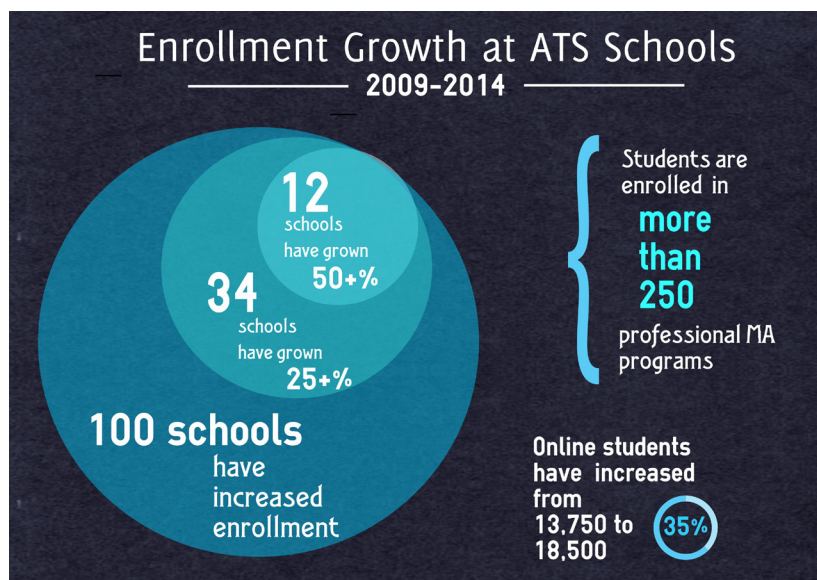


Why 100 ATS member schools have grown

By TOM TANNER AND ELIZA SMITH BROWN

Approximately 37 percent of ATS member schools have grown during the past five years. Among the 100 schools that have grown, 34 have grown at least 25 percent, of which 12 have grown by at least 50 percent. Nearly half (44%) of the growing schools show five-year enrollment gains even despite declines during the past year. While there is no single factor accounting for this sustained growth, given the diverse universe of ATS schools, some factors are worth noting.



from Annual Data Tables of The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada

Size is not necessarily a factor.

Seminary growth is not simply a case of “the big getting bigger” nor is it only a function of small incremental changes to small numbers that yield high percentage rates. Growth during the past five years has been fairly evenly distributed among schools of various student body sizes, as shown in the table below.

The list of 100 growing seminaries divides between 43 percent above the current ATS median size of 150 students and 57 percent below.

New degree programs and delivery systems can make a difference.

Certainly new degree programs and delivery systems have had an impact on the most recent enrollment

COMPARISON OF GROWING SCHOOLS BY SIZE OF STUDENT BODY (2009–2014)

Schools by Size in 2009 ¹	All Schools	Growing Schools	25%+ Growth
500+ students	32 (12%)	13 (13%)	1 (3%)
200–499 students	84 (32%)	25 (25%)	6 (18%)
100–199 students	85 (32%)	29 (29%)	13 (38%)
< 100 students	65 (24%)	33 (33%)	14 (41%)
Totals	266 (100%) ²	100 (100%)	34 (100%)

¹ Twelve of the 100 schools that have grown were not yet members of ATS in 2009; each of those is listed according to its size the year it joined the Association.

² Seven of the 273 member schools just joined in 2014, so no growth data are available.

growth—that experienced from 2013–2014. Looking at this past year alone, nearly two thirds (65 percent) of the 40 schools with double-digit percentage increases have recently implemented new degree programs or new delivery systems or both. The most popular new degree programs are two-year professional MAs, which had record numbers of students and graduates this year (see [Seminaries Set Six Enrollment Records](#) in the February *Colloquy Online*). The 273 ATS member schools now offer more than 250 different professional MA programs—the most ever.

Peter Meehan, principal at St. Mark's College, oversees a program that caters to lay Catholics who are interested in parish work and education—a growing and eclectic constituency. Some 95 percent of St. Mark's students are lay people sent by the Archdiocese to build the permanent diaconate or drawn by the school's new Master of Catholic Leadership, a stream for educational leaders. The school's enrollment has grown 64 percent during the past five years.

The most common new delivery systems are distance (online) education and extension education. More than half (145 schools or 53 percent) of all ATS members now offer distance education, as contrasted with less than 10 percent just a decade ago. Of those 145, 125 have approval to offer comprehensive distance education (i.e., more than five courses; see [list of approved schools](#) on the ATS website). While distance education enrollments are difficult to count (partly due to recent changes in how those numbers are reported), it appears that the number of online students in ATS schools has increased by as much as 35 percent since 2009 (from around 13,750 to around 18,500). This past fall, about one-fourth of all ATS students were enrolled in at least one online course, whereas a decade ago fewer than one-tenth were.

Enrollment trends in extension education, on the other hand, are more mixed, at least as reported by the 78 schools with extension sites. Extension enrollment peaked at 15,024 in 2012, but declined to 12,126 a year ago—and is down even more significantly this past fall

to less than 8,000, though most of that decline is likely due to a change in how those numbers are reported. Even accounting for that change, the number of extension students this year would still likely be fewer than six years ago. It seems more and more students are choosing online education over extension education.

