

# Re-imagining Youth Theological Education (and Analyzing What Works)

**What would theological education look like** if it were made from scratch, without a traditional school “recipe” for Christian leadership formation? It might look like the practices developed at some of the 48 seminaries that have participated in the Theological Programs for High School Youth. In 1998 the Endowment noticed that too few young people were pursuing vocations in Christian ministry and created an initiative for theological schools to develop innovative programs that would capture the imaginations of young people and encourage them to explore vocations as Christian leaders.

“The Endowment invited seminaries to invent theological education for youth without any of the baggage of traditional seminary classrooms,” says Kenda Creasy Dean, professor of Youth, Church and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary. “These programs have been like test kitchens, and seminaries have tried out very different recipes for cultivating Christian leaders.”

Today, more than 15 years after the Theological Programs for High School Youth initiative was launched, 24 of the 48 schools are still continuing their programs and eight church-related colleges and universities have launched similar efforts. Collectively, the programs have touched more than 100,000 youth. More than 22,000 youth have participated in intensive summer theology institutes and leadership experiences.

A recent study conducted by Auburn Theological Seminary found that 20 percent of the young people who participated in these programs have gone on to seminary or intend to do so in the near future, or they have already

started careers in ministry.

With a 2011 Endowment grant, Dean and a team of 14 theological educators initiated an effort to study the youth theological programs to analyze and describe the pedagogical practices that make these programs so effective. The research project will produce at least two books written for pastors, youth ministers and other church leaders.

## Teaching and learning

Some themes have emerged, Dean says. Youth learn best by being part of an intentional community with other young people who are interested in exploring deep theological questions. The experience of pilgrimage—whether in the actual wilderness or in a journey of the mind—is a key element of these programs. Experiential learning and service provides important opportunities for young people to try out vocational possibilities and develop leadership skills. Commissioning youth and naming their gifts are transformative. And how youth are received as leaders in their home churches after these experiences is formative.

Jeffrey Kaster has directed the Youth in Theology and Ministry program at St. John’s School of Theology-Seminary in Collegeville, Minn., for 14 years and is part of the research team, writing on the pedagogy of engaging youth in theological reflection. He is convinced that what the youth theological programs do best is engage high school youth intellectually and spiritually, challenging them to think seriously about God, the church and the world.



“We have systematically underestimated the capacities of young people,” Kaster says. “If you treat them as if they can fully participate in the mission of the church, they can do amazing things.”

While the youth theological programs undeniably have had an impact on youth, they’ve also had a powerful impact on staff and theologians, Dean says. Many of the programs are staffed by seminarians and graduate students who are often at just the right stage of life to learn valuable lessons they take into their own vocations. “You learn best what you teach,” she says.

## “We have systematically underestimated the capacities of young people”

Senior faculty and even towering figures in theology are often completely disarmed by fresh-faced high school students, too. “It turns out that teaching high school students had a profound impact on the way faculty teach in seminary,” Dean says.

“A lot of what we’ve learned and written is not rocket science,” Dean adds. “People who created these programs had the luxury of starting from scratch, with no baggage. The question is, can theological education learn anything from these programs about how to form Christian leaders, or are we so embedded in past practices that we can’t transform ourselves?”

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Compass, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary’s theological exploration program for high school students, features an intense month-long immersion component. Participants backpack in the mountains or volunteer overseas as they explore calls to Christian leadership and ministry.