

Fit for ministry? A new profile of seminarians: A new profile of seminarians

by [Barbara G. Wheeler](#) in the [April 11, 2001](#) issue

The changing profile of seminary students has been much remarked upon. Whereas 50 years ago almost all seminarians in North America were white men who had recently graduated from college, today women are a major presence in seminary classrooms, as are (to varying degrees) ethnic and minority groups. Today's students are also substantially older by the time they get to seminary.

Has this change been good or bad for theological education and for the churches' ministry? On this subject, there is much debate. Some observers believe that there has been a steep decline in the abilities and skills students bring to seminary, a decline that bodes ill for the work of ministry. Others think that the new diversity of theological students brings resources, including maturity and diverse social perspectives, that will strengthen ministry overall.

Who is right? To find out, the Fund for Theological Education asked the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education to help document the changes in the student bodies and to test competing hypotheses about what the changes mean. The center surveyed 10,000 students who had entered master's-level programs in the fall of 1998. About 2,500 responded. The survey was structured to permit comparisons with data from studies of entering law students (dating from 1991) and medical students (1996).

The survey confirmed that current students are older. The average age is 35, and nearly 60 percent of students are over 30. Roman Catholic seminarians tend to be the oldest students, rabbinical students the youngest. All are older, on average, than the sample of law students (26) and medical students (24.3).

Seminary students are also more diverse than they used to be. One-third are women, and in mainline Protestant schools, women number nearly half. There is

some racial diversity, though African-Americans (9 percent) and Hispanics (only 3 percent) are both underrepresented compared to their presence in the general population.

On average, students come from the middle of the middle class. About half their fathers and a third of their mothers have college degrees. (Medical and law students come from more highly educated families.) Family tradition seems to have been influential in many cases. Almost one-third say they have a “close clergy relative.” (Medical and law students are almost equally likely to have a relative in their chosen profession.)

Perhaps the most striking change documented by the survey is the path by which most students now make their way to theological school. The traditional pattern included childhood church and Sunday school attendance, followed by participation in religious youth programs. Involvement in campus ministries was often the next step, typically at a denominational or private liberal arts college that sent substantial numbers of students on to seminary.

Today, students’ religious backgrounds are more varied and less stable than in the past: half switched denominations at least once before enrolling in seminary. They do not report being heavily influenced by youth or campus activities. There are few “feeder” colleges supplying substantial numbers of students to seminaries. Today’s students also have a very wide range of academic backgrounds. Only one-third majored in the humanities (including theology and religion) and about half in the liberal arts. Only one-fifth entered seminary immediately after college and only about one-third had decided to attend seminary by the time they graduated.

The evidence strongly suggests that today’s theological students are steered toward seminary as a result of postcollege involvement in congregational life rather than by persons or studies in the college milieu. On average, students begin to consider seminary at about the age of 25; they do not enroll for another decade. In the interval, most work and about one-quarter earn a master’s degree in another field. A great deal of their nonwork and nonfamily activity after college and before seminary is related to the life of a local church. Congregational clergy, along with spouses and friends, are reported to be influential in their decision to attend seminary.

Students come to theological schools in pursuit of a wide range of goals. Though 80 percent say they are preparing for a “religious” profession, fewer (60 percent) plan

to be ordained. Ministry in a congregation or parish is the primary goal of less than one-third of master's-level students and of only half of students in master of divinity and other ordination-track programs. Counseling, chaplaincy and other forms of ministry to groups and organizations are also attractive, and more than a quarter of entering students are headed for teaching, social service or administration.

Unlike previous generations, many students today do not attend full time. One-quarter of all students report that they enrolled part time in their first year. About the same number report working more than 25 hours a week. On average, entering students work outside the seminary 11 to 15 hours a week, though about one-quarter do not work at all. (Anecdotal reports suggest that the longer students remain in seminary, the more they tend toward part-time attendance and toward taking on heavy loads of paid work; also, the longer students stretch out their programs, the less likely they are to graduate.) Sixty percent live on or near campus. About half of all students are married or have partners; 60 percent report having dependents (2.3 on average).

