

ATS: the benefits of associate membership and accreditation

BY STEPHEN R. GRAHAM

Since 2010, ATS has accepted 70 schools into associate membership, and since then, 57 schools have been accredited by the Commission on Accrediting.¹ Recently, an associate membership applicant asked about the impact of ATS membership on enrollment. Since enrollment trends are one of the most important data points across ATS and generate many inquiries to ATS staff, I was intrigued by the question. As I began to explore enrollment patterns for newer member schools, the question broadened into a larger one: Why do schools pursue ATS membership and accreditation?

Attaining accreditation, the ultimate destination of ATS membership, takes time and the investment of considerable institutional resources. Preparing the application materials for associate membership takes a number of months prior to submission in the fall preceding the next summer's ATS/COA Biennial Meeting. An application submitted in September 2025, for example, will receive a final vote of the membership at the Biennial Meeting in 2026. Applications are processed during the academic year and voted on by the ATS Board of Directors in the spring. Those schools selected to continue in the process are voted on by the membership at the Biennial Meeting held during even numbered years in June. The expectation is that associate members will move with some dispatch toward accreditation, ultimately conferred by the ATS Board of Commissioners, normally between two to five years after becoming associate members. Since most theological schools, and perhaps especially newer ones, have their hands overfull keeping their educational pro-



grams functioning and paying the bills, why do so many schools continue to pursue ATS membership and accreditation?

Affirmation of the four ATS core values

Since 2015, the associate membership application form has asked schools to describe why they wanted to participate in the larger ATS community. A review of applications of those schools voted upon in 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2024 revealed an interesting correlation between the reasons schools desire to join ATS and the four ATS core values:

Core value #1: Quality and improvement

Of the 38 schools that successfully applied for associate membership during those years, 26 (68 percent) mentioned their desire to be accredited by ATS as the “gold standard” for graduate theological schools, citing its reputation for high academic standards and academic excellence. Applicants noted that ATS affirmed the schools’ desire to offer the “highest quality of theological education to [their] students.” For some, this seal of approval is important to their standing within their host universities, and for others, it affirms their status within the larger community of graduate theological schools.

Core value #2: Leadership

Half of the applications mentioned the importance of honing leadership skills through interaction with leaders across the broad spectrum of member schools. In nearly every leadership development event hosted by ATS, one of the most affirmed benefits is networking, conversation, and learning from other leaders in peer schools. Applicants know that ATS is developing the skills and capacities of administrators, faculties, and boards of member schools.

Core value #3: Collegiality

Roughly 40 percent of the schools affirmed the ecumenical character of the Association. Prior to applying for membership, some had already been active in collaborations with ATS schools, including those both like and unlike their own. An equal percentage specifically cited fulfilling the *Standards of Accreditation* as an affirmation of the quality of their schools. Several schools also named the importance of ATS accreditation to validate their credentials for students seeking specialized ministries such as military chaplaincy. Surprisingly, while it must have been in the minds of some, none of the applications mentioned eligibility for funding from supporters of ATS schools such as Lilly Endowment Inc. That benefit is considerable, of course, as is the value of members-only leadership development programming and other services. ATS staff have calculated that for every dollar paid as member dues to ATS, they receive about \$14 in benefits.

Core value #4: Diversity

Data from the 70 schools accepted into ATS associate membership since 2010 reveal a remarkable diversity of sizes, locations, denominational affiliations, embedded/affiliated and stand alone, dates of founding, demographics, and missions among the schools. For example, 2024 student headcounts in these schools range from 6,168 to 16. The group includes one Jewish school, three schools located in Puerto Rico, an indigenous learning community, an institute for worship studies, some schools utilizing competency-based theological education, schools whose educational programs are predominantly online, and those committed to residential theological education.



Enrollment trends of those recently accredited

Fifty-seven schools have been accredited since 2010. Excluding the eight schools accredited in 2024 and 2025 for whom there is obviously no change in enrollment since accreditation, of the remaining 49 schools accredited in 2010 or later, 65 percent (32) have grown in headcount enrollment since the year of initial accreditation. Of those 32 schools, 20 have grown by 25 percent or more, and 15 have grown in excess of 55 percent. One school's enrollment has remained the same since its accreditation, and 16 (33 percent) have declined in headcount enrollment since the year of accreditation.

Compared to the overall enrollment trends across ATS, the growth of new member schools is significant:²

- Across the eight academic years from 2017–18 through 2024–25, fewer than half of all ATS schools grew in headcount enrollment.
- During two of those years, enrollment grew across all ATS schools — in 54 percent of the schools in 2020–21 and in 55 percent of the schools in 2024–25.
- In five of the years, overall enrollment grew: in 45 percent of the schools in 2018–19, 2019–20, 2023–24; in 47 percent of the schools in 2021–22; and in 43 percent of the schools in 2022–23.
- In one year (2017–18), exactly half of the schools grew.

There are probably many and varied reasons why the high percentage of newly accredited schools have increased enrollment in an enterprise where growth is no longer the norm. Some are growing through innovative approaches and distinctive constituencies. Others are able to offer new programs that benefit from ATS accreditation. Some represent immigrant or previously underserved communities that seek the confirmation of quality brought by ATS accreditation. Whatever the case, these new partners in the ATS membership bring significant gifts to the community, and while learning

from the accrued wisdom of the body, they both benefit from and contribute to the Association's core values of diversity, quality and improvement, collegiality, and leadership.

¹For a variety of reasons, nine of the 70 have since left ATS before becoming accredited. Of the 57 schools accredited since 2010, 12 had become associate members prior to 2010. As of May 2025, there are 15 associate member schools that are not yet accredited, having become associate members in either 2022 or 2024.

² See, Chris Meinzer's articles in *Colloquy Online* from December 2017, October 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021, and November 2022, October 2023, and November 2024, available on the [ATS website](#).



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