

## Applications as a leading enrollment indicator. How are we doing?

By Chris Meinzer

ATS staff have written a number of articles over the years about enrollment trends in theological education. And, more recently, effort has been given to understand what is happening on the output side in terms of placements and graduate rates. In this post, we consider the inputs in relation to completed applications reported by ATS member schools during the fall 2015 ATS Annual Report Form process.

Applications are at least one important indicator of public interest in a particular institution and in theological education as a whole. Although some of the barriers have been lowered because of the advent of online application processes, schools often still need to exert a fair amount of effort to get persons to the point where the application is completed.

The total number of applications to ATS schools has continued to decline over the last decade. The chart shows the applications by degree categories for the last 10 years, with the highest years in green and the lowest years in red. This gives a quick reference point to changes within theological education in the most recent decade.

Same Set of 241 ATS Schools, 2006–2015

Fall	MDiv Applicants	Prof MA Applicants	Acad MA Applicants	Adv Prof Applicants	Adv Acad Applicants	Total Applicants
2006	15692	4797	5692	2601	3639	32421
2007	15138	4654	5626	2458	3698	31574
2008	14378	4659	5287	2537	3767	30628
2009	14397	4727	5281	2525	3716	30646
2010	14398	4718	5634	2359	3838	30947
2011	14329	4995	5641	2683	3776	31424
2012	14217	5040	5097	2901	3803	31058
2013	14037	4863	5010	2933	3461	30304
2014	13072	5093	5419	2632	3290	29516
2015	12802	4875	5207	2622	3136	28678

The MDiv degree, representing the majority of the degree activity in terms of applicants *and* enrollment, has dropped through the decade and impacts the totals most significantly. Applications to advanced academic degrees was between 3700 and 3800 for most of the decade, but has declined by almost 20% from its decade peak. Applications to professional MA and advanced professional degrees have been fluctuating but steady when looking at the beginning and end of the decade.

When examining individual institutions in fall 2015, the median number of applications completed within ATS schools was 50. The number of applicants per school can be stratified into quintiles of less than 20 applications, 20–40 applications, 40–70 applications, 70–150 applications, and more than 150 applications. These numbers represent a significant amount of effort on the part of ATS schools, many with limited resources, to identify and nurture potential applicants. All this so that the application might turn into students the institution would want to accept and hope to enroll.

Because theological education is very relationally based, many ATS schools are investing lots of time and effort to turn inquiries to applications and applicants into new enrollees. This *is* worthwhile effort. Overall across the decade, ATS schools are able to turn about 75% of their applications into acceptances and about 75% of their acceptances into new enrollees. So an increase in the number of inquiries and applications often can equate to a larger incoming class.

But many schools are finding that the effort expended in one fashion in the past just does not bear the same level of fruit today in terms of applications and the resulting new enrollments. Research has shown that theological schools may likely need to go further back into the pipeline to gain access to and become known to potential new students. This pipeline-to-potential approach requires even more effort in a relationally-based environment and extends the amount of time until the resource investment pays off. Another way forward for some schools is to find already existing, non-traditional constituencies to whom the institution can offer theological training. This non-traditional access approach reduces the amount of time from investment to potential student. Ultimately, perhaps the most sustainable way forward into the future is a combination of these approaches.

Does your institution use the pipeline-to-potential approach, the non-traditional access approach, or another approach? What are unique strategies that have proven successful to increase inquiries and applications?