



Center for the Study of Theological Education

**Report on a
Study of Doctoral
Programs
that Prepare Faculty
for Teaching
in Theological Schools**

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Background

In the summer of 2009, several institutions that offer support for doctoral students in theology and religion asked the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education for information about the impact of the recent financial downturn on the doctoral programs that prepare future faculty for theological schools. For the past twenty-five years, Auburn has tracked patterns of doctoral preparation of seminary faculty, publishing lists of programs that are the top suppliers of the doctorates held by such faculty, and surveying doctoral students in those programs every ten years. The most recent survey was conducted in 2003.¹ Building on these studies, Auburn Center staff designed a research project of limited scope to address questions about recent developments in the doctoral programs that prepare the majority of faculty in North American theological schools.

The project design was simple. Data on faculty doctorates obtained by the Association of Theological Schools were analyzed to update the list of the top supplier programs. Twenty-one North American institutions whose research doctorates are held by one percent or more of theological school faculty were invited to participate. Two did not respond to the invitation to participate. Several institutions had two programs sufficiently different that they are treated separately. Twenty-four programs are included in this report and are listed by type and with brief descriptions in Appendix A.

The director of each of these programs was interviewed by telephone. Many supplied quantitative data in writing as well.² Helen Blier, Ph.D., conducted the interviews and analyzed the qualitative data collected. Barbara Wheeler, Director of the Auburn Center, analyzed quantitative data. The report was written jointly by Dr. Blier and Ms. Wheeler.

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1. A report on this survey was published as *Signs of the Times: Present and Future Theological Faculty*, Barbara G. Wheeler, Sharon L. Miller and Katarina Schuth. Auburn Studies No. 10, February 2005. It is available at www.AuburnSeminary.org/CSTE.
 2. The interview protocol is attached to this report as Appendix B.

Program Types

The twenty-four programs can be categorized in two ways.

They can be divided by **religious tradition**:

- Fifteen (two-thirds) are housed in institutions that are currently or historically related to mainline Protestantism.³
- Three are located in evangelical seminaries.
- Three are offered by Roman Catholic institutions.
- Three are sponsored by multidenominational institutions.

As this report will show, many programs do not track the careers of their graduates, but it appears that most programs send most of their graduates who get teaching jobs to schools of their own religious tradition, though most send some graduates to schools of other traditions as well. Graduates of programs housed in mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic institutions are more likely to teach in theological schools of other traditions than are graduates of programs in evangelical seminaries.

Programs can also be divided by **funding pattern**.

- Thirteen receive substantial funding from the institution that houses them and collect little if any tuition from doctoral students.
- Eleven are tuition-driven. Most of these give only partial tuition grants to some of their students.

Funded and tuition-driven programs differ from each other in many ways.

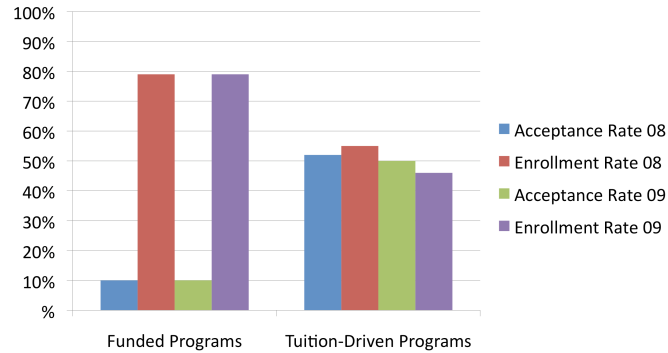
Funded programs limit the number of students they admit to those to whom they can offer full tuition remission and often substantial stipend funding as well. Funded programs attract many applications (in some cases, hundreds—one well-funded program received more than three hundred completed applications last year).

Figure 1 indicates their low acceptance rates (10 percent). Such programs also have high “yield,” that is, most of those they accept (80 percent) decide to attend.

Tuition-driven programs, by contrast, usually have no fixed number of positions to which students are admitted; they accept all who qualify for doctoral study. As a result,

3 . Some of the programs categorized as Mainline Protestant are housed in institutions that no longer claim a religious affiliation. All of them, however, offer degrees in most of the academic subject areas that comprise the curriculum of Protestant seminaries. In most cases, these programs also offer degrees in other areas usually classified as “religious studies.”

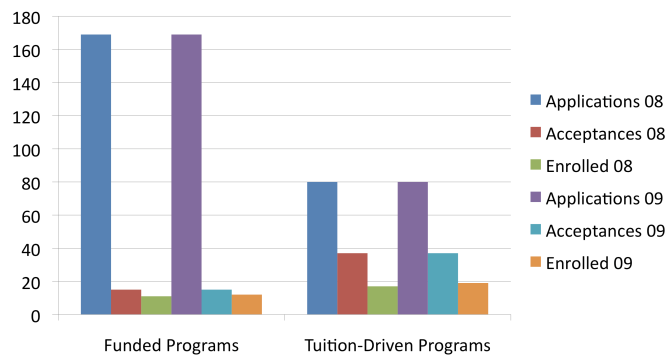
Figure 1:
**Acceptance and Enrollment Rates in 22 Top Supplier Programs,
 Funded and Tuition Driven, 2008 and 2009**



most have a higher number of students than the funded programs. Figure 1 shows that tuition-driven programs have fewer applicants and higher acceptance rates (50 percent). They also have lower yields (45 percent).

Figure 2 shows the results of the two types of funding policies. Many more students apply to the funded programs, but more than twice as many are accepted by the tuition-driven programs (funded programs accept, on average, fifteen students a year; tuition-driven program take about thirty-six students on average), and more

Figure 2:
**Average Numbers of Applications, Acceptances, and Enrollment in
 22 Top Supplier Programs, Funded and Tuition Driven, 2008 and 2009**



anecdotal evidence suggests that students in funded programs are more likely to complete their work. Therefore it is likely that the pool of potential faculty for theological schools initial enrollments in those programs would suggest.

