2014-15 ADSA Survey Report

# Introduction and Methodology

From December 8, 2014 to January 8, 2015 the Advanced Degree Students’ Association (ADSA) polled advanced degree students about CV-building activities, funding levels, time management and workload, use of student services, and overall satisfaction.

To encourage an enthusiastic response, the ADSA offered to enter students in a draw for one of two $50 gift certificates to Crux Books. The e-mail addresses used for the draw were then detached from the results to ensure anonymity.

The survey was prepared with SurveyMonkey.com and distributed through the TST mailing list. Out of 313 students registered in the Fall term, 84 responded, for a 27% response rate. (Last year 91/330 students responded, or 28%.)

2 surveys were incomplete and have been removed. 5 responses from MA students were recorded and set aside, due to their highly variable distribution among the colleges. This report is based on the remaining 77 responses.

# Questions and Results

## Which is your home college?



TST Registrar Diane Henson provided an official head count for Fall 2014. After MA students were removed, St. Michael’s students were found to be slightly underrepresented in the survey, while Trinity students were slightly overrepresented. Responses from the other colleges were within 1.5% of the actual distribution of students.

## Which advanced degree program are you in?

While most responses for every college are from doctoral students, Knox and Trinity have a higher proportion of responses from DMin students, which often have different academic and funding opportunities than ThD/PhD students. This may limit the comparability of data from these two colleges with the other four.

## Ignoring transfers between the ThD and PhD, in which academic year did you start your current degree?



The average year of students who responded was 3.4. However, the standard deviation was 2.5, in part because of a few ‘long-lived’ students in year 8 or later. For that reason, a median year was calculated.

Responses from Emmanuel, Regis, St. Michael’s, and Wycliffe students share a median year of 3. Responses from Knox and Trinity appear to be a bit younger, which again may limit their comparability to the other four colleges.

## Since starting your current degree, have you engaged in any of the following CV-building activities?



Again, comparisons with Knox and Trinity are complicated by their higher proportion of DMin students and lower median year. Still, even if those two colleges are excluded, it is clear that Emmanuel students report engaging in more of every kind of CV-building activity than students at the other three colleges. These differences are especially pronounced in important categories of teaching experience, including working as a teaching assistant (although Trinity does well here), co-teaching a course, teaching as the sole instructor, receiving student evaluations, and receiving faculty feedback or mentoring. Publishing also appears to vary considerably.

## Since starting your current degree, roughly how much financial support have you received from bursaries and scholarships? (please round to the closest amount)



The most common level of support reported from bursaries and scholarships was $5,000 to $10,000. If ThM and DMin students are excluded, the number of students reporting less than $5,000 in support drops considerably, but $5,000 to $10,000 remains the most common bracket, claimed by 40% of ThD/PhD students.

Of course, support varies depending on year of program. However, only in year 3 did a plurality of students (39%) report a higher level of total support ($12,000 to $18,000). In all other years, including year 4, the most common bracket was $5,000 to $10,000, or less.

Analysis of support levels by college indicates considerable variation in bursary and scholarship support, with Emmanuel students reporting the most support and Knox and Wycliffe students reporting the least.

## Since starting your current degree, roughly how much financial support have you received from teaching and research assistantships? (please round to the closest amount)



Perhaps due to the length and complexity of this year’s survey, 26 students skipped this question, including 6 who had earlier reported working as a research or teaching assistant on the CV building question. Still, the totals for all colleges suggest that only a few students receive significant support from teaching or research assistantships, with 91% reporting $10,000 or less in support from these sources during their degree.

## During your studies at TST, have you done any of the following? (please check all that apply)



[todo]

## In an average week, roughly how many hours do you spend: (optional)



After their own academic work, the most significant [todo]

## Overall, are you satisfied with the ADSA’s advocacy, events, and services?



Only 3 students (4%) of those surveyed were not satisfied with the ADSA’s work. However, almost 30% were not sure, suggesting considerable uncertainty about the ADSA and what it does.

9 students left comments on this question. Three comments asked for access to Athletics, Hart House, and/or a better healthcare plan, one was about TST (reported below), and the remaining 5 comments were about the ADSA. Two students said the ADSA has little impact on distance students, another mentioned the low profile of the ADSA, one said they were unaware the ADSA offered so many programs, and the last comment expressed dissatisfaction with the ADSA’s bias, priorities, and lack of advocacy for students:

* “So far, ADSA strikes me as similar to student government in High School: supposedly representative of the entire student body, but really only involved in those things that the leaders (personally) are interested in or benefit from. And clueless about this bias. I've also noticed that the survey this year is shorter, and no longer asks any of the hard questions about our experiences here (e.g.- satisfaction with faculty support/mentoring, experiences with abuse/discrimination, etc.). Even the CV-building question doesn't ask "why". I can only conclude that ADSA doesn't really want to know, because then they might have to address student needs/concerns, rather than planning BBQs.”

