Another Great Question!

In my last blog, I noted that receiving one great question from a school can lead to greater comprehension for the entire ATS membership. Over the summer, I received a question from a vice president of planning and institutional effectiveness who was interested in discerning what impact, if any, reducing the number of credit hours in an MDiv degree had on enrollment. What a great question! The answer has several parts.

First, a recent review of ATS member school websites shows the following credit hours required for the MDiv among the schools:

- About 25% require 72-80 hours
- About 25% require 80-89 hours
- About 20% require exactly 90 hours
- About 15% require 91-99 hours
- About 15% require 100 or more hours

Second, if there is a notable trend among ATS schools, it would be toward a reduction in the number of credit hours required to complete the MDiv. In the most recent decade, many schools have reduced their required MDiv hours to below 90. As can be seen above, 50% of ATS schools now require fewer than 90 hours to complete the MDiv. A decade ago, the vast majority of ATS schools would have required 90 or more hours to graduate with an MDiv degree.

Third, I reviewed the change in enrollment over the last five years for schools that had reduced the credit hours within their MDiv. This impacted about 115 ATS schools, or almost half of schools that offer the MDiv. Of the schools that have reduced their hours below 90 hours, the following chart reflects what happened with their MDiv enrollment in the last five years. (For the purposes of the chart, "growth" is defined as an increase in enrollment of 5%, "decline" is defined as a decrease in enrollment of more than -5%, and "stable" is defined as change in enrollment of +-5%.)

	MDiv Enrollment All ATS Schools	Schools Reducing MDiv Credit Hours	Schools Not Reducing MDiv Credit Hours
Enrollment growth	26%	18%	33%
Enrollment stable	12%	14%	10%
Enrollment decline	62%	68%	57%

Finally, I reviewed the current MDiv credit hour expectations by ATS schools stratified by ecclesial family. At present, mainline Protestant institutions are more likely to require fewer than 90 hours to complete the MDiv degree, and by a substantial margin.

MDiv Credit Hours to Graduate	Evangelical Protestant	Mainline Protestant	Roman Catholic/ Orthodox
<90 hours	44%	71%	28%
90 hours	20%	23%	18%
>90 hours	36%	6%	54%

There are a few brief items of note in the chart and broader data. Overall, MDiv enrollment has declined from about 32,000 in fall 2012 to about 29,000 in fall 2016. Over the last five years, four in ten ATS schools have shown MDiv enrollment growth or stability, while six in ten schools have shown MDiv enrollment declines. When looking at only schools that have reduced their credit hours in the last decade, more of those schools have shown MDiv enrollment decline than schools that have not reduced their required credit hours. This is likely not what ATS schools expected when they reduced their credit hours for the MDiv.

There are potentially many reasons why MDiv enrollment would grow or decline in a theological school. A thorough analysis of enrollment management practices throughout the institution can yield some interesting outcomes and deeper questions. Moreover, there are many good and appropriate reasons to reduce the number of credit hours within a degree program, and each ATS school should undertake a periodic review of its degrees offered to ensure they are serving the school's mission. Further, it is not possible to know for sure if enrollment declines would have been deeper had changes in required hours not been made. Nonetheless, assuming enrollment growth *because* of the decrease in credit hours is not supported by the data (at least not for the MDiv over the last five years).

If you have a reaction or further questions about this topic, send me an email and let me know. Also, let me know if there are other questions out there that your school has been pondering. Your good question just might end up assisting others, too.

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