Program Policies and Practices

Recruitment

Most of the programs surveyed do not actively recruit. Those with related master's degree programs frequently employ a least a part-time recruiter, but most of the recruitment efforts target master's rather than doctoral students. Five programs, however, perform limited active recruitment. Two of these are tuition-driven and three are funded. The recruitment typically consists of advertisements placed in popular Christian journals and higher education publications; one program also actively seeks students through guild meetings and conferences.

Where, then, do most prospective students come from? A number of programs, both tuition-driven and funded, accepted internal candidates from their own master's programs. The majority of the funded programs received applications from students enrolled at the master's level in peer institutions that offer their own funded doctoral degrees; directors do not have statistical data on this point, but when asked to identify feeder institutions from memory, they most often mentioned Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Emory, Duke, Chicago, and Vanderbilt universities. For some students, then, pursuit of the doctorate begins at the master's level. They enroll for the M.A. or M.Div. in a funded doctorate-granting school, hoping for doctoral admission there or in a similar school.⁴

Tuition-driven programs, by contrast, frequently described receiving applications from "all over," including from a number of international programs. Two tuition-driven programs said that their top candidates were often "second tier students from top tier schools." The Roman Catholic and evangelical programs frequently drew from schools with similar confessional commitments.

4. Data on doctoral students' prior degrees were not available from program directors.

Applications

Deadlines. The typical doctoral application is due in January, although five programs have pushed back the deadline to December, two have a February deadline, and three tuition-driven programs have rolling admissions.

Materials. All programs require an application form, transcripts, personal statements, and academic references. Three programs also require a reference from a church-related source. Several programs require an academic writing sample, and all but the Canadian programs ask for Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, which often figured prominently in admissions decisions.

Admissions

Criteria. The paper application is the basis on which most programs make their admissions decisions. Only five schools require interviews: four funded programs and one tuition-driven program which also has stringent confessional requirements for admission. Directors could not say how many students have seen the campus before they enroll, but most tuition-driven programs (80 percent) and more than half of the funded ones (60 percent) do not require a campus visit or facilitate it by paying for travel, housing, or meals. Most programs would prefer that students visit, but budgetary constraints have made programs reluctant to help underwrite those costs.

Asked about the primary criterion for admissions, almost all program directors use the same phrase—“academic excellence”—by which, they say, they mean high GRE scores, excellent grade-point averages, and “readiness for doctoral work” as evidenced by these statistics, the personal statement, and the writing sample where required. There is variation in the emphasis placed on references. Some program directors read references carefully and give them weight; others think they are of limited value, partly because many are based on boilerplate formats. One funded program did not enforce submission of letters from students enrolled in its own master’s program.

In both funded and tuition-driven programs, paper evidence of academic ability is very important in admissions considerations. In funded programs where slots are limited, and in some tuition-driven programs as well, a second screening occurs based on the match between student and faculty interests.

Only a few programs named other criteria as being important in admissions decisions. Four programs (two evangelical programs and two theological doctoral

programs in mainline Protestant universities that also have separate religious studies programs) mentioned the potential for offering service to the church. Most directors responded to a question about diversity in the cohort of students admitted each year by describing the range of admitted students' academic interests. Four funded programs actively consider diversity of race/ethnicity and gender when viewing the cohort of students to be accepted. The director of one of these said that the hope is that the program's admissions decisions "will change the makeup and conversation of the guild." Another program appointed a diversity advocate to review past admissions statistics and determine where the admissions process was doing well (or not) demographically. Other directors said that their admitted classes are not sufficiently diverse and noted especially the small numbers of Latino and Hispanic candidates presenting themselves for doctoral work.

Most tuition-driven programs accept all students who meet basic criteria for admissions. A few programs apply some admissions limits based on the supervision loads that faculty members or departments can handle. Funded programs limit admissions to a fixed number of students that can be supported at the level the program sets. (A few programs have more than one funding tier.) Funded programs are somewhat flexible about the allocation of their fixed numbers of slots to fields or departments. Directors of these programs said that they try for balance and even distribution, taking into account the relative quality of the applications received in each area and trying not to overload a single department. In practice, however, the distribution of students among various areas typically remained consistent from year to year.

Decision-making. Some programs have highly structured processes for deciding whom to admit; others take a more informal approach. In all programs, faculty members play a central role. Departments decide who will be admitted in their area of study; in some programs, the director of graduate study or a committee (or both) play a role in further screening the departmentally-supported finalists, constructing the waitlists, and, in those programs where the funding level is not preset, deciding who will be given how much support.

Most directors describe their admissions processes as energetic but congenial, mostly free of contention between faculty or committee members about which qualified finalists should be selected. Several programs reported recent changes in the decision-making process. Increasingly, these programs involve faculty across

disciplinary lines in choosing students as part of an overall attempt to create programs with an interdisciplinary flavor. One funded program, for instance, restructured its admissions and now requires faculty to read and discuss applications from students in fields other than their own. The changes, according to the director, resulted in fewer turf wars among departments and contributed to the reform of the program along interdisciplinary lines.

Yield. Not surprisingly, programs with generous funding have very high yield rates (80 percent, on average); tuition-driven programs enroll half or less of the students they admit. Two funded programs bring admitted students to campus in hopes of encouraging them to attend.

When asked why students decide to enroll in their programs, directors of most funded and some tuition-driven programs cite the program's prestige. Almost all funded programs (but, interestingly, none of the tuition-driven ones) say that particular faculty members are a decisive factor. Funded programs, not surprisingly, also say that their funding packages attract students. When asked why students decide not to accept their offers of admission and funding, directors of funded programs almost invariably say that family or personal circumstances intervene. The tuition-driven program directors say that the principal reason students turn them down is that they obtain better financial aid elsewhere or can't afford to attend without more support than the program can offer. Directors of two tiered-funding programs said that money is an issue for their students too.

