

Growth in non-degree programs is not without its challenges

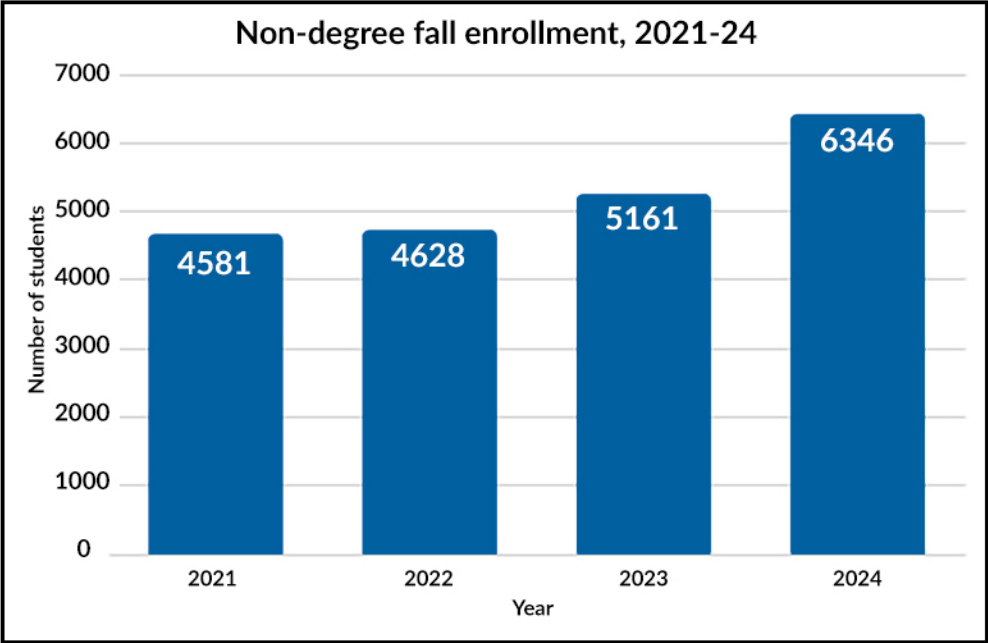
By MERYL HERR AND
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Growth in non-degree enrollment in ATS member schools appears to be increasing rapidly. Fueled by funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.'s Pathways for Tomorrow Initiative, many ATS schools have developed or expanded non-degree offerings as creative ways to make theological education more accessible.

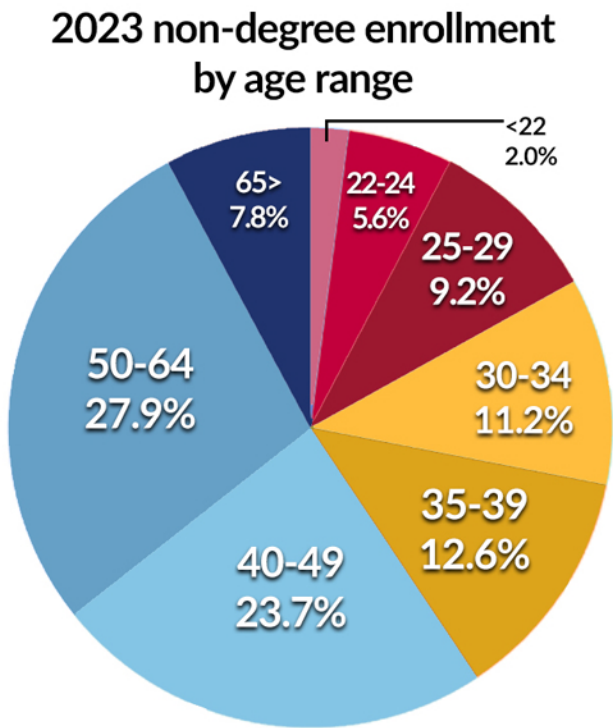
This fall, ATS began a yearlong research initiative to better understand the non-degree ecosystem in theological higher education. While many schools currently offer non-degree programs, and several have been doing so for five or more years, developing and delivering high-quality non-degree programs can be challenging. This article highlights enrollment trends as well as results of a recent survey of Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) on their institutions' non-degree programs.

Trends in non-degree enrollment

ATS has been collecting information on non-degree students in its Annual Report Form since 1988. However, this data represents only those students enrolled in credit-bearing courses. From 1988 to 2020, ATS classified two types of non-degree students: those in certificate and diploma programs, and those with special or unclassified status. In 2021, to align with redeveloped Standards of Accreditation, ATS created a single category for non-degree programs, defining them as "programs, such as certificates, that offer graduate credit for potential use in a graduate degree program." From 2021 to 2024, non-degree enrollment in ATS schools increased by 39 percent as measured by fall headcount.



ATS collected the age ranges of students enrolled in non-degree programs in 2021 and 2023. In 2023, 60 percent of enrolled non-degree students were age 40 or older, with more than a third of all non-degree students age 50 or older.



