

The seminary experience: Conceptual worlds of first-career and second-career seminarians.

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Date

2009-08

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Abstract

This study explored the conceptual worlds of first- and second-career seminarians enrolled in the M.Div. program at New Creation Theological Seminary (NCTS), a mainline Protestant school. Research questions were: 1) What themes do first- and second-career seminarians use to describe their seminary experience? 2) How do first and second-career seminarians relate these themes into a system of thought (mindmap)? 3) How do the systems of thought described by first- and second-career seminarians compare? 4) Do first- and second-career seminarians identify an over-arching message to their theological education? Using interactive qualitative analysis, the researcher discovered 12 key themes common to the conceptual worlds of first- and second-career students. For both types of students, school bureaucracy and church requirements were drivers that influenced many aspects of the seminary experience. The outcomes of the seminary experience were transformation in knowledge, pastoral skills, and sense of vocation. Students became satisficers to meet the competing demands of school, church, and family. Students reported that theological education required vigorous engagement and self-discipline. Students affirmed that God was active in their life worlds. The life worlds of younger and older participants were similar in terms of themes and in the way that these themes combined into mindmaps, although second-career students were more frustrated than first-career students about the way that seminary shrank life outside of school. First-career students reported that the seminary's over-arching message was about community. Second-career students concluded that the over-arching message was about training for ministry. Ecological theory suggests that students received the over-arching messages that they did because of how they had been shaped by involvement in various social microsystems. Two distinctive findings of the study were the importance that participants placed on fulfilling church requirements for ordination and the role that campus facilities played in assisting or hindering their theological studies. Based on the study's results and previous literature about seminary students, the researcher proposed a model to describe student experience in seminary.

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Educational Administration

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Second-career seminarians

New Creation Theological Seminary

Theological education

Mindmaps

Seminary experience

Student experience

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