

# Average age of students rising: emerging opportunities for theological schools

BY CHRISTOPHER THE

*With pastoral aspirations for only one-third of entering students, theological schools continue to face a pivotal challenge: adapting to evolving vocational trajectories in ever-widening contexts.*

In recent years, the landscape of theological education has undergone historic shifts. The emerging realities ATS observes in the [fall 2024 Entering Student Questionnaire \(ESQ\) data](#) reveal several key trends that present both challenges and opportunities for school administration leaders.

**As reported in the [latest Questionnaires \(Qs\) webinar featuring the Fall 2024 ESQ Total School Profile](#), the average age of entering students overall is rising to 40.4 years old.** This [trend toward an older student population](#) suggests a growing interest in theological education among mid-career professionals. Administrators should consider tailoring programs and support services to meet the unique needs of these mature students, who often juggle academic pursuits with work and family responsibilities. Notably, 14.8 percent of degree-seeking students are aged 56 or older, indicating a substantial cohort of late-career and retirement-age students (ESQ fall 2024, Table 4).

**ESQ sample data offer the most robust and longitudinally comparable trends available anywhere for new matriculants at ATS schools.** These student data can be used to compare with the census-level, institutional data your school reports whether annually or biannually (like age



range). Continued diversification of the student body suggests that school leaders prioritize creating inclusive environments that celebrate this diversity and ensure that curricula and campus cultures reflect the experiences of all students.

**Another trend is the significant, stable preference for online and hybrid learning formats.** With 43.5 percent of students planning to take all their courses online (ESQ fall 2024, Table 20), institutions must invest in robust digital infrastructure, pedagogical approaches, and cocurricular strategies that ensure high-quality online education through theological formation. This shift also presents an opportunity to expand reach and accessibility to a broader range of students, particularly those balancing work and family commitments.

**Financial considerations remain a critical factor in students' decision-making processes.** The percentage of students for whom financial aid was of "great" or "greatest"

**Program Average Ages since 2020**  
 Source: ESQ-E (2020–21, 2021–22, 2022–23, 2023–24, 2024), Q5, Q1

ESQ TSP	MDiv	MA	ThM	DMin	OtherProfDr	PhD	Non-degree
2020–21	35.9	38.2	40.1	47.8	42.8	36.5	37.3
2021–22	35.9	37.6	40.2	47.8	43.4	38.9	45.1
2022–23	36.2	38.6	38.2	48.3	45.0	39.9	40.4
2023–24	37.3	38.9	40.9	47.8	45.5	43.2	44.7
2024	36.8	40.1	38.5	47.6	46.9	41.1	42.3

significance increased from 45.7 percent in the past five years to 51.4 percent in 2024 (ESQ fall 2024, Table 11). Additionally, 7.5 percent of new student respondents reported educational debt exceeding \$80,000 (ESQ fall 2024, Table 8). These trends underscore the need for innovative financial aid strategies and financial literacy programs to support students throughout their academic journeys. It's worth noting that 58.5 percent of all respondents reported bringing no educational debt (ESQ fall 2024, Table 8), suggesting a potential opportunity for targeted financial planning support for those with and without existing debt.

***Interestingly, the percentage of students expecting to become pastors, priests, or ministers of congregations after graduation has decreased to 21.7 percent (ESQ fall 2024, Table 23-B).*** Inclusive of multiple pastoral vocational aspirations, that's less than one-third of the incoming class. This shift suggests a broadening of vocational interests among theological students. School leaders may wish to consider diversifying program offerings and career

development resources while employing life-stage specific strategies to align with these evolving aspirations. The data indicates a growing interest in non-pastoral positions such as chaplaincy, counseling, and teaching, highlighting the need for specialized tracks within theological programs.

In conclusion, the 2024 ESQ data highlights the need for theological schools to adapt to an increasingly diverse, older, and digitally-oriented student body with evolving financial needs and career aspirations. By proactively addressing these trends, school administration leaders can ensure their institutions remain relevant, inclusive, and effective in preparing the next generation of theological leaders. This may involve developing specialized programs for bivocational ministry, enhancing online learning capabilities, providing comprehensive financial counseling, and expanding career services to support a wider range of vocational paths within and beyond traditional pastoral roles. For questions about the ATS Student Questionnaires, contact [qmail@ats.edu](mailto:qmail@ats.edu).



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