

ATS identifies return to normal pattern of enrollment trends

By CHRIS MEINZER

Although shifts could still occur as the remaining schools report, there are some interesting trends being identified in the 90% of ATS schools that have reported their fall 2021 enrollment numbers. Overall, 48% of schools experienced enrollment increases and 52% of schools reported enrollment decreases.

Prior to fall 2020, ATS schools had been reflecting a trend of 45% increases/55% decreases for about a decade. In fall 2020, amid the pandemic, ATS schools had reflected 55% with an increase and 45% with a decrease as a reversal of the decade-long trend. Fall 2021 numbers display a return to more schools reflecting decreases, but it is not as pronounced as it was pre-fall 2020. Presently, the estimated head count enrollment would land flat year-over-year.

An analysis of enrollment changes by degree category also shows some notable changes:



- Regarding the MDiv, four out of ten schools experienced enrollment increases, and six out of ten schools reported enrollment decreases. As seen in the chart below, this equates to a fairly dramatic slide in the estimated number of students enrolled in the MDiv by around 1,500. MAs (now shown as a combination of MA professional, MA academic, and MA, both due to the new categorizations within the accrediting standards and data collection) show a slight increase in the estimated number of students enrolled by 300, or a little more than 1%. There are slightly more schools with enrollment increases when compared to enrollment decreases.
- Advanced Professional degrees are reflecting substantially higher estimated enrollment increases at 7.4%, or about 800 students, as more than six out of ten schools individually reflected positive enrollment trends.

	UP	DOWN	Estimated Fall 2021	Fall 2020	Estimated Change %
Total	48%	52%	78,400	78,394	0.0%
MDiv	41%	59%	29,000	30,463	-4.8%
MAs	51%	49%	27,600	27,305	1.1%
Adv Prof	63%	37%	11,800	10,982	7.4%
Adv Acad	55%	45%	5,400	5,197	3.9%
Other	40%	60%	4,600	4,447	3.4%

- Advanced Academic degrees show 55% of schools with enrollment increases and 45% with enrollment decreases, with an estimated growth of 200 students, or a little less than 4%.
- Other enrollment is showing a bit of a reporting anomaly. While only four out of ten schools had enrollment increases, estimated enrollment is up due to one of the schools adding nearly 300 students within this category. As a result, the overall category is up about 150 students, or 3.5%.

- In the Other category, there were some substantial differences within structure and ecclesial family.

These overall trend reports can be an important tool in a school's strategic planning or accreditation process. Understanding where a school fits into the broader landscape of theological education in North America can help a school's administration and board better understand its own trends and trajectory. For example, it is untrue that all ATS schools are facing enrollment decreases. As shown below, there are several areas and schools experiencing enrollment increases, with particular categories showing significant growth.

Using these benchmarks and industry trends help a school provide a more honest assessment of its own realities. It can help a school to ask strategically important questions—*What are our enrollment trends? How do they compare to the overall ATS trend? What about comparisons to similarly situated schools regarding structure or ecclesial family? What trends are occurring within Canada or*

For a deeper analysis, the chart below shows the percentage of schools—broken down by structure and ecclesial family—that reported increases in head count enrollment. These numbers are totaled and displayed by degree category. Regarding total enrollment, 49% of freestanding schools and 45% of related schools experienced enrollment increases; 52% of evangelical schools, 47% of mainline schools, and 35% of Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools reported enrollment increases.

Looking at enrollment changes by degree category in terms of structure and ecclesial family, several trends emerge:

- In the MDiv, all categories display more schools with enrollment decreases than those with increases.
- In the MAs, all categories but one (related schools) show more schools with enrollment increases than schools with decreases.
- In both Advanced Professional and Advanced Academic degrees, all categories were either even, or they reflected more schools with enrollment increases than decreases.

	Freestanding	Related	Evangelical	Mainline	Roman Catholic/Orthodox
Total	49%	45%	52%	47%	35%
MDiv	39%	43%	44%	38%	37%
MAs	58%	41%	51%	51%	52%
Adv Prof	65%	59%	62%	65%	56%
Adv Acad	50%	63%	60%	50%	50%
Other	34%	52%	32%	50%	44%

in the United States?

These simple questions can provide benchmarks for a school to ask deeper questions of its own trends. Once these benchmarks are identified, a school can then determine why its trends are

similar to or different from other schools and investigate what realities lead to these comparisons.

If you would like assistance in situating your school within the broader landscape of North American theological education regarding enrollment, admissions, completions, finances, and other important statistics, you can participate in the [Five-Phase Approach to Discovery in an ATS School](#). This design has been used by nearly 100

ATS schools to support their strategic planning, accreditation, and Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative processes.

If you want more information about this approach, please contact Chris Meinzer.



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