

ATS analyzes fall 2020 admissions statistics of member schools

By CHRIS MEINZER

In a recent [article](#), I noted how the ATS membership experienced an enrollment surprise—54% of schools had enrollment increases in fall 2020 versus fall 2019, reversing a decade-long trend that saw about 45% of schools growing year-over-year in headcount enrollment. I was curious to see if the fall 2020 headcount enrollment increases were also observed in new students beginning their seminary education—if the positive news in overall enrollment resulted from a good year in new admissions or perhaps something else. The answer? Perhaps a little bit of both.

As a follow-up to that article, I analyzed some admissions statistics for fall 2020. I reviewed the data for applications, acceptances, and new enrollments reported by ATS schools in fall 2020 versus the five previous reporting years. As can be seen by the newly published [ATS Annual Data Tables](#), overall enrollment is up about 700 students (with the growth coming mostly in MA degrees).

Comparing fall 2020 with fall 2019, the total number of applications completed by students seeking to attend ATS schools was flat at around 36,600. The number of those students who were accepted by ATS schools was slightly down from about 25,800 to around 25,200. The number of those student who actually enrolled was about 18,200—up slightly from 18,000—representing an increase of about 2%.

This means that some of the positive news on enrollment and the overall enrollment increase was due to 200 more students joining ATS schools in fall 2020 versus fall 2019, but this would not explain the whole increase.



Another factor is that the number of graduates reported in fall 2020 versus fall 2019 declined by about 400 students or 2%. From fall 2015 to fall 2019, on average, about 52% of ATS schools had shown increases in the number of graduates year-over-year. From fall 2019 to fall 2020, only 46% of ATS schools reflected increases in the number of graduates. Clearly, the pandemic had some impact on schools, students, and the ability to graduate during this period. The normal trajectory of graduations decelerated, which explains some of the enrollment increases.

During this period of reporting that covers the time when ATS schools were experiencing the impact of COVID-19, enrollment in the membership was somewhat impacted by additional new students and by fewer students graduating. Both phases of the seminary student's journey had some impact on overall enrollment reported in fall 2020.

As is often the case, the picture of admissions, enrollment, and graduations yields interesting results when we stratify the membership into common categories. In the chart on the following page, data is provided for all ATS schools by ecclesial family and by whether the school is freestanding or related to a college or university.

% Change Fall 2019 to Fall 2020	All ATS	Evangelical	Mainline	Roman Catholic/Orthodox	Independent	Related
Applications	0%	-2%	6%	-1%	-5%	6%
Acceptances	-2%	-4%	0%	1%	-4%	0%
New Enrollees	2%	1%	4%	0%	1%	3%
Graduations	-2%	0%	-7%	-7%	-3%	-2%
HC Enrollment	1%	2%	-1%	0%	1%	2%

1 In evangelical schools, new enrollees increased by 1% and graduations were flat. Overall enrollment went up by about 2%, so it appears that evangelical schools did a relatively good job of also holding onto students who they already had but had not graduated.

2 In mainline schools, new enrollees increased by 4% and graduations declined by 7%. All things being equal, enrollment overall would have been expected to increase. In fact, enrollment across mainline schools declined by 1%. These data points appear to indicate challenges in attrition with existing students during the period. Although ATS does not collect data on attrition, based upon my estimates during this period, it appears that mainline schools had higher attrition rates over this last year than would have been the case in normal years.

3 In Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools, new enrollees were level and graduations were down by 7%. Enrollment for these schools was also flat, so there may have been some challenge with attrition during the year.

4 In both independent schools and those related to a college or university, new enrollees were up and graduations were down leading to some enrollment increases during the year.

There are so many important elements to enrollment management within a theological school. Administrators and board members would benefit from ongoing conversations with their admissions and enrollment teams.

In a year when there was an enrollment surprise to celebrate, there were also data points of pause or concern. Are the delays in graduations a blip or will this lead to broader issues for student completion? Are the estimated levels of attrition actually occurring or are there other unidentified factors? Will some of the positive and negative elements occurring during the pandemic continue in future years? The missions of theological schools require us to pursue these complex questions and to seek answers that are not always easy to discern.



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ATS resources for understanding your school in the broader context of theological education:

Member school CEOs should look for their ATS *Institutional Peer Profile Report (IPPR)* and ATS *Strategic Information Report (SIR)* via email in early March to assist them with resource analysis and benchmarking. Generated by ATS, these annual reports can offer deeper insight into how your school is performing relative to other member schools. Interested in seeing where spending in this most recent year compares with spending over the last two decades? Participate in a self-paced class titled *Mission & Money in These Unique Times*. Interested in a more nuanced and specific presentation of data about your school and how it compares to other ATS schools? Consider using the *Identity & Mission* framework for your school. Please email meinzer@ats.edu with questions about any of these resources.