of zeal and passion for God and ministry. And then gradually seeing those bright eyes becoming duller until they are just in the daily grind of getting through papers, assignments at seminary. And eventually an evolution takes place, so that by the third year these students have matured, they are stronger and they are wiser, but they have never really recaptured the fire in their eyes. It is more “get me out of here!” And I wonder if that is the sort of people we want to send out into the harvest field if they have lost the real fire?

He continues, “. . . seminary becomes a rote exercise, where you pass the test and forget the information. A frequent comment of students is, ‘OK, I am just going to get through, get my grade, and get out of that class.’”

Students believe that professors care. There is the seminary community and the interaction, but students judge that daily conversations are generally about how they are doing with the academic work rather than with pressing issues of ministry. Yet, it is the latter which many students long for—a more mentored response from faculty. One student’s comment is poignant:

We are all trying to figure out what we are doing here, and where we are going, and how we are going to get there, and how we are going to be good at it. And I feel as though a lot of times unless we have red flags all over us, the professors don’t really interact with us in that way. They interact with us about, here is what we can teach you, but I sometimes need more, especially as a woman in ministry going into a field where I know I will be facing various viewpoints on that. So more substantial help in who you are and what you are called for, this is what we see developing in you, your gifts.

Students provided two suggestions. One is for professors to provide two or three office hours a week to talk about nonclassroom issues, personal issues that they struggle with in ministry. A second suggestion is for seminaries to host “pastors-in-residence” to help students discern God’s call, because seminary is “a tumultuous season in life and the future looks scary.”

## **Student characteristics affecting their reception of theological education**

The following list represents categories we created to organize the data regarding how what students bring to seminary affects how and what they receive. The above section reported factors in professors and classrooms that students found most and least helpful for their own learning. In the list below, we attempt to name the student characteristic that underlies the students' responses.

1. **Educational background.** We mentioned this factor above.
2. **Level of vocational clarity.** When we asked students about their most and least profound learning experiences, they often mentioned whether they went into a course with a strong or weak interest in the subject matter. While a professor might turn a student's interest on or off, the student's interest is key. That interest is affected by what students think they are doing in seminary and by the image of the kind of ministry for which they are preparing.
3. **Capacity and interest in dealing with difference:** theological, cultural, racial/ethnic, gender, lifestyle. Some students sought out a particular seminary in order to push themselves out of the comfort zone in which they were raised. Such students tend to revel in difference. Students without such interest may raise defenses (but see below for stories of change).
4. **A deep desire to connect knowledge with life experience and competence in ministry.** We reported how important it is for students that faculty are able to connect the subject and life. Students often mentioned this factor as essential for their learning, regardless of whether the course was in a so-called "practical" subject or in one of the classical disciplines. The desire for teachers to be passionate about their subject also connects here. There is an assumption regarding the connection between passion, vitality, and the heart of life. Students may forgive a teacher's lack of knowledge before they would a lack of passion for the subject.
5. **Time, energy, attention, money.** With very few exceptions, the students we interviewed are living life at a very high expense level for all four of these resources.
6. **Suffer-ability.** An old meaning of the word "suffer" is to be vulnerable to change. Some students come into seminary willing to suffer—to stretch and translate to receive the education offered. They may come from backgrounds and are headed for ministries that differ from the school's mainstream. They will work hard for their learning. Others expect professors to lay the goods squarely on their plate and are either unable or unwilling to translate. While we have uncovered some of the factors that may be linked to one attitude or the other, it would be well to conduct more research on this question of suffer-ability (using a more felicitous term).
7. **Fear of burn-out.** Students have heard many stories (from professors?) regarding burned-out clergy, those who lost their vocational moorings and drifted

with the congregations they served into unfaithfulness. When students press for more spiritual formation or better integration of spiritual and intellectual formation, they express their desire to avoid slipping down that path.

### ***Possible implications for seminaries of student characteristics and learning***

What are the possible practical, administrative, and classroom implications of these findings?

