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Introducing the Seminary to Early Ministry Study

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ABSTRACT

The Seminary to Early Ministry (SEM) Study is a mixed-method, prospective study designed to provide high-quality empirical data on student formation in theological education. The study will use a series of surveys and in-depth interviews to track three cohorts of divinity school students from matriculation into the early years of their careers. As a result, the study hopes to compile the most comprehensive longitudinal dataset on theological education to date, enabling researchers to better understand who attends seminaries, how seminaries form students, and how the training of future religious leaders can be improved.

KEYWORDS

Seminary; empirical; research; formation; theological education

Introduction

While the formation of ministers serving religious communities has always been a central function of theological education, there has been little consensus over the past century on how these institutions should form their students. This has led to a series of debates concerning the fundamental nature of theological education and the methods it ought to use to train ministers. In particular, there has been widespread disagreement on the skills theological schools should prioritize. Should theological education focus on spiritual formation, the building of a "pastoral imagination," developing practical pastoral competencies (e.g., preaching, counseling, and balancing church budgets), or academic knowledge? Should theological education be located primarily in academia, within the church, or in some hybrid context? Is residential or nonresidential training for clergy best? How should theological education adapt to a changing cultural environment?

In the early twentieth century, scholars widely considered theological education as a form of training tailored to prepare ministers for the practice of ministry (Robert L. Kelly 1924; Brown and May 1934; Douglass n.d.; Fielding 1966). Many in the latter

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half of the century critiqued this view for its tendency to prioritize practical skills at the expense of future ministers' spiritual formation and academic education in ecclesial history, theology, and textual interpretation (Niebuhr 1956; Farley 1988; Kelsey 1992; 1993). These critics argued that, instead of reducing itself to a kind of technical training, theological education should aim to be a comprehensive formation that produces a certain kind of person formed in a moral, ethical, and spiritual habitus of religious leadership.

These debates have persisted and have since prompted a secondary set of questions concerning current and ideal models of theological education. Chief among them is the consideration of the appropriate context for the training and preparation of ministers. While some advocate rooting theological education in the actual practice of ministry itself (Banks 1999; Barker and Martin 2004), others – perhaps, most – advocate for keeping theological education primarily within the academy, regarding it as an indispensable resource for developing the skills necessary for faithfully interpreting sacred texts and for grounding students in church history (Aleshire 2008).

There is also a host of literature focused on pedagogical models and curricula. The areas that have garnered the most attention in recent decades include the use of technology and how online versus onsite programs affect outcomes in theological education (Ascough 2002; Hess 2005; Delamarter 2005; Delamarter et al. 2007); how the increasing diversity among students (including age, gender, ethnicity, and denominational affiliations) warrants changes in pedagogical practices (Wheeler and Farley 1991; Aleshire and McCarthy 2002; Evans 2007; T. D. Lincoln 2012); the influence of globalization on the traditional curricula of church history, theology, and interfaith work (Stackhouse 1988; Browning 1993; Ott 2006); and how the educational culture contributes to the overall formation of students (Carroll et al. 1997; Aleshire 2018; 2021).

Finally, there is a rich body of literature on theological education outside of the North American context. For example, there has been a range of empirical research conducted in Australia examining the reasons for student attrition (Matthews 2018), the sources of spiritual formation in seminary (Hussey 2018), buffers of stress during theological training (Craddock 1996), and how theological education prepares students for ministry (Bain and Hussey 2018). Beyond Australia, researchers have studied the role of personality in theological education in the United Kingdom and Italy (Francis, Craig, and Butler 2007; Francis and Crea 2019); whether higher education impacts students' faith in the United Kingdom (Village 2019); and the comparative impact distance education has on student formation in New Zealand and South Africa (Nichols 2014; Knoetze 2022). While this research is too often overlooked, it provides key insight for improving theological education that may, at times, be generalizable to a wider context.