## Overall, would you encourage a friend to start an advanced degree program at TST?

70% of students would encourage a friend to attend TST, similar to the 71% reported in 2013-14. However, satisfaction varies by college: 91% of Regis students would recommend TST, but only 50% of Knox students would.



Satisfaction also varies considerably by degree: 75%-85% of students in TST’s continuing programs would recommend TST, but only 60% of students in the ‘legacy’ programs would do so.

In addition to a relevant comment on the previous question, 19 students left comments on this question. 3 comments were very college specific, and have been omitted from this report. The remaining 17 comments fell in four main categories:

#### Funding

* Less financial support than other theological institutes, even than ICS!
* Expensive for international students, especially from developing countries.
* I would, but I would feel obligated to warn them about the unusually large financial burden associated with pursuing a TST advanced degree as an international student. Like me, the vast majority of my friends are Americans, and their expectations concerning doctoral programs are formed by the full-funding and stipends that almost all prestigious American universities are able to offer their doctoral students in theology. A number of friends – all of whom I consider top-tier graduate students in theology – have plainly told me they would not consider attending TST, as the financial burden resulting from paying international student tuition, living in or around GTA, and getting almost no funding is far too great. … If TST wants their new conjoint PhD to be on par with top-tier American programs (or even remotely competitive with them in terms of admissions), they absolutely must make it more feasible for American students to attend TST.

#### Administration

* During this period of upheaval and change I would not, as I am not sure that the new programs and the changes are in the best interest of the students. If in the future it works out for the program, I might be willing to recommend TST after all the confusion of reworking the program is over.
* I don't understand why TST has created a conjoint Ph.D. with the University of Toronto; it feels like a move motivated primarily by power and profit.
* Poor communication by higher up.

#### Distance education and the DMin program

* My caveat for anyone doing a DMin who does not live in the GTA is that TST/U of T seems ill-equipped to handle distance learning. Too many profs seem unwilling or unable to handle the technology.
* Chose TST for DMin studies as location is convenient and there is merit to connecting with the various colleges and faculty. However have found the program not particularly well organized, exceptional, nor cutting edge.
* It would depend on what they wanted to do. If they were a distance DMin student like me I would caution them that they get very little interaction with faculty except for the two-three weeks on campus every year.

#### Miscellaneous

* Advanced Degree work is quite isolating, especially when you're not really sure what you're planning on doing with it.
* Depends on the person.
* Depends what the friend wanted to study.
* Faculty and Library resources are great.
* I would also encourage them to let go of any volunteer involvement in the community outside of work.
* The profs can vary in capacity to offer good leadership.
* Too many holes in the faculty; lack of effective communication with faculty – doctoral students get shunted aside because the profs don't get any extra $$$ for supervision and they have many other demands on their limited time.
* TST seriously needs to explore ways to develop a full AD program of Orthodox Studies (and not the generic, non-ecclesial "Eastern Christian" studies).

# Conclusions and

[todo]

# Recommendations for Improving Access to Teaching Experience

In itself, the fact that different colleges provide different funding and opportunities is not surprising. However, the considerable variation in teaching experience and other important CV-building activities is concerning, in that it may affect students’ future success in the academic job market. Moreover, while variations in funding may be inherent to TST’s consortium structure, it is not clear that access to teaching assistantships need be as variable, especially given that most do not appear to be especially lucrative.

There are many possible ways access to teaching experience could be increased. We have five suggestions – two to increase openness, and three to increase supply. First, TA positions could be advertised throughout TST. Professors should always have the prerogative to decide who to hire as their TA, but they could have a large pool of applicants to choose from, which would give deserving students a greater chance of securing a teaching assistantship. Similarly, the process for doctoral candidates to apply to teach courses, either courses of their own or courses normally taught by faculty, could be clearer, more open, and more widely advertised. Again, this need not infringe the right of colleges to determine which courses are taught or who teaches them, but could make the process fairer.

As for supply, TST could encourage the return of larger ecumenical classes for basic degree students, which could both reduce demands on faculty and provide more TA opportunities. Similarly, perhaps TST’s increasingly close relationship with the University of Toronto could enable TA or teaching positions for undergraduate classes taught by cross-appointed professors to be created, as they are at the University of St. Michael’s College. Finally, every doctoral student could be required to work as a teaching assistant in year 3 of their program and then propose an elective basic degree course in year 4. The teaching assistantship could be paid out of the standard doctoral funding package, and the elective course could be contingent on approval from a supervisor or faculty mentor as well as sufficient interest from basic degree students.

No doubt some of these suggestions are impractical, but we hope TST will consider these and other measures to increase student access to teaching experience in its doctoral programs.