Funding

Patterns of funding. Most *funded programs* provide all students with tuition support. The majority of students also receive stipends (which range from \$10,000 to \$25,000 per year) for a minimum of four years. Five of the funded programs also provide or subsidize health insurance, and three offer access to lower-cost graduate housing. Four of the funded programs have tiered funding, with some students receiving either partial tuition or smaller stipends, or both. Of these programs, one is a new program and another has recently undergone a major reorganization. Directors at each of the tiered programs expressed a desire to move toward full, level funding for all students.

There is a nearly perfect correlation between level of funding and selectivity: The higher the funding, the more selective the program. One former tiered-funding school now offers level funding and reports that, as a result of the change, its application

process has greater competition, the overall quality of applications is higher, and debt levels among students have dropped significantly. Another formerly tuition-driven school has become a funded program, reducing its acceptance rates from more than thirty students per year to eighteen and becoming significantly more selective in the process. Ten years ago, an already-selective institution accepted significantly fewer students and greatly increased the stipend (now the largest among funded schools) to attract the best candidates. It is now the most selective program among those polled and has the highest yield.

All the *tuition-driven programs* in this study provide some funding for some students. The amounts of funding vary a great deal, from full tuition plus stipend to partial tuition remission for some students, as do the percentages of students who receive any funding and the program processes for deciding who receives support and who does not. In most programs, any available aid monies are allocated by the director or admissions committee in order to encourage especially attractive students to attend, though in six schools, some funds are allocated on a need basis. One school that has a mission commitment to the worldwide church reserves the majority of its aid for needy international students.

Directors at tuition-driven programs admit that funding is a primary factor in applicants' decisions to enroll in programs other than their own. All would prefer that their programs be better funded. Several say that financial awards would attract better quality students. In an effort to move toward greater selectivity, one program has chosen to concentrate all funding in a fixed number of full awards while continuing to admit other students who pay full tuition. The strategy appears to be working: in the first year, all seven of its top applicants accepted the package and matriculated. Another tuition-driven school, however, has moved in the opposite direction and has given smaller awards to more students.

Other support for students. Most programs do not track the financial well-being of their students. In fact, only five schools had ready access to this information. Two of the least selective and least well-funded programs reported some students accruing educational debt in excess of \$150,000. Two others reported an average debt of \$75,000–\$80,000, though it is not clear whether these figures include nonborrowers, how much of the debt is acquired during doctoral study, and to what extent students are burdened by additional, noneducational borrowing. Some directors report that finances were a primary motivator in the withdrawal of some students. One tuition-

driven program, however, required students to disclose all debt and sources of income upon application, and high debt factored negatively into admissions decisions. Most directors of funded programs said that students graduate with little or no debt. The most frequently named sources of support besides student loans include spouses and part-time work. All funded programs actively discourage students from doing outside work except program-related teaching, while most of the tuition-driven programs expect that students will work to support themselves.

Outside grant support. All directors report that some students in their programs have received outside grant support. One funded program requires all students to apply for such funding after their first year of enrollment. The most frequently named sources of outside funding appear in Table 1.

Table 1: Sources of Outside Funding

Fellowship Source	Percentage of programs reporting one or more fellowships from the source [3.5%=one program]
The Fund for Theological Education	70
Denominations	45
Hispanic Theological Initiative	25
Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship	21
Jacob J. Javits Fellowship	14
Foreign Language & Area Studies Fellowship	14

*Other: Louisville (2 programs); Mellon (2); Leibmann (2); Lake Institute (1); Stott (1); Int'l Christian Scholars (1); Center for Global Islamic Studies (1); various Canadian and named university fellowships.*⁵

Directors are grateful for the prestige and support that such awards confer, though they acknowledge that they also create accounting challenges. All but three programs use external tuition awards to replace internal funding and limit the stipend amount that

5. Program directors we interviewed may be unaware of some outside grant support that their students receive. The Louisville Institute, for instance, reports that students in at least six programs on our list, or twenty-five percent of all programs, received dissertation fellowship grants.

students are permitted to receive. Typically, a student is allowed to keep up to \$5000 of the external stipend on top of the typical institutional awards. One of the schools offers fellowship students a sixth year of university-supported funding to supplement the funding arc of the external award. One tiered-funding program, however, offered certain applicants lowered funding if they suspected that the student would be likely to receive an outside award.

Academic and Vocational Support

Training in teaching. Almost all program directors underscored the importance of graduating excellent teachers. To this end, teaching assistantships were available in all programs to at least some students. One-third of the tuition-driven programs required that students serve as a teaching assistant either as a condition for funding or because they are enrolled in particular academic specialties. Three-quarters of the funded programs required the same of all students.

There was broad variation, however, in the degrees of support and training offered for students engaged in teaching. In ten percent of the programs, no training was offered; it was required in one-third of tuition-driven programs, and offered in one-half. Despite the prevalence of required teaching in funded programs, training was required in just one-half of them. In many cases, the optional training was offered not by the program itself but by the university. In some schools that either do not require teaching or offer training, ad hoc resources were available: occasional symposia on teaching and some doctoral advisers who served voluntarily as teaching mentors. As one director observed, reflecting on the lack of training in his program, “We do a good job of training scholars, but not academics. Fifty to sixty percent of the academic job is about things other than research.”

Several directors wished for more training resources for their students. One program has developed a multistep plan, yet to be implemented, that aims to move students from assisting professors to teaching independently. Another director, however, expressed distrust of teacher training initiatives, saying that the school assumes that graduates who had excelled in research and scholarship will be good teachers.

Time to completion and attrition. Reported time to completion was about seven years for all programs, though several directors noted that specializations with field research or stringent language requirements raise that average. The average is almost the same for tuition-driven (7.1 years) and funded (6.9 years) programs, probably

because, as noted below, many students in tuition-driven programs whose programs become elongated fail to finish.

