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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



The Dean and Visual Communication (Part 1)

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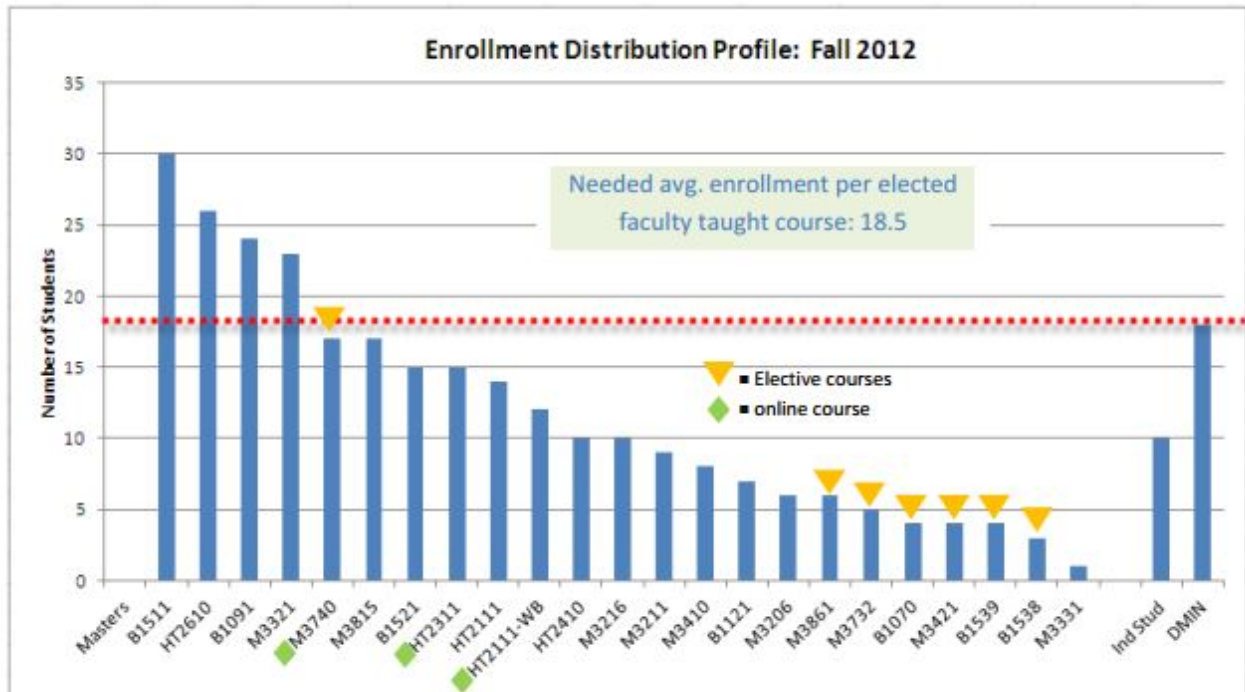
Blog Series: Theological School Deans

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Tags: teaching with media | teaching with the arts

Deans work in complex systems and, often, need to communicate complex ideas when leading Faculty to interpret problems and determine solutions. I've found that using graphic interpretation of data helps facilitate communication and interpretation of complex ideas. I've benefited greatly from the works of Edward Tufte (<http://www.edwardtufte.com/tufte>). His book on the visual display of quantitative information is a great guide. If you ever get a chance to attend one of his seminars, do. He also models excellent communication, including, lectures as they should be.

Here is one example of the use of visual communication of complex data using a cluster diagram. The purpose of this graphic is to illustrate the enrollment profile related to the economics of the curriculum. In this particular school the need is for 18.5 average class enrollment in each elected faculty taught course (represented by the red line). Achieving this ratio will meet the minimum tuition needed to cover faculty salaries based on the tuition rate at this school, a tuition-dependent model.



SOURCE: Office of the Registrar

The graphic shows the distribution in individual course enrollment from highest to lowest. Two elements are highlighted: enrollment in elective courses and online courses. Immediately evident is the fact that enrollment in courses is not meeting the minimum required level. This school needs to raise its enrollment numbers. Also evident is that elective courses cluster on the low enrollment end of the scale, well below the needed 18.5. The interpretation here is that students tend to enroll in required courses, primarily, and in elective courses in lower numbers--lower than the minimum needed. Given this data, Faculty may consider reducing or eliminating elective courses and offering more required courses. Even second sessions of the same required course will likely yield higher enrollment than an elective course.

A second observation is that when an elective course is offered online, its enrollment is significantly higher than the average enrollment in classroom elective courses. This data may suggest that Faculty should try to offer more elective courses online than in the classroom option. In similar cluster graphs from other terms a comparison was made of the instance when the same required courses were offered in two sessions: one in the classroom and one online version. In all instances, online enrollment was higher.

How Faculty chooses to interpret the data and what programmatic decisions it makes will depend on several factors, pragmatic, ideological, or philosophical. What the visual presentation of the data allows, regardless, is the capacity to grasp complex and otherwise obscure data. When data and information remains obscure, we run the risk of not identifying, understanding, and correctly interpreting dynamics, forces, or patterns that affect the life and work of the seminary.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2013/01/the-dean-and-visual-communication-part-1/>