

An enrollment surprise—more ATS schools grow than decline for first time since 2006

BY CHRIS MEINZER

As of early December, 98% of ATS schools have reported their enrollment data for fall 2020. In terms of a year-over-year comparison by school, 54% of ATS schools had enrollment increases and 46% of ATS schools had enrollment decreases. This is positive news for ATS schools! In the last decade, on average, about 45% of ATS schools were growing year-over-year in terms of total head count enrollment. Fall 2020 then shows a change in this trend at least for one year.



Year to year changes since 1990

The chart on the next page shows the percent of ATS schools with stable or growing enrollments each year from 1990 to 2019, with 2020 added in green. From 1991 until 2004, more ATS schools grew annually than declined. For example, in 1991, 58% of ATS schools grew year-over-year versus 42% that declined. The blue dots represent each year that more ATS schools had enrollment increases than those that had enrollment declines. In the period from 1990 to 2004, when overall ATS enrollment was growing, there were more schools with enrollment increases annually, and this is one factor that drove the overall enrollment growth. There were certainly some schools that were growing significantly, but the total enrollment across ATS was also being driven by general growth in the population of schools.

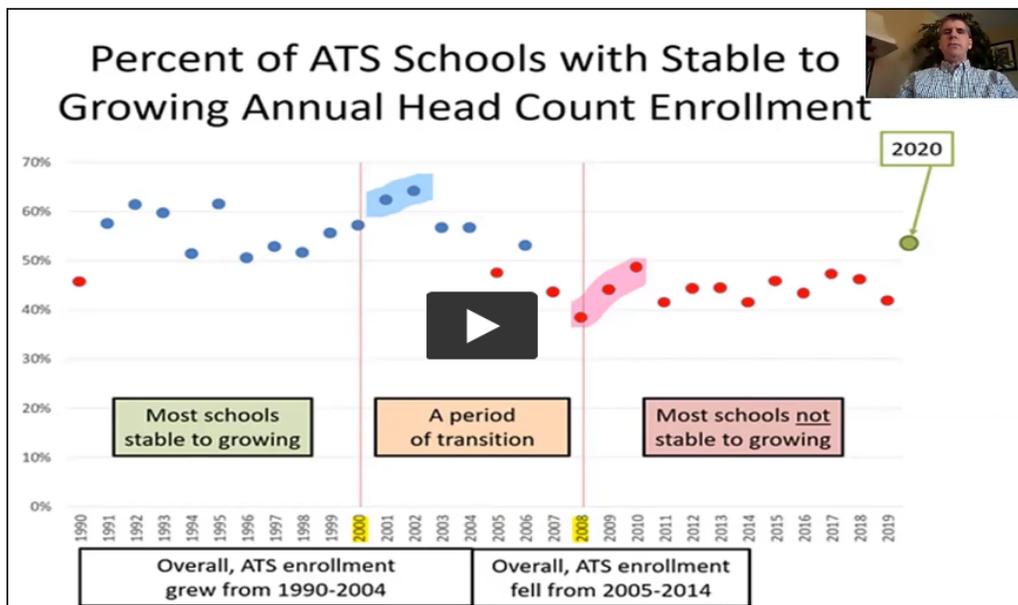
From 2000 to 2008, ATS schools hit a period of transition in terms of enrollment. In 2000 and 2001, more than 60% of ATS schools grew year-over-year. The percentage of schools experiencing growth began to drop and by 2004–2006, there were more schools declining than growing. For example, by 2007, only 44% of ATS schools grew year-over-year. Equally important, overall enrollment across ATS schools began to fall starting in 2005, and this overall decline was significantly driven by declines across the membership. As can be seen by the red dots, somewhere between 40% and 49% of the membership was growing from 2007 to 2019.

The years 2000 and 2008 are highlighted in the chart. In 2000, the US was experiencing the economic challenges brought on by the DotCom Bubble. In 2008, Canada and the US were living through the economic challenges of

the Great Recession. There is a common expectation that enrollment in higher education grows during economic downturns. As can be seen, there were some positive variations in 2001 and 2002 (blue highlight), and again in 2009 and 2010 (pink highlight); however, these changes only lasted for two years and the past trajectories returned.

In 2020, there was a dramatic shift. From 2015 to 2019, on average, about 45% of ATS schools grew year-over-year. In 2020, 54% of ATS schools grew year-over-year. In the face of an historic pandemic, this swing is noteworthy. As a response to the pandemic, nearly all ATS schools shifted quickly in the spring 2020 semester to online delivery. Most continued online delivery into fall 2020. This new educational approach very likely helped support enrollment levels and the resulting year-over-year swing. Given the shifts that occurred between 2001–2002 and 2009–2010, it is possible that the shift in 2020 will be short-lived. Schools will want to closely monitor their enrollments and admission performances to ascertain the potential length of these changes and the impact on mission and economics.

[Click the video below to hear a further explanation of the data.]



When the actual head count enrollment numbers are finalized, I would expect that total enrollment will be either flat or slightly up. I do not anticipate a dramatic shift in terms of the number of students enrolled. Nonetheless, this shift to more schools growing than declining year-over-year in fall 2020 is a heartening surprise.

The last five years

As another data point for enrollment, I reviewed specific schools over the last five years. I looked at each school and whether that school had an annual enrollment increase or decrease from fall 2016 to fall 2020. There was a total of 256 ATS schools that reported enrollment during each of these years. Here is what the data shows:

HC Enrollment Increases by School	# Schools	% Schools
0 years of enrollment increases	17	7%
1 year of enrollment increases	55	21%
2 years of enrollment increases	90	35%
3 years of enrollment increases	57	22%
4 years of enrollment increases	30	12%
5 years of enrollment increases	7	3%

Seven percent of ATS schools declined each year of the five years. Three percent of the ATS schools increased each year of the five years, and another 12% increased in four of the five years under review. The large proportion

of ATS schools fluctuated up and down with some variation. Of the seven schools that grew each year of the five years, six were evangelical and one was mainline. All seven were freestanding schools. Of the seven, three have more than 1,000 students, one has about 500 students, and three have fewer than 300 students. All seven have been approved for online delivery.

Conclusion

2020 is indeed a noteworthy year. More than half (54%) of ATS schools showed enrollment increases in fall 2020 when compared to fall 2019—this swing reversed a trend where only about 45% of ATS schools had been growing over the last decade. This is very good news in the face of the health challenges in the world. Given enrollment trajectories during other economic challenges, this positive swing might be short-lived. Whether the school experienced enrollment increases or decreases, leaders

should have thorough internal discussions about why this occurred for them in fall 2020, as well as about the trends over at least the last five years. Historic data does not necessarily support a long-lasting enrollment increase during periods of economic challenge nor does recent data show that growth is the norm. Theological schools should celebrate the positive results of fall 2020 while discerning what it means for them in the broader context of the last several years and the broader trends across ATS schools.



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I like to know what you are thinking. Your good questions lead to further research and deeper insights. If you have specific questions or would like to pursue additional aspects of the enrollment data, please contact me at meinzer@ats.edu