Further evidence of the growing popularity of online programs among ATS seminaries may be found in the initial results from recent exceptions and experiments granted to member schools under the 2012 revision of the ATS Commission Standards. The vast majority of those exceptions and experiments allow seminaries to offer MDiv and professional MA programs either completely or almost completely online. Among the seven schools granted exceptions to the one-year residency requirement for MDiv programs, five saw those programs grow an average of 10 percent this past year (vs. a 6 percent loss for MDiv programs in general). Among the eight schools granted exceptions to the one-third

In search of creative new models and practices

Most schools don't have risk capital to provide a cushion for experimentation, but many are developing innovative models and practices nonetheless. Over the next year, as part of its Lilly-funded [Educational Models Project](#), ATS will conduct a comprehensive study of educational program developments in ATS schools. This mapping survey will gather information on the variety of educational practices that have developed during the past several decades, often to address new constituencies, to increase accessibility of theological education, or to address patterns of ministry that have been under-attended by the dominant educational models. The entire Association stands to gain from this investigation.

residency requirement for professional MA programs, six experienced an amazing average growth of 94 percent this past year (vs. 4 percent growth for all MA programs). It should be noted, however, that insufficient longitudinal data have been collected to project how the growth from exceptions and experimental initiatives might continue. As Jason Allen, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and College (MBTS), says, “The online MTS degree, which the seminary launched approximately five years ago, has certainly expanded our reach. Our fully online MDiv, however, is too new to have affected our enrollment.”

Notably, 11 of the 24 schools with approved exceptions and seven schools with approved experiments appear on the double-digit growth list for 2009–2014.

But there is no silver bullet.

As for other reasons why certain seminaries are growing, that is difficult to discern. “There is no silver bullet,”

says Daniel O. Aleshire, executive director of ATS. “The reasons that some schools have enjoyed extraordinary enrollment growth during the past five years are idiosyncratic. Each growing school has its own success story to tell.”

Philip Attebery, dean at Baptist Missionary Association Theological Seminary (BMATS), sums up the reason for

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—Daniel O. Aleshire, ATS

the school’s significant enrollment growth (94% over five years) in one word: convenience. Attebery says that students are increasingly choosing online options over extension sites, valuing the convenience of time as much as location. He also notes that enrollment jumped 36 percent at the time of BMATS’s initial accreditation with

THE 12 FASTEST-GROWING ATS SEMINARIES DURING THE PAST FIVE YEARS (SCHOOLS THAT HAVE EXPERIENCED AT LEAST 50 PERCENT ENROLLMENT GROWTH)

School	Location	2014 Enrollment
Baptist Missionary Association Theological Seminary	Jacksonville, TX	68
Central Baptist Theological Seminary	Shawnee, KS	287
Christian Witness Theological Seminary	San Jose, CA	78
Immaculate Conception Seminary Seton Hall University	South Orange, NJ	334
Knox Theological Seminary	Ft. Lauderdale, FL	277
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary	Kansas City, MO	804
Mount Angel Seminary	St. Benedict, OR	87
Northwest Baptist Seminary	Langley, BC	34
Notre Dame Seminary	New Orleans, LA	200
St. Mark’s College	Vancouver, BC	54
University of Notre Dame Department of Theology	Notre Dame, IN	318
United Theological Seminary	Dayton, OH	538

ATS, but he further observes, “the increase of ministry and bible programs in regional universities is drawing off enrollment from the freestanding seminary.”

Molly T. Marshall, in her eleventh year as president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary, has overseen a record growth of more than 179 percent during the past five years—without petitioning for any exceptions or experiments. “We have been strategic,” she explains, “by experimenting within the already approved program offerings.” Two of Central’s most successful programs have been fully funded to recruit and build cohorts of students. The CREATE program has added 12 new MDiv students each year for six years, and a women’s leadership initiative is following the same model. Students learn entrepreneurial skills and financial literacy, preparing them for a capstone project in which they launch a startup ministry. Marshall also attributes Central’s success to its nine off-campus sites—four of them for Korean language students and all with integrated online learning and an active social media program.

“We have learned that it is absolutely critical to try to offer relevant and contextual theological education to support the school’s mission and values,” she adds.

Allen at MBTS agrees that building the student body with robust numbers of Korean, Hispanic, and African American students has yielded sustainable growth. In describing the dramatic growth at MBTS during the past two years, Allen adds, “For fall 2014 and spring 2015,

both semesters saw headcount and hours sold surge approximately 20 percent from the previous, comparable semesters. We have fundamentally rebuilt our student recruiting, retention, and institutional communication and marketing efforts—like most every other area of the institution.”

“But,” Allen concludes, “while these steps have doubtlessly helped, I believe the most important steps we’ve taken are convictional and missiological. We have repurposed the institution to give its very best energies to serving the local Southern Baptist Church. Our doctrinal convictions and our missiological clarity both have accelerated our growth. Everyone knows precisely who we are, what our theological convictions are, and what we see as our chief ambition—to train pastors, ministers, and evangelists for the church.”

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