Few schools kept good records on attrition rates. Directors of funded programs, who keep closer track of their students, report that attrition from their programs is low. Some limit the amount of time allowed for completion of the program. Students unable to meet benchmarks for progress in these programs were required either to request an extension or to withdraw from the program. One of the more competitive funded programs has determined that the next step to take in further improving the quality of their graduates is to shorten the time to completion. The program has recently instituted strict time limits for completion of the various stages of the doctoral program and encourages a faculty culture that does not allow students to “tread water.” In most of the tuition-driven programs, however, there were few if any enforced deadlines, and some students maintained graduate student status for lengthy periods of time. One tuition-driven program director reported having recently cleaned out files and discovering that the program had lost track of several dozen students. Another director in a tuition-driven program said that students are routinely given extensions as long as an advisor approves. In other words, few students in these programs ever formally withdraw. Lack of information about who is still enrolled produces a low or indeterminate attrition rate, but many of these straggling students never graduate (and therefore are not included in the completion rates of tuition-driven programs).

Reasons for dropping out vary by program type. Directors of tuition-driven programs cited financial stress and change in vocational direction as primary reasons for students dropping out. In funded programs, students leave because they fail to advance through the degree process for a variety of reasons (some of them interrelated, including an inability to do work of adequate quality, family problems, or personal difficulties).

Placement. All program directors said they wanted their graduates to obtain good jobs, but the quality and amount of help given to students for this purpose varied greatly. Most program directors praised particular faculty members who kept an eye out for possible placements and wrote compelling letters of reference for their advisees. Beyond this individual mentoring, however, guidance in thinking about vocation and placement assistance was haphazard. Sometimes students organized conversations about academic career issues; sometimes university placement offices were of some help. The assistance rendered was most often focused on the job search process rather

than discernment of what kind of teaching in what type of institution would best fulfill students' vocational aspirations.

Although several programs discouraged students from accepting full-time positions before completing their doctoral work, many directors admitted that financial necessity typically drove students to seek work prior to graduation. Directors at funded programs strongly encouraged students to finish their degree within the funding arc so that they could avoid the inevitable conflicts between dissertation and employment. Two directors noted that some students delay walking at graduation until they can secure a position, so that they will not appear stale on the job market.

About half of the programs surveyed had some information about what their graduates are currently doing. All claimed that their graduates are employable and reported that the majority now occupy faculty positions. The two factors most significantly influencing a graduate's career path were academic discipline and availability of positions. Students who studied theology, ethics, and the Bible most often ended up in theological schools and seminaries; students in other disciplines, such as history and philosophy of religion, tended to be hired to teach in university and college programs. Few programs actively encouraged graduates to pursue teaching in one particular context over another; for example, theological school, graduate department of religious studies, liberal arts program. They reported that students concerned about job prospects do not commit to one path or another. One director said that students ask faculty mentors to "just get me a job." "If someplace is willing to pay you to teach," another director said, "then that's a good job."

One of the more competitive funded programs indicated that eighty percent of its 2009 graduates had been placed, as compared with ninety-three percent in prior years. Another highly selective program reported that its graduates now receive job offers after three to five interviews rather than after one or two, as in the past. A number of selective programs also reported that highly qualified graduates had successfully navigated hiring processes only to be stymied by a late hiring freeze just prior to receiving an offer. One such graduate had been the unanimous choice of the faculty in the graduate program of a major research university, but the position was frozen; the student did, however, find a job in a denominational seminary.

Trends and Recent Developments

The following trends are evident in the data and reports collected for this study:

Enrollments Are Currently Rising but May Begin to Fall

One of the questions this study was designed to address was how the economic downturn was affecting the doctoral programs that prepare teachers for theological schools. The data suggest that the immediate effect is somewhat higher enrollments. The size of the pool of potential students seems to have remained the same: total applications and acceptances, the range of numbers of applicants and acceptances, and the average numbers of applicants and acceptances per program were nearly identical in 2008 and 2009 (Table 2).

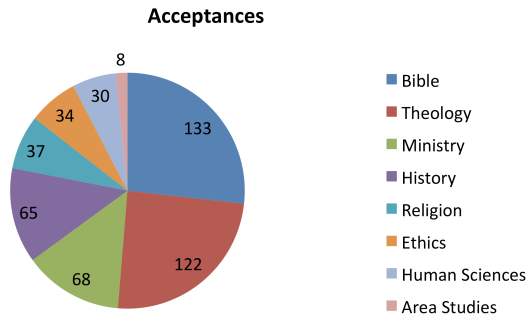
Table 2: Enrollment Profile, 2008 and 2009

	2008	2009
Total applications	3129 in 24 programs	2989 in 24 programs
Range of applications	19–320	17–294
Average applicants per program	130	130
Total acceptances	632 in 24 programs	628 in 21 programs
Range of acceptances	6–73	6–77
Average acceptances per program	26	26

The only population from which applications are reported to be declining is international students, whose ability to travel to North America for study has been complicated by both the economic downturn and restrictive immigration policies.

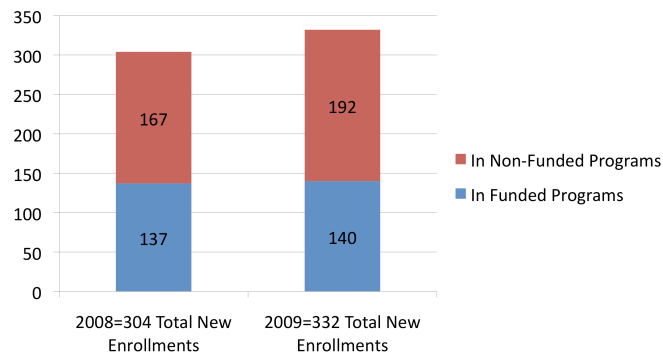
Admissions by program area are also stable. In fact, the numbers were almost identical in 2008 and 2009. As Figure 3 shows, biblical studies and theology together comprise almost half the students, in part because evangelical programs, which are tuition-driven and larger in size, have heavy enrollments in these fields.

Figure 3:
Average Acceptances by Area of Study
2008 and 2009



Although applications and acceptances have not increased, enrollment of new students has increased slightly. As Figure 4 shows, all the increase was in tuition-driven programs.

