

# Seminaries set six enrollment records

By TOM TANNER

In the midst of unprecedented enrollment declines in higher education and a gradual decline in theological school enrollments that began in 2007, the latest figures from The Association of Theological Schools reveal six positive trends.

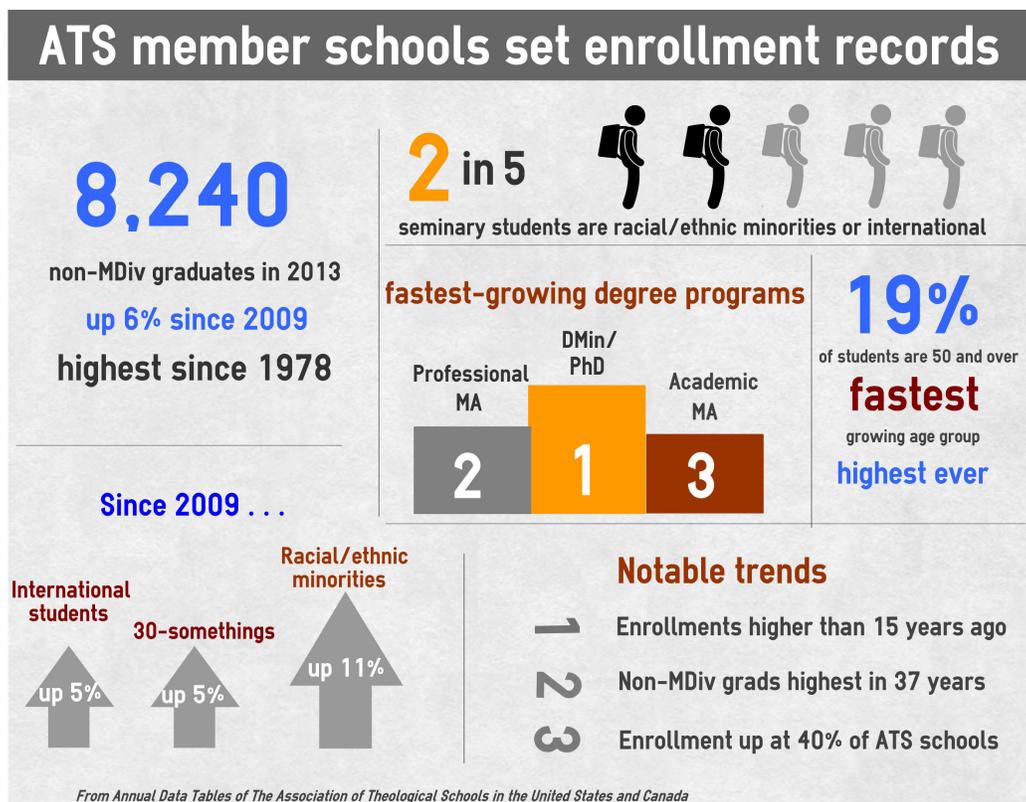
Since 2009, total enrollment for the 273 ATS member schools has declined 5 percent, from 75,096 to 71,449.

versus 4,870 this past year. While much of that decline is due to more consistency in the way schools count nondegree students, some may also be a result of the recession—fewer students able to afford to “just take a class or two” outside of pursuing a degree program.

By comparison, the number of *degree-seeking* students has declined by only 3 percent since 2009 (from 68,051 to 66,579). That is only half a percent per year, which,

compared to other sectors of graduate education, represents a relatively stable enrollment for theological schools. Even more encouraging is the number of *degree-completing* students. The number of graduates this past year is virtually the same as in 2009 (14,552 graduates now vs. 14,571 graduates then). The year before was the third highest number ever reported at 14,704, topped only by the prerecession years of 2007 and 2008.

Examining the numbers more closely, six enrollment trends have set records over the last six years:



However, ATS enrollment is actually higher now than it was in 1999, prior to the six-year enrollment boom that peaked in 2006 at 81,180 total students. Much of that “enrollment bubble” in the early 2000s was due to unusually high counts of nondegree-seeking students, reaching more than 11,000 prior to the 2008 recession,

**1** Since 2009, ATS member schools have graduated record numbers of non-MDiv students, with the 2013 number of 8,240 the highest ever reported since ATS began keeping records in 1978. This year’s number of 8,146 non-MDiv graduates, though down slightly, is still the third highest ever reported, with the record of 8,198 set in 2008—just before the recession. The num-

ber of doctoral graduates (primarily DMin and PhD) set a record a year ago with 2,587, up 10 percent since 2009, though that number is down slightly this year to 2,428. [By contrast, the numbers of MDiv students and MDiv graduates continue their steady decline begun nearly a decade ago. This year's 30,311 MDiv students are down 8 percent since the 32,689 reported in 2009, and this year's 6,406 MDiv graduates represent a 7 percent decline since the 6,852 reported in 2009.]

**2** *Since 2009, ATS member schools have enrolled and graduated record numbers of professional MA students.* The number now enrolled is at its highest level ever at 11,752—up 7 percent since 2009. The number just graduated is also the highest ever reported at 3,013—up 15 percent since 2009. These two-year programs now number more than 250 among the 273 ATS member schools and enroll more students than any others except the MDiv.