In 2023, ATS began tracking admissions data for non-degree students to identify patterns of recruitment to matriculation. The chart below shows applicants, acceptances, and new enrollments for non-degree students in 2023 and 2024. Between 2023 and 2024, non-degree applicants increased by 38 percent, acceptances by 32 percent, and new enrollments by 44 percent.

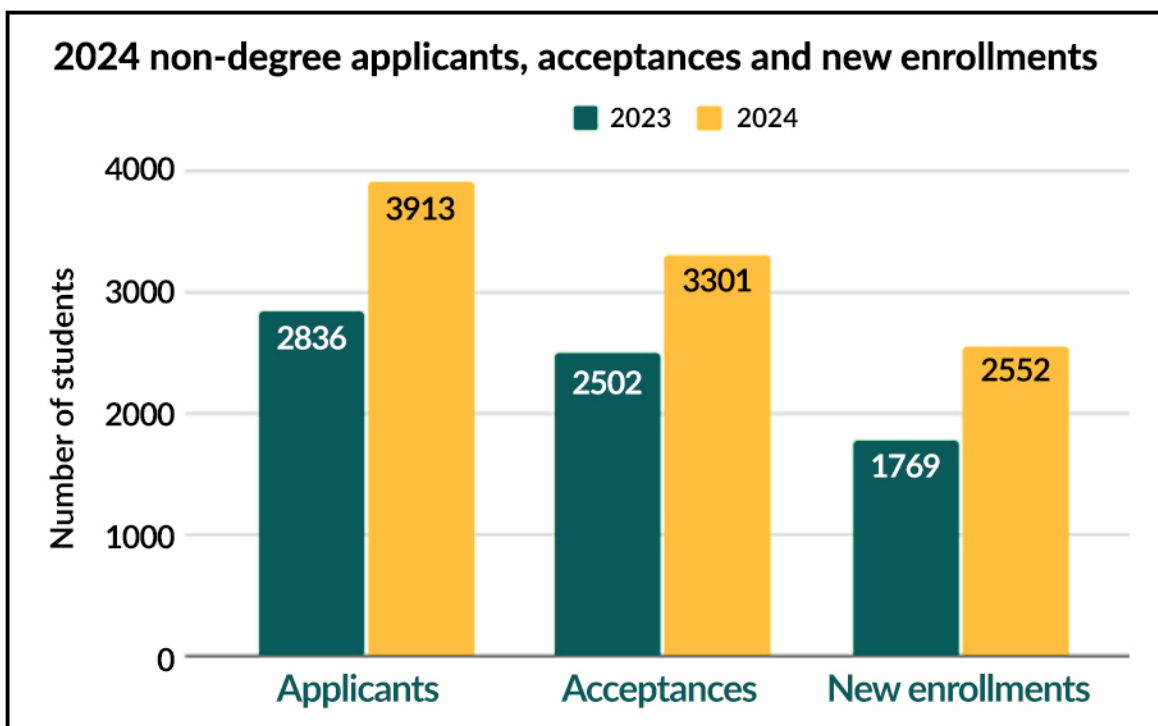
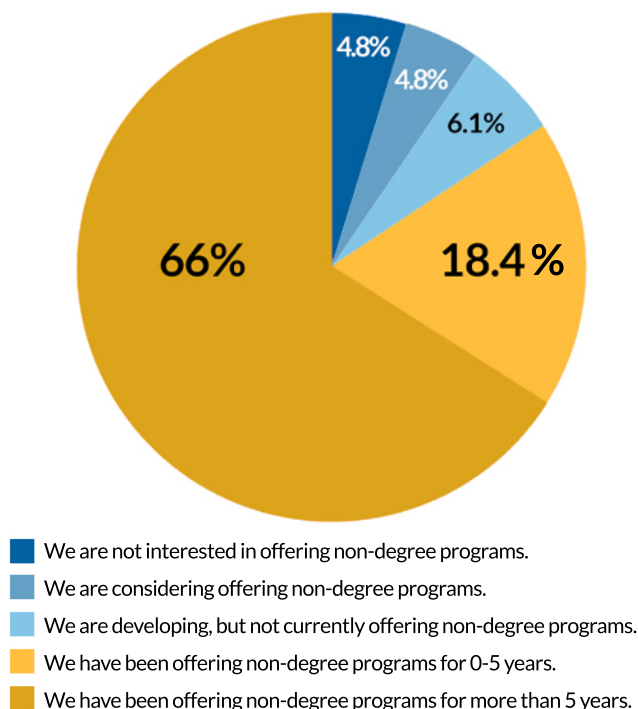
These statistics do not account for all non-degree students, though. Many institutions offer non-degree learning pathways that are not credit bearing, yet ATS has not required institutions to report on these programs and the students enrolled in them. Our research into non-degree programs began with a mapping project to help us understand the breadth of non-degree programs in ATS schools.

