

Bright spots emerge in fall 2023 ATS enrollment update

By CHRIS MEINZER

ATS member schools have reported their enrollment data for fall 2023. There are many bright spots and some continual sobering trends that require the attention of the ATS membership.

With 96% of the schools reporting through mid-December, ATS is projecting that overall enrollment across the membership will be down only about 1.2%. These projections are based upon the enrollment reported by the 96% and the assumption of those not yet reporting being similar to what they reported in the prior year.

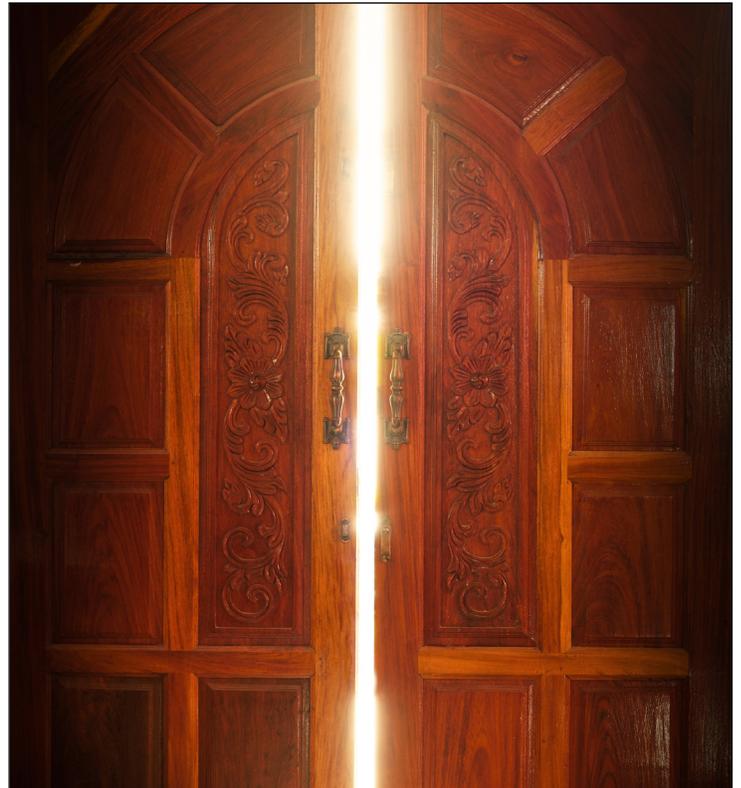
Enrollment by degree category

Below is a breakdown of the projected fall 2023 head count enrollment with a comparison to what was reported in fall 2022. Certain trends have continued.

	Fall 2023	Fall 2022	% Change
MDIV	26,266	27,635	-5.0%
MA	27,975	27,789	+0.7%
STM THM	1,295	1,315	-1.5%
ADV PROF	12,015	12,305	-2.4%
PHD THD	4,192	4,113	+1.9%
NON-DEGREE	5,182	4,694	+10.4%
TOTAL	76,925	77,851	-1.2%

The number of students enrolled in MA degrees continues to grow across ATS. The 27,789 students would be the highest enrollment ever recorded in ATS and now represents 36% of total enrollment. The current year increase is a modest 0.7%, but the degree category continues as a growth area for the ATS membership.

Enrollment within PhD/ThD degrees across ATS schools has remained between 3,900 and 4,100 students during the last 15 years. The projection of 4,192 students



would be the highest level ever reported within the membership.

The number of non-degree students is projected to increase by more than 10% to nearly 5,200 students. If this projection holds, it would be the highest point since 2017. Further analysis is warranted, but it appears that some of the efforts of schools within Lilly Endowment Inc.'s *Pathways for Tomorrow* Initiative are influencing this marked increase.

The number of students enrolled in an MDiv program continues to decline across ATS, with a projected decline of 5.0% this year. If the projection of 26,266 MDiv students holds, it will be the lowest number of MDiv students reported since 1992, when ATS schools numbered 217 (versus nearly 280 schools today). MDiv student enrollment still represents about 34% of enrollment, but the number of students pursuing the degree continues to fall.

The enrollment in STH/THM and advanced professional degrees, which include the DMin and other professional doctoral degrees, are both projected to show nominal declines. For the advanced professional degrees, this would be the first year of decline since 2016. This degree category has grown from about 9,500 students to about 12,000 students since then and it has had a robust positive influence on enrollment during this time. It will be interesting to see if this year-over-year decline is a blip or if a new trend will emerge in the next few years.

Ecclesial family enrollment

An important stratification of enrollment is to look at enrollment across ATS schools by ecclesial family. The chart below reflects projected enrollment by degree category and by ecclesial family. Roman Catholic and Orthodox schools show an annual increase of 2.3%. This is the only group of schools that has increased. Evangelical schools are down by 0.9%, mainline schools are down by 3.6%, and the Jewish school is down by 31.1%.

	Evangelical	Mainline	Roman Catholic/ Orthodox	Jewish	Total
MDIV	17,713	6,187	2,325	41	26,266
MA	21,896	3,031	3,047	1	27,975
STM THM	812	279	204		1,295
ADV PROF	8,747	3,066	202		12,015
PHD THD	3,083	833	276		4,192
NON-DEGREE	3,326	875	981		5,182
TOTAL	55,577	14,271	7,035		76,925
% CHANGE	-0.9%	-3.6%	+2.3%	-31.1%	-1.2%

Some additional bright spots within degree categories are noteworthy. The number of MA students has increased since fall 2022 in evangelical (+0.6%), mainline (+0.2%), and Roman Catholic/Orthodox (+2.1%) schools. Similarly, the number of non-degree students has increased since fall 2022 in evangelical (+6.8%), mainline (+9.2%), and Roman Catholic/Orthodox (+25.8%) schools. Both MA and non-degree students have benefited from a broad-based increase across ATS schools.