1. Entering seminary is a predictably stressful experience, and in multiple ways. What can schools do to acknowledge this and equip students to cope with or ease the pain?
2. What is the curriculum that the *faculty* need to master in order to teach these students well? Could we designate and train particular faculty as master initiators to help students over the limina they encounter?
3. First-term students need challenges *and* confidence builders.
4. Pay attention to how the racial/ethnic students at your school receive their education. A student's quietness and attentiveness may not equal reception.
5. How can schools both remediate some incoming students and advance others?
6. How can we honor both the needs of formation for ordained ministry and for lay professionals in the same degree programs?
7. Search for teachers who . . . (please read "tongue-in-cheek"):
  - ◆ Are available 24/7/365, and engaged in their own research.
  - ◆ Are intellectually deep, appropriately vulnerable, wise.
  - ◆ Can relate any biblical or theological concept to everyday, practical ministry—as in *my* ministry, the one *I* think *I* know, *my* experience of *my* tradition.
  - ◆ Will couple their knowledge of me with great examples that appeal to me.
  - ◆ Are sensitive to all the learning styles among the students, switching effortlessly and gracefully between them as the situation requires and demonstrating great creativity at all times.
  - ◆ Are accomplished in: lecture; Socratic method; discussion; using PowerPoint; 50-minute, 3-hour, and weekend intensives; online or two-way video conferencing.
  - ◆ Are challenging but not exhausting.
  - ◆ Only assign readings for which students will be held accountable.

### **Seminary as leadership education?**

One of the more remarkable consistencies among the students we interviewed was that, in six of the seven schools, the majority of students were preparing for pastoral leadership in congregations. That being said, we had to work very hard to piece together the answers to our questions about leadership

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into a presentable picture—with some exceptions. Students and faculty both were not as articulate answering questions about seminary as leadership education as they were about the other areas of inquiry. At three schools, when we asked about leadership and seminary education, the students pointed to a course—and whether or not they had taken it. What we are suggesting is that the connection between seminary education and leadership in ministry was not clear with students or with faculties—in four of the seven schools.

In the following, we rely both on the interviews *per se*, as well as on written responses to questions regarding what they would like to see changed in today's church and what from the past they wish the church still had or practiced.

Students named the following, multiple times, as enemies of today's church: biblical, historical, and theological ignorance; individualism; entertainment culture; disempowered laity; burned-out, spiritually dead pastors; distracting church conflicts; comfortableness; and busyness.

Roles, knowledge, and skills that leaders ought to possess include: functioning as theologians in particular contexts, framing everyday life theologically, being a teacher (this was mentioned frequently), being a catechist fostering biblical literacy, helping discipleship formation, and fostering more community and less individualism. We were impressed how often students lifted up the teaching role as foundation for pastoral identity.

In several cases, students remarked on leadership as “taught” in the school's implicit curriculum. How do the faculty teach (e.g., lecture only, listening, real discussion, warm-up discussion, evidence of self-integration, examples used, individuals and teams)? How is conflict handled in the classroom and in the seminary community? What kind of leadership opportunities does the school make available? Who leads worship?

On the subject of leadership, two schools were clearly different from the rest and very different from each other. In both of them, their publicly stated leadership emphases clearly reverberated, positively (for the most part), through the faculty and the students. In one setting, the school seeks to form theological interpreters to and for the church. Students offered many classroom examples evidencing the faculty's aptitude for connecting the discipline, life, and ministry. But leadership language, *per se*, was either avoided or compartmentalized. The other school professed to educate missional leaders formed in partnership with the church, a partnership that affected the whole curriculum.

### ***Possible implications regarding seminary as leadership education***

Our research regarding seminary as leadership education suggests two questions to us:

1. How has your school addressed the difference between education for an individual (e.g., can you interpret a text?) and education for leadership (e.g., how does a leader help a congregation to interpret a text?)?

2. What are the ecclesiological assumptions regarding the church for which students are preparing that faculty members embed in their teaching? A related question: what are the ways the faculty understand the seminary and church to be a partnership, including their understandings of the bridge traffic flow (e.g., what could the seminary learn from congregations, from church leaders? What do church leaders need to learn from the seminary?)?

### Core convictions, learning, and change in seminary

Seminary faculty and administrators, accreditation societies, financial supporters, judicatory leaders, congregants, and students themselves would like to think that seminary makes a positive difference for the church, that seminary “adds value” to ecclesial leaders. School mission statements and faculty members envision seminary as a transformational experience for students. What difference does seminary make?

Student responses indicate that seminary does make a difference, a real and positive difference. They used many different expressions to describe that difference. The reader is cautioned not to try to add the following percentages to total one hundred. The categories we are using overlap respondents (e.g., some students spoke both about acquiring a framework and becoming less defensive; see below).

Nearly half of the student respondents used a structural metaphor: *seminary provided a framework or structure for previously held beliefs*. “I have better reasons for holding the beliefs I have.” Seminary helped them connect heart and head, to articulate the previously inarticulate. For such students, crossing the threshold into seminary and the effort to learn the required vocabulary was essential to their intellectual development. That vocabulary is a crucial component of the framework.