How capable are today's seminary students? This is a difficult question to answer, given the difficulty of defining skills and talents. One noteworthy bit of evidence is the relative lack of selectivity on the part of theological schools. The median acceptance rate for Protestant seminaries is 87 percent. Students are evidently well aware of this reality, since most students apply to only one school, and 90 percent say the school they are attending was their first choice. Very few (15 percent) of those who are not attending their first choice say they were rejected by schools they preferred. By sharp contrast, almost all law students (85 percent) make multiple applications; only 46 percent are attending their first-choice school; and 87 percent of those not attending first-choice schools say those schools did not accept them.

Seminaries share a general definition of quality, though they may weigh various factors differently. For entrance into master's programs, most require academic ability signaled by at least a B average in undergraduate work. 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, welcome, 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 apply criteria to the profile of the whole student body, hoping that their student bodies will incorporate a variety of experience 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.

If we keep all these measures of quality in mind, can we say that students are good enough to meet the demands of contemporary ministry? Some critics say that today's students lack the quality of younger students in the past. Others argue that the diversity of today's student body brings new strengths.

To test these judgments, Auburn compared younger students (30 and younger) with the rest. Men and women and minorities and nonminorities were also compared on a wide range of measures.

The analyses show that younger students often do bring certain strengths to theological study that older students lack. Younger entering students have significantly higher grade-point averages than older students have. Younger students are more likely to have received college graduation honors and other awards and to have been elected to a national honor society. They are stronger on all these measures, even when compared with older students who earned graduate degrees before seminary.

Almost two-thirds of younger students (62 percent) decided before or during college to attend seminary, and they first considered a religious vocation at an average age of 18.5 years, compared with 29 years of age for the older students. Not surprisingly, then, younger theological 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 or other subjects in the humanities. Older students are much more likely to have majored in a scientific or technical subject.

Considering all these measures, it can be argued that today's student bodies, with a majority of older students, are less able than they would be if the total group were to include more younger students.

It is also true that older students bring desirable characteristics that younger students are less likely to exhibit. Older students demonstrate stronger commitment to ordained ministry and more interest in serving in congregations, which most seminaries view as the central focus of the educational preparation they provide. Two-thirds of older students (65 percent), but just over half of younger ones (54 percent), 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 master of divinity programs—in which older students are also more likely to be enrolled than in other master's-level programs.

Older students also 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 older women. In the case of young African-Americans, it is very likely that vigorous recruitment efforts of other professions deflect many from careers in ministry.

It is important to note that older students who contribute the most to making student bodies diverse contribute the least to the gap in academic ability. Even though many 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 in social class. Educational levels of parents, a standard indicator of social and economic class, differ markedly for younger and older theological students. Eighty percent of fathers of younger students have some education beyond high school; only 53 percent of fathers of older students have that much education. Differences for mothers are comparable. On this variable, younger theological students closely resemble law students, about four-fifths of whose fathers also have education beyond high school. Parents of younger theological students are almost as well educated as medical students' parents.

Further, older students are more than twice as likely as younger students to have attended a vocational or technical high school or a two-year or community college, and much less likely to have attended a private, nonreligious grade and high school.

Other differences between the two groups may 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 and positively associated with students' economic comfort levels—younger students are much more likely to be full-time students. (Ninety percent are full time, compared with 74 percent of older students.) These statistics suggest that younger students have found the means (from family resources or perhaps from the prospect of future wealth) to pursue theological study without simultaneously working full time. Older students are also much less likely to live on or conveniently close to campus (49 percent, compared with 75 percent of younger students) and less likely to say they have adequate time for study.

In summary, though the Auburn survey shows that older and younger theological students both have strengths, it also strongly indicates that there is a problem overall. Some students in each group have the full range of abilities and characteristics that define “good” students, but many come to seminary with serious limitations. Older students' previous academic work often has not been strong or is not the most helpful preparation for theological study. In many cases, their religious commitments, though intense, are not long established. At the same time, younger students often lack interest in 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. Yet most theological schools maintain enrollments by accepting almost all applicants who meet minimum standards. This poses a great challenge for theological schools and a danger for religious communities. Because seminaries are not selective and because they dismiss very few students for any reason except noncompletion of work, religious communities cannot assume that a professional degree from an accredited theological school guarantees genuine promise for ministry.

What can be done to address these concerns? One obvious response is to recruit more recent college graduates. This survey shows that younger students are more likely to bring intellectual strength and strong educational backgrounds. They 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 seminary training.