Nevertheless, significant gaps in our knowledge remain. As Timothy Lincoln notes, "despite a lively literature debating the purposes of theological education, there are far fewer studies of how theological education affects students" (Lincoln 2010, p. 218). Much of the conversation about theological education has been historical or focused on pedagogical theories. Most data are cross-sectional and come from convenience samples, which undermines the ability to make generalizable claims. Well-designed empirical studies of theological education are still few and far between. The major source of quantitative data on students comes from the Entering Student, Graduate

Student, and Alumni Questionnaires of the Association of Theological Schools (https://www.ats.edu/resources/student-data/questionnaires), which have limited domains and unknown response rates, and which may not necessarily be representative. Quantitative and qualitative data that holistically examines how divinity schools form students are needed to inform and adjudicate ongoing debates regarding theological education.

In 2019, we established the Seminary to Early Ministry (SEM) Study to begin to address the lack of comprehensive longitudinal data on students in theological education. The SEM Study is a mixed-method, prospective study comprised of three entering classes from a United Methodist divinity school in the United States. It will help inform our understanding of who goes to seminary, why they choose to attend, and how students change during their time in the program – including any changes in students' sense of calling, career and vocational plans, theological views, physical and mental health, and religious and spiritual lives. The SEM Study will also track what happens to students *after* divinity school, following the three focal cohorts of students into their early careers to better understand whether and how divinity school helps prepare students for careers in religious leadership. It will explore what aspects of the program were most helpful and where theological training has fallen short. The goal of this study is to prompt further empirically informed discussion on the structure, nature, and future of theological education.

Methodology

The SEM Study is currently underway and has received formal approval from the Duke Campus Institutional Review Board. Three waves of participants are enrolled, consisting of students who matriculated into their program in Fall 2019, Fall 2020, and Fall 2021. Each of these cohorts consists of master's-level students at a United Methodist divinity school in the United States. These students participate in one of four academic programs: the Traditional Master of Divinity (M.Div.) program, a three-year full-time (or four-year part-time) residential professional degree program traditionally focused on preparing students for Christian ministry; the Hybrid Master of Divinity (H-M.Div.) program, a four-year part-time version of the M.Div. program that consists of one-week on-campus intensive and remote coursework (launched in Fall 2021); the Master of Theological Studies (M.T.S.) program, a two-year academic program traditionally focused on preparing students for doctoral studies, teaching, or research; and the Master of Arts in Christian Practice (M.A.C.P.) program, a part-time hybrid program focused on enriching students currently in lay professions.

This is a mixed-method study that employs surveys of all students enrolled in these four programs along with qualitative in-depth interviews with a randomly selected group of M.Div. and H-M.Div. students. Students take a series of self-administered surveys at various points throughout their academic program: round one at matriculation, round two halfway through their program, and round three at graduation. After this point, participants will take surveys every two years for approximately four to eight years. Following the same timeline, selected M.Div. students are interviewed once per year throughout their academic program and then every two years thereafter.

To date, we have conducted five survey rounds: round one with the entering classes of 2019, 2020, and 2021 and round two with the entering classes of 2019 and 2020.

Table 1. The response rate to the SEM Study surveys by round, entering class, and degree program.

	Round 1					Round 2				
Entering Class of	M.A.C.P.	M.T.S.	M.Div.	H-M.Div.	Total	M.A.C.P.	M.T.S.	M.Div.	H-M.Div.	Total
2019	41%	83%	81%	–	76%	62%	89%	81%	–	80%
2020	71%	61%	79%	–	75%	50%	79%	77%	–	73%
2021	59%	73%	90%	86%	83%	–	–	–	–	–

The response rates for each degree program and round can be found in Table 1. Overall, these have been strong. Among all eligible participants, our response rate was 78% for round one and 77% for round two. Our response rate has been particularly high among M.Div. and H-M.Div. students. Between these two programs, our response rate has been 83% in round one and 79% in round two.

