

Being where? The shift from on-campus to offsite to online education

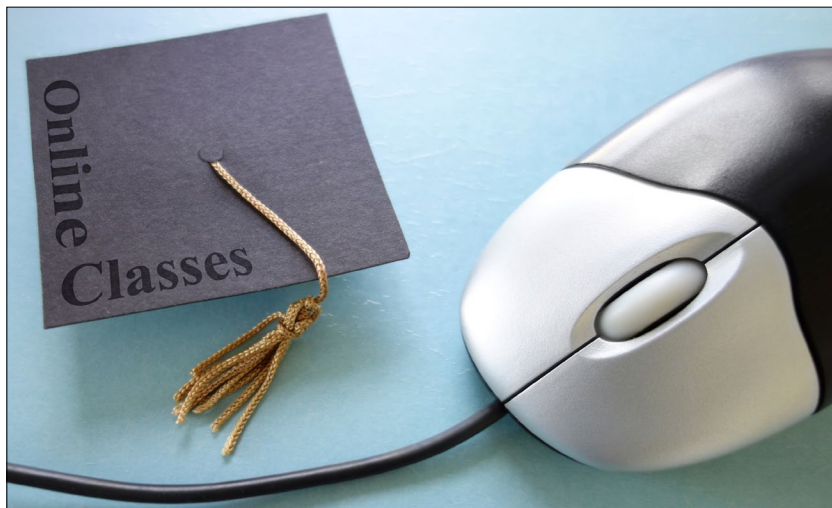
By TOM TANNER

*Oxford University Press published a classic study of on-campus residential education at ATS schools 20 years ago titled *Being There: Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools* (1997). The authors drew this conclusion: “In summary, few of the new forms and technologies seem to us to deliver the full benefits of actually being there, on location at school, in its buildings ...”*

While their concerns were focused on online (distance) education, they also expressed some anxiety about offsite (extension) education. After all, in 1997 no ATS schools were approved to offer online education (and wouldn't be for several more years), while offsite extension education was clearly growing—and about to explode.

In fact, over the next 15 years, offsite education grew from a few dozen sites operated by 16 ATS schools to more than 220 sites at more than 80 ATS schools. Offsite enrollments grew even more, from a few hundred students in 1997 to nearly 10,000 in 2012—the peak year for extension education at ATS schools. In those 15 years, theological education shifted from being virtually all on-campus to one in seven seminarians studying offsite in extension education.

The shift from on-campus to offsite began to change in 2011–12, however, perhaps not coincidentally with the last revision of the Standards of Accreditation in 2012. That revision allowed for more online education, including fully online degrees, now offered by scores of ATS



schools (54 schools have fully or almost fully online MDiv programs).

In 2011–12, online enrollment (i.e., those taking at least one course online) surpassed offsite enrollment for the first time, though their totals were close at around 10,000 students each. Offsite enrollment has declined 31 percent since its peak in 2012, while online enrollment has grown 110 percent, as the table and the accompanying charts at the end of the article show. Now, there are three-and-a-half times more online students than offsite students (23,279 vs. 6,725).

Not all sectors of extension education are in decline, however. For example, there are more sites offering less than half a degree than there were six years ago (79 vs. 64). In addition, a growing number of schools (four this past year alone) are opening new extension sites in prisons, where online education is not permitted. And the total number of schools offering extension education, while stable at 222 since 2012, hides considerable turbulence beneath that surface, with a dozen or more sites closing each year and just as many replacing them. Still, the overall shift in the last six years from offsite to online enrollment is clear. Two-thirds of all ATS schools now

offer online education, and one-third of all ATS students take at least one class online.

This shift in recent years from offsite to online education is likely due to several factors. One factor is the convenience of online education, especially given that most ATS students are working adults with other commitments and other communities. Another factor is the improvement in online platforms and pedagogies, with recent ATS graduates who completed most of their degree online reporting higher levels of satisfaction with their education, including spiritual formation, than those graduates who completed their degree on-campus.