**3** *Since 2009, ATS member schools have enrolled record numbers of academic MA students, now at their highest levels ever at 9,459, up 5 percent since 2009.* These two-year programs had begun to decline in 2011, but in 2012 the Commission Standards were revised to allow students to complete these programs completely online. Since then, enrollment in these programs is up 8 percent. In addition, the number of students graduating from these programs has increased each

of the last three years and is now at 2,705—the fourth highest ever reported and up 7 percent since 2011.

**4** *Since 2009, ATS member schools have enrolled record numbers of minority students.* This year's 19,411 is the third highest number of minority students ever reported, exceeded only by the previous two years (19,590 in 2013 and 19,499 in 2012) and 11 percent more than the 17,498 reported in 2009. Minorities now comprise one third (33 percent) of all students in ATS member schools whose race/ethnicity is known. (Note that **some ATS member schools neither collect nor report that information.**)

**5** *Since 2009, ATS member schools have enrolled record numbers of international students, with the peak reached in 2010 at 6,550.* This past year was a near record at 6,475, up 5 percent from 2009 and up 3 percent from a year ago. International students now represent 10 percent of all enrolled students whose race/ethnicity or country of residence is reported. The combined total of minority and international students this year is 25,886—just slightly below the record of 26,203 reached in 2011. Non-white and non-North American students now represent 40 percent of all students, compared to 30 percent a decade ago. At this rate, by 2025 the North American white majority will be a minority in ATS member schools.

## The Greater Context: Higher Education

Six years now separate us from the Great Recession. While that economic downturn may have technically ended in June 2009 in the United States, its effects are still very much with us (see [Six Years from Its Beginning, the Great Recession's Shadow Looms...](#)). One often overlooked effect is in higher education, which has seen unprecedented enrollment declines. As the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) announced last September, "College enrollment declined by close to half a million . . . between 2012 and 2013, marking the second year in a row that a drop of this magnitude has occurred. The cumulative two-year drop of 930,000 was larger than any college enrollment drop before the recent recession." Even more precipitous has been the decline at for-profit institutions, which before the recession regularly posted double-digit increases but since 2009 have seen cumulative declines of more than 30 percent, according to the [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#).

**6** Since 2009, ATS member schools have enrolled record numbers of 50-plus and 30-something students. This past year's 8,889 students aged 50+ are the highest ever reported, up 18 percent over 2009. One fifth (19 percent) of all enrolled students (whose ages are known) are now aged 50 or older. In addition, this past year's 12,769 students in their 30s are the highest ever reported, up 5 percent over 2009. More than a fourth (28 percent) of all students (whose ages are known) are now in their 30s. The largest age group remains 20-somethings at 14,915, or one third of all students enrolled in ATS member schools, but that age group is down 9 percent since 2009. The number of 40-somethings actually increased since 2009 (from 9,128 to 9,265) but remains well below the record of 10,085 set in 2005.

Collectively, these records point to an **overall stability in the numbers of students completing degrees** at ATS member schools. While enrollment in MDiv and nondegree programs has seen steady declines for nearly a decade, record numbers of students are pursuing and graduating with two-year professional and academic MAs. The 273 ATS member schools now offer more than 250 different professional MA programs, the most schools and most degrees ever.

The trends described here suggest a brighter future for graduate theological education—six years out from the recession—than is often reported. As for the entire ATS membership of schools, the news is admittedly better for some than others. Nearly 40 percent of the 273 member schools grew this past year, while another 4 percent had stable enrollments. Among the 107 schools that grew, 40 experienced double-digit growth. While there is no single factor accounting for this growth, given the diverse universe of ATS member schools, it is worth noting that nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of the 40 schools with double-digit growth this past year have recently implemented new degree programs or new delivery systems or both. Watch for future stories on why some schools are growing.

[Editor's Note: The data in this release are based on the ATS Annual Report Forms completed each fall by member schools and published each spring on the ATS website under the [Annual Data Tables](#). Calculated when the fall 2014 data were about 99 percent complete, the figures may contain minor variances from the final published data. The annual data presented here include all ATS member schools reporting that year, which ranged from 247 schools in 2009 to 273 schools this year—the highest number ever. The 2014–2015 Annual Data Tables will be released in early March.]

*Tom Tanner is Director, Accreditation and Institutional Evaluation for The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh.*



## The Greater Context: Graduate Education

While not as precipitous, graduate education has also seen overall enrollment declines during the recent economic downturn. Last fall the [Council of Graduate Schools](#) reported that “total graduate enrollment fell 0.2 percent between fall 2012 and fall 2013 following a 2.3 percent decline in the previous year.” For some graduate professions, however, the declines truly are unprecedented. The [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) reported last December that “enrollment in American law schools declined this fall by 6.9 percent, down nearly 20 percent from its peak in 2010 [and is now] at its lowest point since 1982, when there were 35 fewer [accredited] law schools.” In the broader North American context, Canada seems to have weathered the economic storm with record postsecondary enrollments, according to the [Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada](#). Still, some are warning that Canada will also soon face enrollment challenges (see [Five Ways to Meet the Coming Enrollment Challenges for Canadian Higher Education](#)).