When we pressed (which we tended to more during the latter schools visited than among the earlier ones), however, *most of these students said their core convictions did not change*. They were better formed, better organized, better expressed—but not fundamentally changed. A younger student, on student conversations: “It is interesting to listen to cafeteria conversations. It is not always about [local pro football team] or the weather, it is about theological framing.” A mid-30s student with strong church background: “The training here has given an intellectual backbone to what I’ve always believed in my heart.” A 50-something student with decades of business experience: “I am thinking theologically about things that I would have previously considered practical matters ... But in terms of world view and basic tenets I hold regarding justice and mercy, those are reinforced but not changed.”

*About one in six students responded clearly that core beliefs and convictions did change*. As we mentioned above, “I was given new lenses through which to see” was one way of saying this. Changes included God metaphors and self-under-

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standings, especially as emerged in educational encounters with “an other,” often a person of a different race or from a different country. One student, who grew up in the church: “I think my basic convictions and frameworks were not actually formed until I came here.” A second career student who came to seminary after recovering from a major illness and used seminary to rebuild her belief system: “Seminary has helped me to own a faith that I did not grow up with . . . It has shaped my faith by making me take a hard look at my own life.”

Then there were responses such as this one—hard to interpret. A mid-life student, taking a Bible class and listening to the professor talk about the biblical actor’s transformation: “I finally realized the whole seminary thing is about being transformed. Your knowledge, your thinking, your writing.” The student went on to say that both church history and ethics were also transforming. But the student then concluded the interview saying that seminary had affirmed his or her faith and, “I haven’t had any big changes in my religious convictions.”

Almost another one in six students used phrases like seminary “rattled my cage” or “shook my foundations.” It is not always clear to what end.

A sizeable portion of the students also used language of ignorance, humility, and formation. About one-fourth spoke of being introduced to a breadth and depth of ecclesial wisdom and events that they previously did not know existed. *One in six said, and many more inferred, that they are leaving seminary less defensive, less fearful of difference, more respectful of others.* A student with a master’s degree in religion who came to seminary after twelve years in ministry: “I am just more interested in understanding what people believe. If they are interested in what I believe, I am happy to tell them. But I don’t feel the need to convince them that my way is right and their way is wrong.” A student in his or her late twenties with a church background and minor in theology: because of the cognitive dissonance between self and school, the student spent the first year “blocking,” a second year considering (“I took it all in and kind of lost myself”), and the third year trying to integrate.

And students at every school used the language of formation, especially in reference to field education and through programs designated by the school as formation per se.

### **Concluding questions and comments**

Is an implicit curriculum undermining our stated intentions? Recall the student we quoted above who saw students’ attitudes in the course of seminary shift from enthusiasm to survival. A faculty member (from a different school from the student), after remarking on the increased expectations built into the seminary’s and the church’s curricula today, as compared with a few decades ago, mused:

I have a sense when I talk with seniors, many of them say “this has been a stimulating, intellectual, theological experience. But this has been the worst time of my life.” One of our DMin students

did a study of the primary relationships of our students who live in seminary housing. The study was just devastating in terms of the emotional, relational, and spiritual toll on our students and those with whom they have their primary relationships. What hasn't happened yet is that the key people who need to sit at the table and ask, What do we, in fact, want in the development of our leaders—not just theologically or strategically or in terms of the practice of ministry but in terms of attitude and enculturation of leadership? We just have not asked that question in a thorough-going, holistic fashion.

What is required of students in seminaries? What is required of seminaries in the ecology of education for leadership in the church? We believe that seminaries, their host denominations and related judicatory leaders, and students could profit from engaging the following conversational topics:

- ◆ What is the character and what are the essential topics of the conversation between seminary and church leaders?
- ◆ If your denominational context is full of anxiety, who is paying attention to the seminary responding appropriately rather than reacting anxiously itself?
- ◆ For what kind of church is the faculty preparing students?
- ◆ What if we are approximating the best we can do, given the resources and the models in which we live? Is the current level of performance of schools and graduates acceptable? Desirable? If not, given the already demanding nature of seminary life (in terms of time, money, energy, and attention), how can we make the right changes that will not (in the words of one seminary leader) “simply add more sand to the bags”?

Finally, we ask: given the churches' leadership needs, the preparation and convictions students bring to seminary, and our shared standards regarding “deepening spiritual awareness, growing in moral sensitivity and character ” (Statement 4.1.1): *how much time would it take* to develop these? In the 1996 Standards, when we added these elements, did we also include the requisite resources in our schools' and the students' lives to develop them to the extent that we want and that the church needs?

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#### ENDNOTE

1. The Association of Theological Schools, “Goals of the Theological Curriculum,” *Bulletin* 46, Part 1 (2004): 54.