Figure 4:
New Enrollments in 24 Programs
2008 and 2009



Indeed, half the tuition-driven programs had higher new enrollments in 2009 than they did in 2008. Some report offering more complete funding packages to some of those they admit; others offered smaller amounts of funding to more students. Whether either or both of these measures helped to increase enrollment is not clear (one director reported that bigger packages attract better students). One theory that

has been advanced to explain the increased undergraduate and seminary enrollments reported in 2009 is that advanced education is an alternative for persons who have lost or cannot find jobs. That trend may be in play in sustaining doctoral enrollments as well.

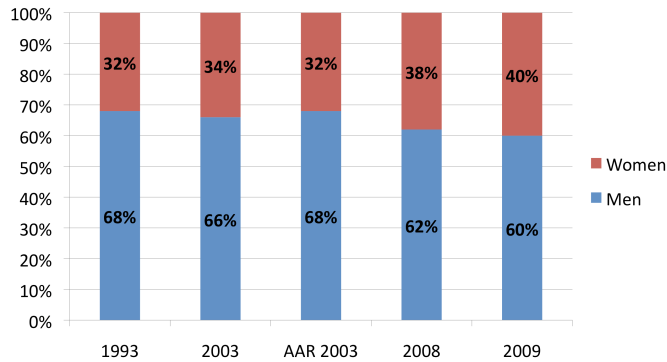
In funded programs, enrollments held steady between 2008 and 2009, but overall, they have been decreasing as programs reduce the number of funded slots in order to maintain funding levels. At least one director predicted that fewer students will be accepted and enrolled next year as a result of the financial downturn; another said that at the end of the recession their program will be about ten percent smaller. A number of others, noting the “panic” among students nearing completion of their programs about the job market, speculated that as word of the paucity of jobs spreads, applications will decline.

Progress Toward Diversity Is Slow

Most programs do not keep records on the demography of students who apply, are accepted, and enroll. Directors report their impressions that progress toward racial diversity in the body of doctoral students is slow. Hispanic applicants are especially scarce. Few schools or programs have formal mechanisms to increase diversity, though two institutions reported that the school has a diversity officer and one or two programs say they actively aim for diversity among students.

Most programs could provide the gender breakdown of their 2008 and 2009 new enrollment. Figure 5 shows that women comprise about one-third of all doctoral students in theology and religion over a long period. The 1993 and 2003 figures come from Auburn Center surveys of doctoral students in programs that are top suppliers of seminary faculty. The AAR (American Academy of Religion) figure comes from a survey of students in a much wider range of programs, including many that describe themselves as “religious studies” rather than “theological studies.” The 2008 and 2009 figures reflect the numbers of students entering the doctoral programs surveyed for the present study. The 2009 entering students figure is slightly higher than the others (40 percent).

Figure 5:
Gender of Doctoral Students
Auburn 1993, 2003, 2008, 2009; AAR 2003



Other Auburn Center research shows that women are more likely than men to be slowed or interrupted in their doctoral studies, so it is possible that by graduation the percentage of women will be closer to the long-time mean of one-third.⁶

Programs Are Diverging in Their Basic Purposes

All program directors when asked about the goals of their programs said they aim to produce excellent scholars who contribute original work to their fields. Most mentioned competence in teaching as well. Beyond that wide and general goal, programs can be grouped into three categories with respect to purpose and focus.

Activist. Several programs—about one in five—describe themselves as primarily oriented to social and religious change through scholarship and teaching. One says that its goal is to “disrupt church and scholarly givens.” Another wants its graduates to be “passionate doers” as well as “rigorous thinkers.” A third states its ultimate purpose as social justice.

6. We did not ask about time-to-completion policies for women who become pregnant, but one director volunteered that his program stops the clock for maternity leave and another said that his does not.

Ecclesial. A slightly larger group of programs state their primary purpose as service to the religious community through scholarship and teaching. The category includes three evangelical programs, as well as some Th.D. programs in universities that also offer Ph.D. degrees and a program based in a free-standing mainline Protestant seminary. These programs identify themselves as Christian. The evangelical ones place heavy emphasis on the theological or confessional commitments of their graduates. The mainline programs want their students to focus on their “situatedness in the Christian community,” or on “the love of God and learning with a Christian focus.”

Academic. More than half of the programs have as their major focus service to the academic community. Scholarship and teaching are both prominent, though the relative emphases vary, and at least one program says that its primary goal and distinctive contribution is the preparation of excellent teachers.

The programs can also be more roughly categorized by their attitudes toward change. Some programs—a smaller group—describe their role in traditional terms: restocking and maintaining the standards of existing fields and disciplines of study in theology and religion. Most, however, say they are promoting the reform of the field. One group of the reforming programs has as its focus the de-centering of Christian subject matter. Several directors note that increasing numbers of students come from non-Christian traditions or have no religious background or commitments, and a few programs are moving toward reorganizations in which neither traditional theological disciplines (biblical studies and theology) nor religious “areas” (Christian studies, Buddhist studies, Eastern religions, etc.) are the primary divisions. In their place are various features of “religion,” such as texts, social practices, etc. A second kind of academic reform is taking place in divinity school-based programs that aim to break down the walls of division between theological disciplines, often with “practices” as an integrating theme and improved theological teaching as the goal. Directors of both kinds of reforming programs often mention the prominence of cultural theory in their curricula.

Almost All Programs Claim to be Increasingly Interdisciplinary and to Promote Collegiality Among Faculty and Students

The term used most frequently in response to questions about changes in program direction was “interdisciplinary” (along with a popular new word, interdisciplinarity). Whatever a program’s goals—activist, ecclesial, or academic—most program directors think that those goals will be better realized if students become fluent in disciplines other than the one that is their major focus, and some say that they would like to break down the walls of academic “silos” altogether. Many directors also report that their programs aim to form graduates who are collegial and will become good faculty citizens. A correlative value, skill in communication with persons outside one’s discipline, including the nonacademic public, was often mentioned as well.