Theological study and ministry do not rank high among the chosen professions of college graduates. By the time the average theological student begins to think about 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 set on their professional course before most future ministers have begun to consider theirs. For this reason, some persons who might make good religious leaders are lost to the profession simply because they made early decisions to take other paths. Those concerned about quality in the ministry must devise ways to persuade substantially greater numbers of college students to consider the ministry.

To do so, theological schools and religious bodies will probably need to make major, long-term investments in recruitment. Other professions have had great success with programs of “early identification,” such as summer and co-curricular programs for student in high school and early college years. Foundations have recently sponsored a few such programs for prospective theological students.

Denominational and other clusters of institutions should continue to make these opportunities available. Such programs are especially important for mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic schools, which have the most difficulty attracting younger students, and for any theological school that wants to recruit younger women and African-Americans—groups that are scarce in the student bodies of most schools.

Schools should also offer special support to the ablest older students. Though intensified recruitment of younger students is needed, it would be a mistake to ignore older students. They bring important strengths, especially commitment to ministry and diversity of background. Since older students are already interested in theological study in significant numbers, aggressive recruitment is less important than financial support during seminary. Older students are far more likely than younger ones to be enrolled part time, to be working full time or nearly full time, and to live at a considerable distance from campus. Additional aid would make it possible for them to concentrate their efforts on study and to focus on ministry practice. Such aid would also make it possible for them to finish seminary in a shorter time, lengthening their period of service.

Such steps will probably make a measurable difference, but they will not make ministry an easy sell in our culture. Religion is pervasive in North America, but more and more it is individualized, privatized and diffuse. Almost all religious

organizations except the newest and most effervescent are struggling, and even new organizations 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. The Auburn study concludes by suggesting two high goals—one for religious bodies, the other for seminaries—that address underlying causes of the problem of quality in ministry.

First, encourage respect for the profession of ministry by increasing compensation and by other means. The clearest measure of the value that religious groups place on the profession is the low pay scale for Christian ministers and most other religious professionals. Most religious groups justify low pay as the outworking of such values as simplicity and financial restraint, but pay rates for many religious groups are so low they make even a simple life difficult. Many ministers cannot afford to contribute to their children's college education or to retire with any measure of financial security.

Is low pay a significant barrier to the recruitment of able persons into the ministry? The Auburn survey produced significant evidence that it is—evidence found in the comparison between rabbinical students and others. Though their course of study is longer and their debt load higher, rabbinical students, as a group, have most of the characteristics of “quality” that other groups say they want. They are almost uniformly young, headed for ordained service, seeking positions in congregations, and of high academic ability. Compared with Christian students, they are religiously well trained and enculturated. A number of factors account for these striking differences, but certainly key among them is the high status of the rabbinate, which goes hand-in-hand with starting salaries as much as twice as high as beginning salaries for Christian ministers.

Other factors may also make the rabbinate attractive, including the esteem in which Jewish congregations hold their rabbis and the freedom, even encouragement, rabbis have to be active in civic and cultural activities. Pay, however, 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 express their priorities in financial and other concrete forms.

Second, theological schools should raise entrance and completion standards. The obstacles to any such move are formidable. Most seminaries admit as many students as possible to generate much-needed tuition income or to justify their existence. Sponsoring religious bodies expect and sometimes require them to accept marginal students. These pressures make it improbable that any effort to achieve higher minimum standards by regulation would succeed.

Further, unlike many other professional schools, seminaries do not form a unitary system, and therefore it is not possible to limit strictly the number of schools in the system or the number of places for students in those schools, as medical schools do. Given the diversity of seminaries, neither would it be fair to rank them comparatively based on selectivity and other factors that are goads to quality in fields such as business and law.

There are, however, things that theological schools can do to address the question of quality. One approach deserving exploration is the creation of an honors track within existing programs. This would signal an emphasis on quality while not requiring any school to exclude from its basic program students who are sent to them by their sponsoring religious body. If, in fact, the programs produce abler graduates, employers will seek them out, thereby motivating schools to recruit and educate more students by the honors route. The impact on quality would be slow but real, especially if accrediting standards were created to ensure that the honors designation is more than decorative.

Without minimizing the difficulties, theological schools and the religious groups they serve must ask themselves the hard questions: Do we care about the quality of religious leaders we educate? If so, how shall we join forces to set higher standards and to meet them?