A total of 414 individuals took at least one survey. Overall, 49% of our sample identifies as female. Our mean age, which is calculated as the age participants were when they completed their first survey, is 30.2 (SD = 11.1). Our sample is 73% White, 15% Black, 5% Asian, and 6% who identify as multiracial or with a different racial background. Finally, 49% of our participants are mainline Protestant, 39% are evangelical Protestant, 6% are Black Protestant, and 4% identify with another or no religious group. Further details on the demographic composition of each cohort can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. •••

	Wave 1, Round 1 ($N = 125$)	Wave 1, Round 2 (New) ($N = 15$)	Wave 2, Round 1 ($N = 123$)	Wave 2, Round 2 (New) ($N = 8$)	Wave 3, Round 1 ($N = 143$)	Overall ($N = 414$)
Gender						
Female	61 (48.8%)	7 (46.7%)	59 (48.0%)	3 (37.5%)	74 (51.7%)	204 (49.3%)
Male	64 (51.2%)	8 (53.3%)	63 (51.2%)	5 (62.5%)	66 (46.2%)	206 (49.8%)
Other	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)	3 (2.1%)	4 (1.0%)
Age						
Mean (SD)	29.5 (10.7)	32.1 (11.6)	31.4 (11.9)	27.9 (10.1)	29.6 (10.8)	30.2 (11.1)
Median (Min, Max)	25.0 (21.0, 74.0)	25.0 (23.0, 53.0)	26.0 (21.0, 66.0)	24.0 (22.0, 52.0)	25.0 (21.0, 67.0)	25.0 (21.0, 74.0)
Missing	1 (0.8%)	3 (20.0%)	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)	4 (2.8%)	9 (2.2%)
Race						
Asian	8 (6.4%)	2 (13.3%)	7 (5.7%)	1 (12.5%)	3 (2.1%)	21 (5.1%)
Black	21 (16.8%)	4 (26.7%)	19 (15.4%)	1 (12.5%)	16 (11.2%)	61 (14.7%)
Other or Multiracial	10 (8.0%)	0 (0%)	4 (3.3%)	1 (12.5%)	10 (7.0%)	25 (6.0%)
White	85 (68.0%)	9 (60.0%)	92 (74.8%)	5 (62.5%)	110 (76.9%)	301 (72.7%)
Native American	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (2.1%)	3 (0.7%)
Missing	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.7%)	3 (0.7%)
Religion						
Black Protestant	7 (5.6%)	2 (13.3%)	11 (8.9%)	0 (0%)	5 (3.5%)	25 (6.0%)
Catholic	5 (4.0%)	0 (0%)	2 (1.6%)	2 (25.0%)	3 (2.1%)	12 (2.9%)
Evangelical Protestant	51 (40.8%)	6 (40.0%)	50 (40.7%)	3 (37.5%)	53 (37.1%)	163 (39.4%)
Jewish	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.2%)
Mainline Protestant	60 (48.0%)	6 (40.0%)	57 (46.3%)	3 (37.5%)	77 (53.8%)	203 (49.0%)
No Religion	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (1.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.5%)
Other	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.8%)	0 (0%)	2 (1.4%)	3 (0.7%)
Missing	1 (0.8%)	1 (6.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (2.1%)	5 (1.2%)

The second tier of participation involves one-on-one in-depth interviews with a subset of participants enrolled in the M.Div. program in each wave. We selected 36 participants from the first cohort (2019), 30 from the second (2020), and 36 from the entering class of 2021 (i.e., 24 M.Div. and 12 H-M.Div. students) to participate in this portion of the study. To select these students, we used stratified random sampling from the pool of students who responded to the first round of our surveys. The interview samples are representative of the broader cohort of M.Div. and H-M.Div. students in terms of gender, race, and denominational affiliations.