Issues for Discussion

Several issues and questions emerge from the data collected and analyzed for this project.

Doctoral Programs’ Practices Are Often at Odds with Their Stated Purposes and Goals

Program directors articulate high purposes for their programs: In addition to the universal goal of fostering excellent scholarship, various programs aim to shape academics who are skilled teachers, good faculty citizens, generous colleagues, creative theologians for the church, and eloquent communicators to other disciplines and the wider public. All these roles require not only the intellectual gifts reflected in grades, test scores, written statements, and faculty references, but also the personal traits and qualities of character that are difficult to assess from paper evidence. Yet only a handful of programs require applicants to appear for an interview. Several directors said that they would like to interview, but many students cannot afford the trip and the school cannot afford to underwrite their travel and guest housing. If these programs were to require campus visits, they would (they say) lose good applicants to schools that have no such requirement. One director said that having to meet prospective students would be an unwelcome burden on faculty members, and that may be a

factor elsewhere as well. Thus most programs, including the ones that will have invested several hundred thousand dollars by the end of a student's course in the form of tuition remission, stipend, and teaching assistantship, decide who will be admitted and funded without having talked with many of the prospects. One recent doctoral graduate, reviewing these data, noted that not requiring an interview gives insider applicants—those who have completed a master's-level degree in the school or program to which they are applying—a great advantage over applicants from other institutions.

Nor do programs have information on paper from persons who know the applicant in settings other than the classroom: almost all programs require only academic references. Even some programs whose directors say that their primary constituency is the church do not ask for references from a pastor or other church-based source.

Many directors say that their programs aim to reshape the profession by helping their students to work collegially with each other. Very few, however, attempt to create a cohort of entering students that is likely to be congenial and able to bring complementary gifts and interests. Most programs still give most weight in admissions decisions to fields or departments that choose their students without reference to those who are selected by other fields or departments.

Similarly, the term *interdisciplinarity* appears often on the lists of qualities programs hope to cultivate in their students. In most programs, however, students are still selected by the faculty of discrete disciplines or fields and sometimes by individual faculty members without much consultation. There are very few programs in which the faculty members of one discipline judge the potential of applicants whose major study will be in another.

The goal of producing excellent teachers, endorsed by all the directors interviewed, is not matched by program structures and requirements. Most programs make available at least some teaching assistantships, but only a few require that doctoral students teach. Students in university-based programs usually have access to a university-wide program that supports teaching, but usually students are not required to take advantage of it, and, in the majority of programs, only informal, student-organized programs focus specifically on teaching religion or theology.

Finally, most directors say that they hope to reduce time to completion and the numbers of students who are stalled at the dissertation phase. Some programs have had success at this, but at least half the programs cannot account for some students

who have neither finished their program nor formally dropped out. Structures or processes to address the problem of students slowing their progress toward the degree and drifting out of contact are needed in these programs. Some tuition-driven programs should also be tracking the debt loads of their students. Directors who told us that some of their students owe \$150,000 or more should be urging students to stop borrowing well before they reach such stratospheric levels.

Students' Vocational Aspirations Receive Scant Attention

With several exceptions noted above, the majority of programs do not aim to prepare students for any particular teaching setting or vocational genre, such as service to the church or liberal arts education or research-based graduate education. Correspondingly, Auburn's previous research found that a majority of doctoral students, aware of the vagaries of the academic job market, do not see themselves as set on a vocational path. Both schools and students focus instead on mastery of a specialty and, sometimes, on ancillary studies that will enable graduate to teach both general and specialized courses in a variety of settings. Not only do most programs not plan to prepare their students for particular employment sectors, but—again, with notable exceptions—they do not know where, over time, their graduates end up. Very few programs keep longitudinal employment records of their graduates. Most directors had only rough counts or impressions of where their graduates are now at work.

Only a handful of programs give formal assistance in job placement. (At least one sends a compilation of resumes of students and graduates who are looking for teaching jobs to institutions that might have job vacancies.) In most cases, the job-hunting student is at the mercy of the advisor or doctoral mentor. Program directors' descriptions of the quality of this assistance were remarkably uniform. In every faculty or department, it seems some doctoral faculty advocate energetically for their students or even search out opportunities for them. Others write recommendations when asked by a student who has located an opportunity. A few faculty members have to be hounded to do even that.

There are Major Obstacles to Change in the Conduct of Doctoral Programs

The subject matter of doctoral education—themes, conceptual paradigms, and key texts—changes constantly, but the policies and practices that structure the enterprise are notoriously difficult to reshape. Despite criticism of many features of programs, the basic procedures of application, selection, supervision, instruction, examinations, and final project are essentially the same as they were when doctoral education in fields such as theology and religion came into its own almost a century ago.

This brief study gives some insight into why structures and procedures are so hard to adjust. Unlike undergraduate and professional programs that can call on all the resources of a school for recruitment of students, admissions, vocational development, co-curricular activities, and postgraduation placement, doctoral programs are usually conducted by departments that have very limited administrative and educational support resources of their own. These limitations are especially hard on programs in areas such as theology and religion whose students are preparing to serve a uniquely configured set of institutions. The findings of this study strongly suggest that various aspects of doctoral programs should operate differently if their goal is to better serve the purposes of the institutions most likely to employ doctoral graduates in theology and religion. For instance, most graduates of the programs we studied, if they end up in teaching positions, will find themselves in settings where the character and vocational formation of students is a central goal. This is the case not only in seminaries in which students are preparing for church ministries, but also in the liberal arts programs that are most likely to offer positions in religion. To prepare teachers for this work, doctoral programs need to change their admissions procedures to focus on character and personal qualities as well as on intellectual capacities. Doctoral students would be well served by structured attention to their own formation and vocational goals because they are likely to be required to provide the same for their undergraduate or seminary students. And all doctoral students in these fields should receive both training and practice in teaching—these should not be optional, as they are in a number of programs.