Insights from Chief Academic Officers

The first phase of the research involved a brief survey to CAOs. We received 147 responses representing 57 percent of the institutions invited to complete the survey. We sought to discover how many schools are offering or considering offering non-degree programs, the types of programs they offer, reasons why schools offer their non-degree programs, the best qualities of schools' non-degree programs, and key challenges faced by schools offering non-degree programs. Here is some of what we learned.

Institutions are at varying stages of the journey

At the time of the study, we found that two-thirds had been offering non-degree programs for five years or more. Eighteen percent had been offering them between 0 and 5 years, 6 percent were developing but not offering non-degree programs, 5 percent were considering offering non-degree programs, and 5 percent said they were not interested in offering non-degree programs.



Increasing revenue is not a driving factor

We asked respondents who have been offering non-degree programs to rank nine possible reasons why they are doing so. The results surprised us. For many of the schools, increasing revenue is not their top concern, though reasons ranked near the top may indirectly affect revenue. In fact, increasing revenue ranked eighth out of the nine options. The five main reasons these institutions offer their non-degree programs are:

1. To meet a perceived or expressed need of a denomination, congregation, or group of people (ex., lay leaders, alumni, etc.);
2. To increase enrollment or develop an enrollment pipeline;
3. To provide general lifelong learning (ex., for those who are curious or seeking spiritual formation);
4. To expand the reach of the institution;
5. To provide access to theological education for those who may lack pre-requisite preparation.

Best qualities of non-degree programs

Survey respondents who have been offering non-degree programs shared what they believe to be the top three qualities of their non-degree programs. Responses were coded and categorized to reveal the following themes, beginning with the most prominent in the data.

1. **Excellent content and curriculum.** CAOs described the academic quality, applicability, rigor, and relevance of their non-degree offerings. Some also shared that their programs are biblically or theologically grounded. Others noted the variety of offerings and students' abilities to customize their learning journeys.
2. **Accessibility.** Numerous CAOs said accessibility is one of their programs' best qualities. The flexibility of the programs in terms of time, location, and modality contributes to their accessibility.
3. **Affordability.** The reasonable costs of non-degree programs is one of their top qualities.

4. **High-quality instruction.** Several CAOs mentioned the quality of instruction, particularly by faculty members.

5. **Type of training offered.** For several institutions, a top quality of their non-degree programs is the type of training they offer. Some mentioned they offer lay training. Others offer specialized commissioning or credentialing pathways for lay leaders and clergy.

6. **Responsiveness.** Non-degree programs can be created and adapted to meet the specific needs of churches, denominations, and other organizations.

7. **Relational connections.** Non-degree programs foster community within the seminary and enhance relationships among the schools, churches, denominations, and other partners.

Key challenges of developing and administering non-degree programs

We asked those same respondents to list the three biggest challenges their institutions face in developing and administering non-degree programs. Their responses were coded and categorized, and the following themes emerged. Again, themes are listed in order of their prominence in the data.

1. **Institutional capacity.** Institutions said they are limited in terms of the personnel, administrative staff and infrastructure, and time to develop and administer their non-degree programs.
2. **Marketing and communication.** Schools struggle with all aspects of marketing and communication, from market research to market fit, cultivating awareness for their programs, explaining the value of their programs to their audience, and differentiating their non-degree programs from their degree programs.
3. **Finances.** Several schools mentioned financial challenges. Running non-degree programs can be costly. Some institutions' programs are even losing money. Schools need new financial models that account for and adequately support these programs. Plus, they need funding to sustain their programs.

4. **Recruitment and enrollment.** Recruiting students into non-degree programs and keeping them enrolled is a challenge for some schools. Others noted that maintaining steady enrollment in their programs can be a challenge. Several noted that it was challenging to convert non-degree students into degree-seeking students.
5. **Curriculum.** Respondents identified several curricular challenges, such as planning, scheduling non-degree courses, assessing student work, and maintaining academic rigor.
6. **Personnel.** Some schools struggle to involve faculty in their non-degree programs, and a couple mentioned that faculty development for those teaching in non-degree programs can be a challenge.
7. **Student services.** Providing non-degree students with wraparound support, such as advising and a sense of community, is a challenge for some institutions. Even though affordability is a top quality of many institutions' non-degree programs, some respondents noted that the costs for non-degree students are a challenge, especially

when no scholarships or financial aid are available to them.

Though an outlier in the data, the respondent from one institution wondered if their institution's ATS accreditation could be in jeopardy if non-degree enrollment continues to eclipse enrollment in their accredited degree programs.

Reflections and future research

Our research shows that, while non-degree programs appear to be quite prolific in the ATS ecosystem, we collectively have much more to learn about these programs. ATS hopes to contribute to this learning through this research initiative. The next phase of the mapping study will be a survey to non-degree program directors later this fall. Early in 2026, we plan to interview representatives from a sample of institutions to do an in-depth exploration of how they develop, fund, and administer their programs. Finally, in April 2026, we will convene a wide variety of stakeholders to dream together about the future of non-degree programs in theological education.



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