In-depth interviews occur shortly after each round of survey data collection. They are conducted both in-person and remotely (generally by Zoom, a few by phone) by a trained qualitative interviewer and last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. To date, we have completed five rounds of in-depth interviews: rounds one and two with the entering class of 2019 (Fall 2019, Winter 2021), rounds one and two with the entering class of 2020 (Fall 2020, Winter 2022), and round one with the entering class of 2021 (Fall 2021). Because SEM Study data are sensitive in nature and difficult to de-identify, they will not be made publicly available. However, they can be accessed with proper institutional approvals in place.

Survey domains

Our self-administered surveys contain a wide range of measures assessing a variety of domains. Rather than prespecifying our analytical goals and limiting our data collection to these areas, our study casts a wide net, providing researchers with the latitude to understand who enrolls in divinity school and how their experiences shape them. In addition to collecting detailed demographic and background information, our surveys cover six primary domains at each data collection time point. These domains are both theoretically and practically derived. In developing our instruments, we identified key themes that arose during a comprehensive literature review on graduate education and from consulting experts in the fields of sociology and psychology of religion and divinity school faculty and staff.

A table detailing our survey measures can be found in the appendix. Whenever possible, we used validated psychometric scales to measure psychological factors including depression (CESD-R) and personality (HEXACO) (Eaton et al. 2004; Ashton and Lee 2009; Lee and Ashton 2018). For items measuring beliefs and attitudes, we sought to replicate items found in major surveys including the General Social Survey (https://gss.norc.org/), surveys from Pew Research Center (https://www.pewresearch.org/), and the National Survey of Religious Leaders (Chaves, Roso, and Holleman 2022). Finally, we internally developed items measuring factors specific to our research sample. The six domains covered in the survey are described below.

Divinity school experiences

There are two facets of this domain. First, it covers students' experiences with the programmatic aspects of their divinity school education. These include participants' experiences in the classroom, their spiritual formation groups, their field education internships, and how the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic

impacted each of these. This domain also includes aspects of students' lives that divinity school often directly impacts, such as their career aspirations, finances, and social networks.

Religious practices and experiences

Spiritual formation is central to much of the discourse on the nature and purpose of theological education (Williamson and Sandage 2009; Aleshire 2018; Hall, Edwards, and Wang 2016; Aleshire 2021). Our surveys consequently track several aspects of students' religious lives. First, they ask about our participants' religious identities, including the affiliation of their parents, partners, and current and previous religious congregations. Next, the surveys probe students about their spiritual practices, asking them whether they keep the Sabbath; how frequently they pray, read the Bible, and attend religious services; and how much they give to charities. Finally, they contain scales assessing students' levels of spirituality and the extent to which they struggle with various aspects of religion or spirituality.

Physical health

Clergy have well-documented negative health outcomes and behaviors (Proeschold-Bell and McDevitt 2012; Bopp and Baruth 2014; Proeschold-Bell and Byassee 2018). Unfortunately, our present understanding of the causal pathways leading to these issues is limited. For this reason, our surveys track students' physical health behaviors and characteristics including their sleep, diet, exercise, substance use, and physical traits, such as height and weight. By tracking these longitudinally, we will better understand when and how clergy become unhealthy.

Mental health

Similar to physical health, examining the mental health of students entering divinity school and how this changes as they proceed through school and into the early years of their careers is vital for holistically understanding clergy mental health. Our surveys use a variety of measures to track various components of students' mental health, including, but not limited to, depression, anxiety, stress, loneliness, and burnout. By analyzing these longitudinally, we will better understand the impact theological education has on mental health and whether there are key timepoints during students' training in which they could use additional support.

Personality traits

Our surveys tracked students' personality traits using two measures: the HEXACO Personality Inventory (Ashton and Lee 2009; Lee and Ashton 2018) and the Tolerance for Ambiguity Scale (Budner 1962). We measure these characteristics in our first survey and will do this again at graduation. This will provide us with an understanding of the personalities of students who choose theological education

and how, if at all, divinity school shapes personality. Moreover, we will be able to examine the ways that personality shapes and/or moderates other outcomes, such as career aspirations, theological views, academic experiences, and mental and physical health.