As things now stand, changes such as these are unlikely to happen. In university-based programs, these and other administrative features of any given theology or religion program are governed by policies that apply to all a university's arts and sciences doctoral offerings. Departments are rarely permitted to change procedures on

their own; even if permission is available, the staff and funds needed to improve the conduct of programs are not. Programs in free-standing institutions may have more freedom to make changes, but because they are so expensive to conduct, they have very limited funds for administration and educational support.

As a result, good ideas about how to make doctoral education more focused and effective are rarely implemented. It is significant that most of the exemplary structures and procedures that we discovered in the course of this study are found in programs that have substantial support from a private foundation. These programs have staff to organize their operations and monitor student progress, funds to implement best practices (such as bringing finalist applicants to campus for interview), and accountability requirements as a condition of funding.

Paradoxically, the current widely documented crisis in the job market for newly minted Ph.D.s in the humanities may become a catalyst for change. With so many graduates unable to find regular positions, programs will have to pay special attention to the conditions their students are likely to encounter as they finish. Several directors forecast reduced admissions in funded programs, both because university funding is tight and because they have qualms about admitting students who may not be able to find work. The best possible outcome of this difficult situation would be a conversation within doctoral departments about the relationship between the purposes of their programs and their practices. Where do they hope their students will end up working? What kinds of students would be best suited to that kind of academic setting? What new screening procedures might help them identify such students? How can students' vocational aspirations be supported during their time in the program, and what help can the institution give them in finding a suitable position when they are ready?

Appendix A:

Descriptions of Top Supplier Programs

Boston University Division of Religious and Theological Studies (DRTS) is located within the university's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and offers the Ph.D. Faculty are drawn from both the Department of Religion and the School of Theology. The DRTS recently discontinued admissions to its counseling psychology and religion program as part of the migration of practical theological degrees to the School of Theology.

Boston University School of Theology is a seminary of the United Methodist Church. The School of Theology shares some faculty with the DRTS and offers the Th.D. in traditional areas of religious and theological studies as well as a newly approved Ph.D. in practical theology.

Catholic University of America is a Roman Catholic institution. The university's School of Theology and Religious Studies grants both civil (Ph.D.) and ecclesiastical (STD) doctoral degrees in traditional discipline areas.

Claremont Graduate University (CGU) School of Religion is housed within a graduate-only research university and is not religiously affiliated. Recent restructuring of the School of Religion has ended its longstanding collaborative relationship with Claremont School of Theology, through which it shared teaching faculty and degree programs. As a result of the restructuring, CGU has retained the ability to grant the Ph.D. in philosophy of religion and theology, women's studies and religion, and history of Christianity and religions of North America. The school now offers new doctoral degrees in critical comparative scriptures and Islamic studies.

Claremont School of Theology (CST) is a United Methodist seminary with a recently adopted multifaith focus. As a result of restructuring its relationship with CGU, CST has now assumed responsibility for granting the doctorate in traditional areas of theological studies (Bible, theology, process studies, and ethics) as well as its longstanding degrees in religious education and spiritual care and counseling.

Columbia University* grants the Ph.D. through its Department of Religion, housed within the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. Faculty members are drawn from Columbia, Barnard College, and Union Theological Seminary. Rather than aligning with a traditional discipline, students engage a “field of study” (Christianity, Buddhism, etc.) within a “zone of inquiry”—an interdisciplinary approach that emphasizes methodological investigation.

Dallas Theological Seminary is a freestanding, multidenominational evangelical seminary with dispensationalist roots that offers the Ph.D. in biblical studies and theological studies. It is the only graduate school among those in this study to grant the Ph.D. in biblical exposition, a synthetic approach to study of both biblical testaments.

Drew University* recently moved its Ph.D. program from the university’s Caspersen School of Graduate Studies to its School of Theology, a seminary of the United Methodist Church. It continues to offer doctoral studies in traditional discipline areas, including theological and philosophical studies, Bible, historical studies, and religion and society.

Duke Divinity School* is a university-affiliated seminary of the United Methodist Church. It began offering the Th.D. degree in 2006 to complement the academic Ph.D. offered by the university. Rather than having students apply for enrollment within a disciplinary area, the program accepts students into the Th.D. program, where they create an interdisciplinary focus and course of study after matriculation and in consultation with an advisor. Students have access to members of the Graduate Faculty both within the Divinity School and the Department of Religion.

Duke University* grants the Ph.D. through its Graduate Program in Religion, housed within the Duke Graduate School. It draws faculty from both the Divinity School and the Department of Religion in the College of Arts and Sciences. Areas of study include religion and theology. Degrees in the practical arts are offered through the Divinity School.

* Program offer full-tuition funding (and in most cases, stipends as well) to all of most of its students

Emory University* offers the Ph.D. through its Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. Students pursue degrees in one of ten areas and study with faculty who hold appointments in either Candler School of Theology (a United Methodist seminary) or Emory College's Department of Religion. Emory's Graduate Division of Religion is also home to the Initiative in Religious Practices and Practical Theology. Through the Initiative, doctoral students can declare a concentration that focuses on the intersection of religious practices and their primary course of study.

Fuller Theological Seminary is a freestanding, multidenominational evangelical Protestant institution comprised of the School of Theology, School of Psychology, and School of Intercultural Studies. The Ph.D. in theology is offered through its Center for Advanced Theological Studies, housed within the School of Theology, in eleven areas of theological study.

The Graduate Theological Union (GTU) is a consortium of nine theological seminaries and eight affiliated centers in and around Berkeley, California. The GTU grants the Ph.D. and Th.D. degrees in thirteen areas of theological and religious studies, including two joint degrees offered with the University of California–Berkeley. GTU students are able to seek study and advisement with faculty from all participating seminaries and centers.

At **Harvard University,*** both the Ph.D. of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the Th.D. of Harvard Divinity School* are administered by the university's Committee on the Study of Religion. Because there is little difference between the requirements of the degrees and because faculty members teach in both programs, conversations are underway about the relationship between the programs and the possibility of merging them.

