

**Prepared by the Center for the Study of Theological Education  
Auburn Theological Seminary**

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**The Context of Theological Education Today**

Contemporary seminaries face strenuous challenges.

Enrollments in the traditional core seminary program—the residential Master of Divinity—have been flat for more than a decade. The pool of applicants for the degree in its traditional format is stagnant.

One reason that traditional residential M.Div. programs are not growing is that the profile of prospective students has changed. Fifty years ago, most students enrolled in seminary immediately after college. They were single and highly mobile. Today there is still a group of young post-college students. In fact, this cohort appears to be growing again, after at least two decades in which it has diminished in size. Still, however, seminary is a less common choice for young college graduates than it was for most of the history of theological education in this country. Meanwhile, beginning in the 1970s as women entered seminaries in record numbers, older students began to enroll in M.Div. programs. By 1999, the median age of an entering student had risen to 37. Older students often have family ties that prevent them from moving to a distant campus and financial obligations that keep them from enrolling full-time. Thus fewer students now move to enroll in traditional campus-based programs; more students commute to a seminary close to home, live off-campus, and study part-time.

At the same time that the student profile has changed, the leadership needs of the church have taken new forms, especially in mainline Protestantism. Declining membership has left many congregations without the resources to employ a full-time clergy leader. To help these churches, many denominations, the ECUSA prominent among them, have begun to experiment with various arrangements for local training. Most mainline clergy are still seminary-trained, but some predict that local programs that meet the needs of less mobile students will become more prevalent in the future.

In the face of these changes, theological schools seeking to increase their enrollments have two options. They can compete with other schools for students in the existing pool of prospective M.Div. students. Or they can devise new programs—Master's degrees or non-traditional formats for the M.Div.—that attract students who otherwise would not have attended a theological school. Both these strategies require investment of resources. Students seeking a traditional M.Div. program of full-time study and campus residence gravitate to schools with strong reputations and generous financial aid. New programs bring substantial costs for development and marketing.

Seminary finances have also been a challenge for many institutions. The costs in all of higher education have risen sharply in recent decades. For seminaries, the increases have been especially steep. Fifty years ago, they operated cheaply, largely unregulated, relying on the personal dedication of their faculty and small staffs to keep salaries and other costs low. Now they have become part of the world of higher education. Government regulators and accreditors mandate policies and programs that are expensive to implement. Competition with college and university religion departments for faculty and with other non-profits for skilled administrators has raised the level of salaries. And many seminaries occupy buildings on which maintenance has been long deferred.

Meeting these financial challenges is not easy. Denominations and congregations, a traditional source of support for seminaries, face their own difficulties. Their financial contributions to the schools associated with them have declined, and in some cases (the ECUSA is one) dwindled to small amounts. Most of the types of government funding that provide basic support for most of higher education are not available to seminaries. The major revenue stream that supports colleges and universities, tuition, is not as large a part of the income of most mainline seminaries, for two reasons: (1) tuitions must be set low and financial assistance offered in light of the limited earning prospects of seminary graduates and (2) most seminaries do not have large enough enrollments to generate substantial revenue, even if students could pay high tuition. These conditions leave seminaries heavily dependent on current gifts, income from endowments, and, if they are part of a larger configuration, subsidy support from a parent institution.

### **Theological Education in the ECUSA**

The trends just enumerated affect the ECUSA, often in intensified form, because the Episcopal Church has more seminaries in proportion to the number of students than any other denomination. As the data in this section show, most of the schools are small. All rely on a relatively small denomination and its members for support and draw from the same small pool of prospective students.

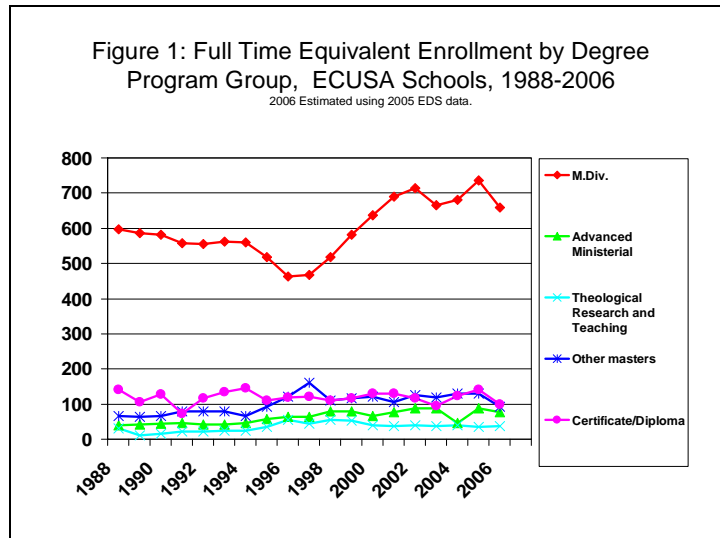
#### Enrollment in Episcopal seminaries and location of Episcopal students

Figure 1, below, shows the numbers of full-time equivalent students in ten of the eleven ECUSA seminaries.<sup>1</sup>