Overall, many of the items we use overlap with those of major national surveys, including the General Social Survey and Add Health. The SEM Study's design consequently enables us not only to track how our participants are changing over time, but to compare them to other national samples and longitudinal studies. While doing this requires controlling for baseline differences between our sample and others, our data allow us to analyze how divinity school students differ from the general population and how changes that occur throughout students' training compare to the typical life course of people outside of seminary.

Interview domains

The in-depth interviews cover a range of thematic areas with some topics, such as career plans and theological views, repeating each year and others, such as religious history, being covered at only one time point. Generally speaking, students' interview responses add nuance and complexity to our survey data, allowing us to dig deeper into their experiences, views, future plans, and relationships. Below, we review several key topics covered in our interviews, including those that repeat across time. A complete list of the topics we explore and their collection timepoints can be found in Table 3. The interview guides are located in the appendix.

A key feature of our approach to in-depth interviews (or IDIs) is the tailoring of interview guides to each student's previous responses. Before each round, interviewers review the student's previous transcripts and survey responses in order to design targeted questions and probes specific to the student. For example, interviewers may summarize previous interview responses and ask students to reflect on whether, how, and why their plans, views, or responses may have changed since the last interview. Alternatively, the interviewer may highlight changes in the student's views or behaviors identified in the survey data and ask students to comment and reflect on those changes and the factors that lead to them.

Table 3. •••

Year	Domains
Year 1 (Fall)	Religious History (including religious upbringing)
	Calling and Career Plans
	Theological Views
	Initial Academic Experiences
Year 2 (Winter)	Check-in: Career Plans
	Check-in: Theological Views
	Social Life at Seminary
	Inclusion and Discrimination
	Academic Experiences
Year 3 (Spring)	Seminary Experiences and Impacts
	Theological Views
	Career Plans and Preparation
	Religious and Spiritual Formation
	Physical and Mental Health
	Finances

Religious history

Anecdotal evidence and popular discourse suggest that the kinds of people who enroll in seminary are changing, as are students' motivations and goals for doing so. By soliciting a detailed religious history from students in the fall of their first year, the SEM Study seeks to identify the most common pathways, experiences, and social interactions that lead people to enroll in an M.Div. program. Students are asked to describe their religious upbringing and then to trace their religious lives up through the present (i.e., their first semester). We prompt students to recount formative experiences and turning points and to identify the people, groups, and organizations that have had an impact on their faith lives, generally, and their decision to enroll in seminary, specifically. These rich life histories provide a strong foundation for understanding the changing composition of seminary students and a baseline from which to follow students' academic experiences and career paths (Johnston and Eagle 2022).

Theological views

It is assumed that seminary deepens students' theological knowledge and provides space for students to identify and articulate their personal theological position on key issues. Yet, there is little empirical data tracing whether and how students' theological views change or evolve during their time at divinity school. In our interviews, we ask targeted questions about theological views in each round in order to identify and account for change over time. In the first round, students are asked to describe their general theological orientation and degree of theological preparation prior to enrollment and to discuss theological issues and ideas they have struggled with. We also ask students to share their views on core theological issues such as the Bible, Jesus, and evangelism and on several issues related to sexuality (i.e., consensual sex before marriage, same-sex marriage, and the ordination of LGBTQ + clergy). In the second round, we ask students to reflect on whether and how the M.Div. program has impacted their theological views. We ask students to reflect on theological struggles they mentioned in round one and account for any changes in their views identified in the survey data (e.g., changes in views on same-sex marriage from round one to round two). Before graduation (round three), we will repeat the same set of theological questions asked in round one. This will allow us to directly compare students' responses at matriculation (round one) and graduation (round three).