Princeton Theological Seminary* is a freestanding seminary affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The seminary grants the Ph.D. in thirteen traditional fields of Christian theological and religious studies. Students have access to many of the academic resources of Princeton University.

* Program offer full-tuition funding (and in most cases, stipends as well) to all of most of its students

Toronto School of Theology (TST) is an ecumenical consortium of seven theological schools and is also affiliated with four additional institutes of theological and religious studies in the area. It offers a Th.D. in theological fields granted conjointly by the University of Toronto and the TST member school in which the student is registered. One of its member institutions, University of St. Michael's (see below), grants the Ph.D. degree.

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS) is an Evangelical Free Church of America seminary embedded within Trinity International University (TIU). TEDS hosts three academic doctoral programs: the Ph.D. in intercultural studies, Ph.D. in educational studies, and Ph.D. in theological studies. Students can choose to receive their degrees with either TEDS or TIU named on the diploma as the granting institution.

Union Theological Seminary* is a freestanding, multid denominational school of theology offering Ph.D. degrees in ten areas of study organized into biblical, theological, and practical theological groupings. Students in its programs have access to some of the academic resources of Columbia University.

The University of Chicago Divinity School,* a university-affiliated, nondenominational school of theology, grants the Ph.D. in religion in ten areas of study, including Christian theological and religious studies, Islamic studies, anthropology, and religion and literature. Students have access to both Divinity School faculty and University faculty within and outside the university's religion department.

The University of Notre Dame,* a Roman Catholic university, offers Ph.D. studies through its Department of Theology. Foci include liturgical studies, systematics, world religions, and Christianity and Judaism in antiquity, which emphasizes the interrelationship among Hebrew scriptures, Judaism, New Testament, and early Christian history. Students in the doctoral program have access to faculty in other university departments.

The University of St. Michael's College, a Roman Catholic institution, is the only member of the Toronto School of Theology consortium that grants the Ph.D. The degree is offered in the same fields as the Th.D. granted by TST: biblical, historical, pastoral, and theological areas of study.

* Program offer full-tuition funding (and in most cases, stipends as well) to all of most of its students

Vanderbilt University* grants the Ph.D. in eight areas of religion through the university's Graduate Department of Religion. Faculty from both the department and the interdenominational Divinity School collaborate in teaching and advising doctoral students. Students accepted for the Ph.D. are eligible to apply for a fellowship through the Program in Theology and Practice, designed to support those interested in interdisciplinary inquiry and teaching in theological schools.

Yale University* offers Ph.D. studies in religion through the university's Department of Religious Studies. The department and the interdenominational Yale Divinity School share some faculty and resources, and students may take courses in both schools; other faculty members in the department have joint appointments in other university departments. Students are accepted in one of ten areas of religious studies, including both traditional theological disciplines (New Testament, theology, etc.) as well as other religious traditions, such as Islamic studies, Judaic studies, and Asian religions.

* Program offer full-tuition funding (and in most cases, stipends as well) to all of most of its students

Appendix B:

Interview Questions

1. [Reference purpose statement] What does the program aim to accomplish?

2. Admissions in 08–09:

- a. How many applicants did you have in 08–09? In 09–10?
- b. How many were accepted (by field)?
- c. What was the demographic profile—age, gender, race, religious affiliation?
- d. How many will enroll?
- e. Do you know what factors cause students to choose your program rather than others to which they have been admitted?
- f. Do you know what programs students choose in preference to yours?
- h. How do these numbers compare to prior years?

3. Getting students

- a. Do you recruit?
- b. Where do your students come from? Do your most attractive candidates come from any particular sources?
- c. What is your application deadline?
- d. What application materials do you require? References from whom?
- e. Do you encourage campus visits?
- f. Do you require interviews?

4. Choosing students

- a. Who decides who will be admitted?
- b. What are the criteria?
- c. Are slots allotted by field? How is this decision made?
- d. Do you look for diversity or balance in the cohort of students admitted?
- e. Are there any funded slots that have to be filled?

5. Funding

- a. How many admitted students get financial aid offers?
- b. On what basis is funding given [merit and need; funded and unfunded]?
- c. How many years are funded?
- d. What is in a typical package?
 - i. Tuition
 - ii. Stipend
 - iii. Housing subsidy
 - iv. Health insurance
 - v. Fees
 - vi. Other
- e. Do packages differ by status (international students, etc.)?
- f. Have funding levels or policies changed in recent years? If so, what are the reasons for the changes?
- g. Do your students get support from fellowship programs outside the school? Which ones?
- h. How do you make funding decisions for students you know to have outside funding?
- i. Where do students find the support they need but do not get from grants and fellowships?
- j. Do students enter with prior educational debt? Does the amount of prior debt figure in admissions or funding decisions? What levels of debt do your students have when they graduate from your program?

6. In program

- a. When is an advisor assigned or chosen?
- b. Are teaching assistantships offered? Required?
- c. Is training in teaching offered? Required?
- d. Are there resources in the program for students to discern their vocational direction? To prepare for a particular kind of teaching?
- e. What are attrition rates? At what point do people leave? What are the major reasons leave the program?

7. Completion

- a. How long does it take students to complete the program?
- b. Are there differences in attrition and completion rates between demographic groups?
- c. Do you offer formal placement assistance? Are your faculty members active in helping students find jobs?
- d. Where are your graduates working?
- e. Are there factors that make it more likely that a graduate will teach in a theological school?
- f. How long has it taken recent graduates to find employment? Does this vary by field of study? What percentage of students take full-time jobs before completing the dissertation? Are their first jobs usually the jobs the program is training them for? Jobs the students want?
- g. Do graduates tend to stay in the same kind of work over time?

8. Other

- a. What qualities and abilities do you most hope your graduates will display?
- b. Have you seen any changes in patterns of doctoral study in recent years?
- c. How is your program funded? What do you think are its future prospects?