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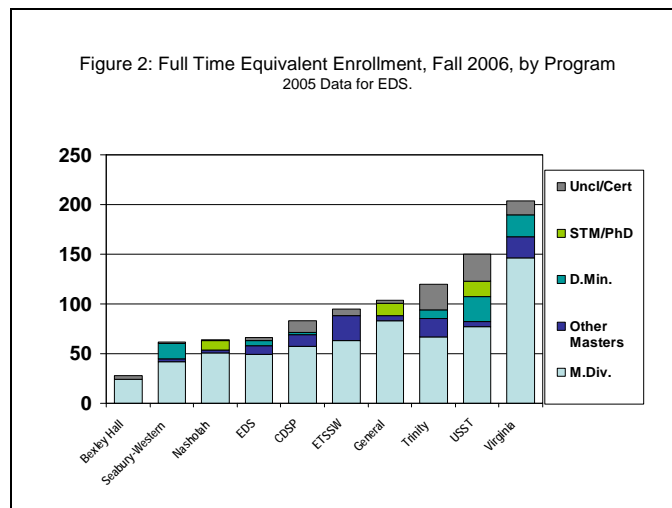
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<sup>1</sup> Berkeley Divinity School's data are reported to the ATS as part of Yale Divinity School, and are therefore not included in the chart.



As the graph shows, the numbers of students in all programs have fluctuated somewhat over the past two decades. Overall, however, the trend is flat: today the numbers are about what they were ten years ago. In the core program, the M.Div., there are only about 50 more FTE students than there were twenty years ago. In this respect, Episcopal enrollment resembles that of other mainline denominations, in which long-term growth is modest at best.

Figure 2 shows full-time equivalent enrollments of students in all denominations in ten of the ECUSA's eleven seminaries. Only one school has more than 100 FTE M.Div. students. Only three schools have more than 100 FTE students in all programs.



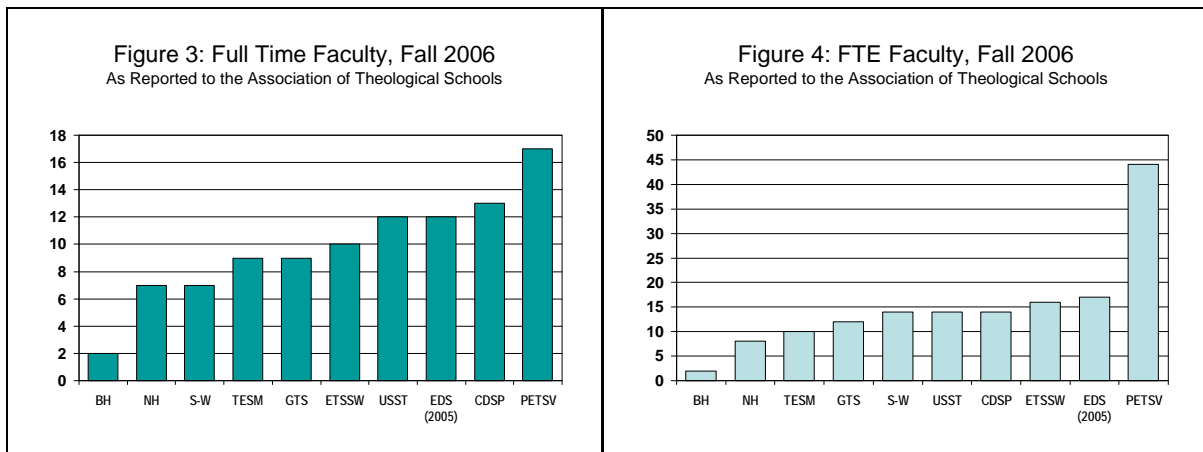
Not all Episcopal theological students are enrolled in ECUSA seminaries. Nearly one-third of students who list their affiliation as Episcopal are enrolled in theological schools not affiliated with the ECUSA. Some of these students in non-ECUSA seminaries are candidates in programs not widely offered in ECUSA schools (for instance, the Ph.D.); some are candidates for the priesthood who have received approval to enroll in a non-ECUSA school; most appear to be persons not headed for ordination or not yet accepted by their dioceses as postulants.

Information from the Church Pension Group suggests that about 20 percent of clergy ordained since 1997 graduated from a non-ECUSA institution. At least one quarter of these (the data are incomplete on this point) also completed an Anglican studies program at an ECUSA seminary. Enrollments of ECUSA students in non-ECUSA schools have, like those in ECUSA seminaries, fluctuated for the last decade or so, but generally they have remained flat.

In addition, some persons are preparing for the priesthood in local training programs that do not result in a seminary degree. Data from the Church Pension Group show that 2.4% of those ordained since 1997 were prepared in such programs. Because information about educational preparation is not available for 11% of graduates, that figure may underestimate the number of priests being trained outside of seminary programs.

### Faculty in Episcopal Seminaries

Figure 3 and Figure 4, below, show full-time and full-time equivalent faculty size in the eleven ECUSA schools (again, Berkeley is excluded). Full-time faculty members are all those persons who have faculty status and whose work assignment is 50% or more in teaching. The full-time equivalent faculty statistic includes adjunct faculty, whose contribution is calculated based on the percentage of a full teaching load that their teaching represents. Most of the ECUSA schools have small faculties. Seabury's use of adjuncts makes its FTE faculty size larger.



### Finances of Episcopal seminaries

Data are not available to make a nuanced comparison of the financial strength of Episcopal seminaries. It is clear, however, that most of them confront the financial challenges enumerated above: small size and low enrollment, resulting in very high per capita costs; low levels of financial support from the denominational and congregational sources; and, in several cases, aging physical plants on which maintenance is not current.

Information about long term investments is publicly available. It is an incomplete measure of financial strength, but it shows that with one exception, Episcopal seminaries are not highly endowed.