Career plans and preparation

The M.Div. program is traditionally understood to be a training program for those who plan to pursue pastoral ministry. However, a growing number of students are entering the program unsure of what career path or occupational role they plan to pursue after graduation. At the same time, some portion of students change or modify their career plans while in divinity school. As with theological views, we ask targeted questions about career plans at each interview in order to examine when and why some students change career plans, or, for those who enter unsure, what aspects of the program are most useful in identifying and discerning their future career path. In

round one, students are asked about their call to ministry, decision to attend seminary, and future career plans. In round two, students are asked to reflect on whether, how, and why their career plans may have changed. And finally, in round three, students are again asked to describe their career plans and to reflect on the resources and experiences most helpful in the discernment process. They are also asked in this round to talk about their career expectations and to reflect on whether and how the M.Div. program has prepared them for their future career.

Spiritual formation

Personal faith and spiritual formation are considered foundational components of seminary training and good religious leadership, especially for those entering pastoral ministry. In our study, we ask students to describe their personal faith life at each interview and to reflect on whether and how their faith is changing year over year. We include prompts for students to discuss their involvement in a local church and attendance at on-campus chapel services as well as their personal spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, or Bible study, and their relationship to God. At graduation, students are asked to reflect explicitly on whether and in what ways they feel United Methodist divinity school in the United States emphasized or facilitated their personal spiritual formation as well as the barriers or challenges they faced in their spiritual lives during their time in the program. Together, these data will present a more nuanced picture of whether and how divinity school facilitates students' spiritual formation and complement our survey measures.

Strengths and limitations

The SEM Study's main strength is that it is the first major longitudinal study of divinity school students to follow them through their program and into the initial years of their careers. By collecting mixed-method longitudinal data on divinity school students, the study will combine interview and survey findings to provide rich data on how theological education affects students and trains them for their careers.

The clearest limitation of the SEM Study is its generalizability. It is currently only tracking participants at one mainline Protestant divinity school in the United States. The types of students enrolling at this divinity school may differ from others. We know, for example, that our cohort is younger and contains more women than most theological schools in North America (Association of Theological Schools 2021; p. 45). Moreover, we cannot be certain our students' experiences in divinity school are like those at other institutions, especially those outside of North America. While the study will provide a thorough look into how students change over time in one divinity school, future research at other seminaries and divinity schools is necessary to determine how generalizable our study is to other contexts. Such a project would give researchers and practitioners a clearer picture of the varied landscape of theological education along with the tools to assess the relative efficacy of the latest developments in theological education, including the rising use of competency-based theological education among ATS institutions.

However, this limitation also comes with benefits. By working with just one institution, we can hold contextual factors steady while analyzing students' varied trajectories. Moreover, our familiarity with this divinity school allows us to better understand its culture and programs, enhancing our ability to measure and analyze student experiences and outcomes. These factors combined will enable us to develop more informed theories of how theological education forms its students.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on this study is also a strength and limitation. Because the pandemic has fundamentally altered students' experiences since Spring 2020, COVID-19 has impacted each of the study's cohorts in different ways. While the limitations of this are obvious (i.e., we do not have a cohort unaffected by the pandemic), COVID-19's influence on the study comes with a clear benefit. By analyzing the various trajectories of students impacted by COVID-19 in different ways, the pandemic has provided us with a natural experiment whereby we can compare the effects of unexpected remote education (Fall 2020 – Spring 2021) to a traditional academic year (Fall 2019 – March 2020).

Conclusion

The SEM Study is the first major comprehensive longitudinal study of divinity school students that follows students through school and into the early years of their careers. It was designed to address the longstanding need for empirical data on how theological education forms its students and prepares them for their careers. By conducting a series of surveys and in-depth interviews with students throughout their time in school and after graduation, the study will provide a uniquely detailed snapshot of who attends divinity school and will track how these students change through their education and into the early years of their careers. The domains the SEM Study is investigating are myriad. They include students' divinity school experiences, beliefs and attitudes, religious practices, physical health, mental health, and personality. This robust set of survey and interview data will enable us to move beyond theory-driven conversations about theological education and empirically consider how it is forming students.

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