

Seminary aims to offer free education

by [John Dart](#) in the [December 13, 2011](#) issue

More than half of the graduates at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary this year borrowed an average of \$20,600 to earn their master's degree—not an uncommon handicap for seminarians today as they await a call to ministry or seek other employment.

But in a bold venture believed to be unique for mainline seminaries, the Kentucky school affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recently adopted a long-range plan to provide full scholarships for all master's degree candidates by fall 2015 and stipends to cover living expenses by fall 2021.

Many students enter graduate studies already encumbered by loans from their undergraduate days. At Louisville Seminary, officials said that incoming students that have such debt have owed between \$23,000 and \$25,000. Annual tuition at Louisville is about \$10,200 a year.

In order to achieve the full-scholarship goal, Louisville Seminary reduced its master's program enrollment from its current average of 150 students down to 130. "Capping the size of entering classes will make full funding of each student an achievable goal with a relatively short time frame," said Patrick Cecil, vice-president and CFO at Louisville.

Daniel Aleshire, executive director of the Association of Theological Schools, said in an interview that the recently announced plan "truly addresses the student debt issue in a positive way."

Seminaries within the Southern Baptist Convention have not charged tuition. "They charge a small fee that grows a little bit each year," Aleshire said, "but there are few theological schools that don't charge tuition besides SBC schools—funding comes from the denomination or from other sources."

Aleshire added that Louisville Seminary's plan is unique for mainline churches in two ways: "One, by not educating more students than the church can use, and two, by graduating students with virtually no debt so they are free to accept a wide range of opportunities." It has been widely reported that ever-fewer congregations can employ a full-time pastor—and without a decent-paying ministry new graduates cannot make enough money fast enough to pay off their debt.

Scholarships covering tuition and living expenses, to be funded by a fund-raising campaign over ten years, may put the seminary in position to admit Presbyterians and other students "with real potential for leadership," as Michael Jenkins, the school's president, put it. "Liberated from additional educational debt, our graduates will be enabled to serve wherever God calls them."

Dean-elect Susan R. Garrett added: "Emphasis will be on achieving the highest quality, rather than quantity, of entering students. At the same time, we will seek to admit classes that reflect the racial, ethnic, national and theological diversity in which our graduates will serve." The comprehensive plan envisions preparing seminarians for interfaith dialogue, expanding its black church studies and maintaining updated communications techniques.

"At this time, I don't know of another school, at least in the mainline, that is contemplating reduced enrollment and increased endowment so [it] can provide tuition and living expenses," said Aleshire of the Pittsburgh-based ATS, which oversees certification policies for about 260 seminaries in the U.S. and Canada.

The step "makes sense" for a denomination like the PCUSA, he said, "where there are more seminary graduates in the past several years seeking ordination of word and sacrament than there are congregations open to first-call pastors."