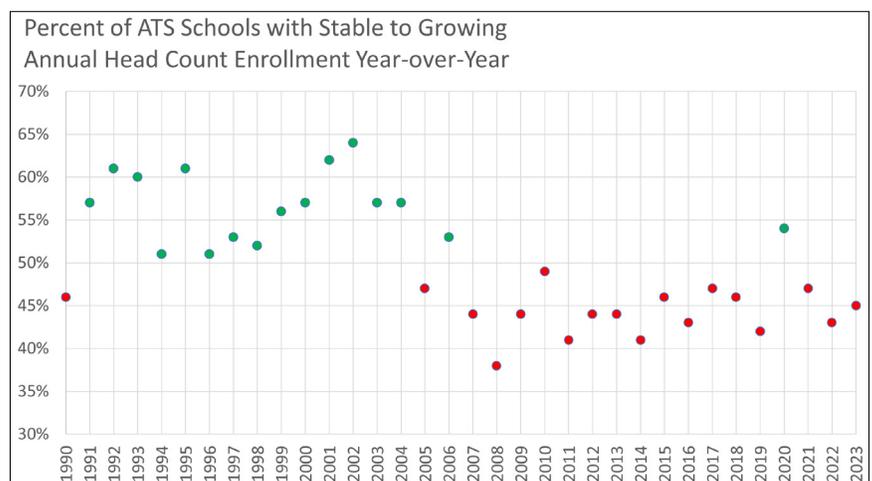
There are some notable trends regarding advanced professional degrees, which reflected an overall decline of 2.4%. Evangelical schools decreased by 3.3% and Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools decreased by 8.6% within this degree category, while mainline schools reflected a 1.0% increase.

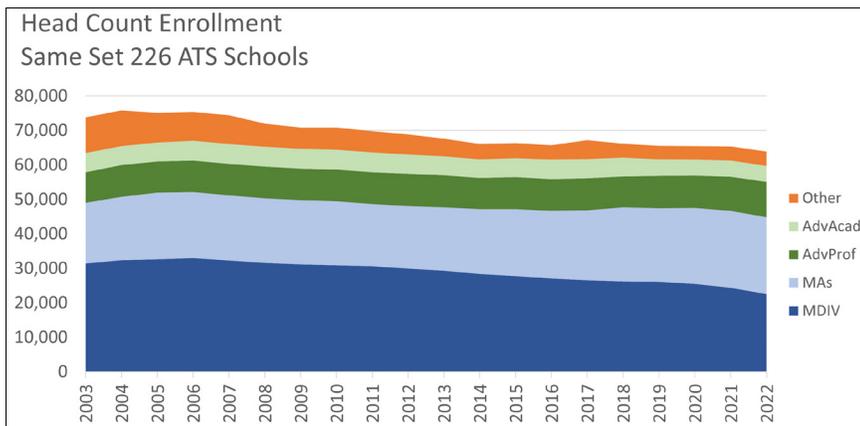
As already mentioned, it will be important to watch the enrollment within these degrees in the years ahead to determine if this is a new pattern toward overall declines or a brief upturn in what has been a strong positive market in the past decade.

Broad-based annual changes in ATS schools

ATS continues to monitor what year-over-year enrollment changes are occurring in the membership. The chart below provides some insight, reflecting the percent of ATS schools that have been growing or remaining stable each year since 1990. As has been reported previously, more than 50% of ATS schools grew year-over-year for most years from 1990 to 2006, and this led to overall enrollment growth across ATS schools.

In 2007, a shift occurred and fewer than 50% of ATS schools grew year-over-year, and this trend has essentially continued through fall 2023, when it is projected that 45% of ATS schools will have grown and 55% will have declined. This broad-based trend of more schools declining than growing has led to a period of overall decline or stability since 2006.





To demonstrate the impact this shift has had on enrollment across ATS, the graph above shows the enrollment of the same set of 226 ATS schools for the last 20 years. (This reflects only the schools that were part of ATS for the entirety of 2003–2022).

The graph reflects important trends mentioned elsewhere in this article. One can see the decline of MDiv students, the increase of MA students, and the relative stability of advanced degrees. Overall enrollment is down, pushed by the broad-based declines across schools offset by some significant growth among a few schools.

Growing schools

There are 18 ATS schools that have shown year-over-year growth in each of the last five years. Below is a list of those schools and the five-year enrollment change that has occurred. Leaders in ATS schools often ask which schools are having positive enrollment trends, so this list provides some potential conversation partners.

SCHOOL	2019–2023 % Change
Augustine Institute	27%
Baptist Seminary of Kentucky	80%
Bethany Theological Seminary	32%
Columbia Biblical Seminary of Columbia International University	93%
Dallas Theological Seminary	6%
Franciscan School of Theology	39%
Grace Theological Seminary	190%
Inter-American Adventist Theological Seminary	34%
International Theological Seminary	115%
Kairos University	150%
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary	23%
NAIITS An Indigenous Learning Community	860%
Palm Beach Atlantic University School of Ministry Graduate Department	206%
Shepherds Theological Seminary	82%
Southeastern University School of Divinity	14%
United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities	82%
Westminster Theological Seminary	25%
Winebrenner Theological Seminary	147%

Conclusions

There are many positive developments to celebrate and some sobering data points to ponder. ATS encourages every school to engage in an honest assessment of enrollment trends by considering its own enrollment across a ten-year period, finding benchmark schools with which to compare itself, and contemplating what broader trends among the ATS membership mean for projecting future enrollment expectations. If there are specific questions this

article has generated, feel free to send your questions to meinzer@ats.edu. Good questions that come from the ATS membership often lead to further exploration and discovery that can benefit our collective work.



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