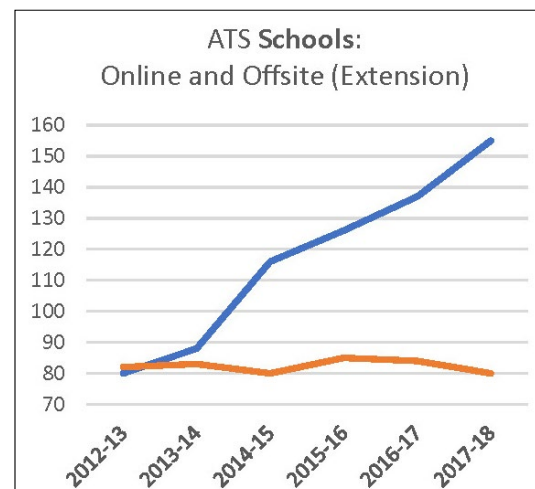
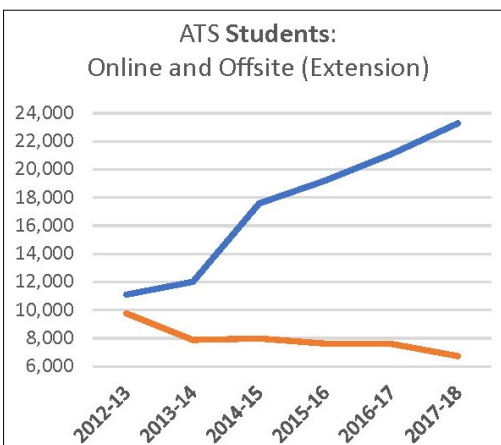
A third factor may be the increasingly blurry line between offsite and online education—and even on-campus education. Many ATS schools now deliver theological education through multiple modalities simultaneously. It is not uncommon for some seminary professors today to teach all three groups of students at the same time, with some students sitting in an on-campus classroom, some sitting in an offsite extension location, and still others joining individually online from their homes and ministries.

Today, 40 percent of all ATS students are online or offsite, compared to a little more than one-fourth only six years ago. Soon, a majority of students may no longer study exclusively “there” on a seminary campus. This shift raises the question: where is the “there” in “being there?” Twenty years after the 1997 classic study *Being There*, the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education published *(Not) Being There: Online Distance Theological Education* (2017). Noting the many changes in education that have occurred over the last two decades, especially in online education, the authors asked where the “there” should be? To be sure, theological education needs a strong sense of place, but *where* is the best place? Their 2017 study, like the 1997 study, affirms the value of formation that occurs in community, but increasingly the community of choice for many theological students is the one where they are already living and serving—in their own ministries, workplaces, and social/family settings.

Being where? The “there” seems to be moving, from on-campus to offsite to online. I wonder where the next “there” will be?



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(Please note: table showing enrollment trends is on the following page)

ATS Enrollment Trends in Online and Offsite (Extension) Education
(2012-13 to 2017-18)

Year (Fall*)	ATS Schools Online~	ATS Students Online	ATS Schools with Extension Sites^	Number of Extension Sites	ATS Students at Extension Sites
2012-13	80	11,100	82	222	9,750
2013-14	88	12,000	83	226	7,900
2014-15	116	17,573	80	231	7,972
2015-16	126	19,203	85	239	7,606
2016-17	137	21,099	84	236	7,595
2017-18	155	23,279	80	222	6,725
Change	Up 94%	Up 110%	Down 2%	Down 7% (from peak)	Down 31%

* Enrollments for 2012-13 and 2014-14 were adjusted from annual to fall counts, since formula changed to fall in 2014-15.

~ Number of ATS schools "online" equals those with comprehensive distance education approval (6+ courses).

^ Extension sites have three levels of approval: complete degree, half or more of a degree, and less than half a degree.

The number of complete degree sites is stable at around 95 since 2012, but enrollment is down 25% (6,220 to 4,669).

The number of half-or-more degree sites has declined from 62 to 50, and enrollment is down 43% (1,800 to 1,023).

The number of less-than-half degree sites has increased from 64 to 79, but enrollment is down 40% (1,730 to 1,033).

The numbers above do not include occasional course sites for which ongoing approval is not needed.