

# Master's enrollment—a changing landscape

By CHRIS MEINZER

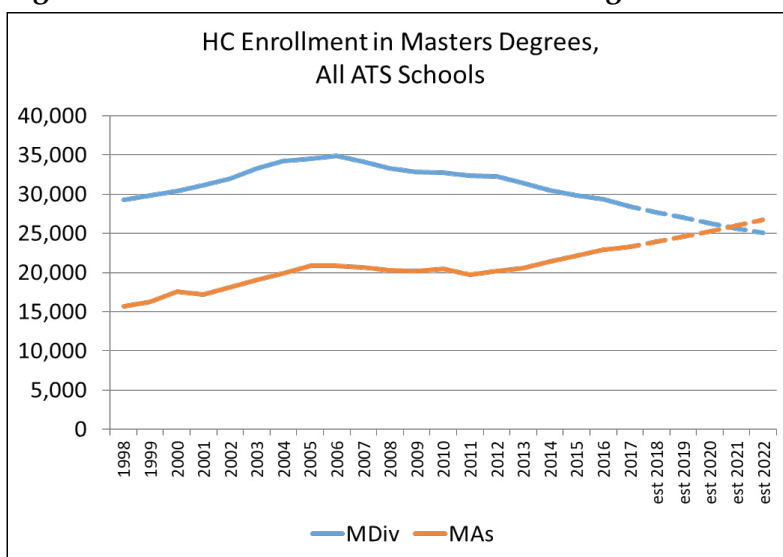
*An interesting enrollment trend has been happening across ATS schools in the last two decades, and it has been changing the landscape of theological education in North America. The number of students enrolled in professional master's degrees and academic master's degrees (collectively, "MAs" or "MA students") has been increasing while the number of students enrolled in the Master of Divinity (MDiv) has been declining.*

If trajectories continue, the number of students enrolled in MAs will exceed the number of MDiv students by 2021. Figure 1 shows headcount enrollment among all ATS schools from 1998 to 2017, with projections through 2022. Of particular note, the number of MDiv students has been decreasing since 2006 and the number of students enrolled in MAs has been growing at a significant rate since about 2012.

The changing enrollment in master's degree students has impacted overall enrollment. In 1998, there were about 29,300 MDiv students. The peak enrollment in the MDiv was just under 35,000 in 2006, and MDiv enrollment is now back down to about 28,400 in 2017. During the same timeframe, MA students started at about 15,700 in 1998, steadily grew to 20,800 in 2006 (the MDiv peak), stayed around that level until 2013, and had grown to 23,300 in 2017. This change has been reflected in each ecclesial family as shown in Figure 2 and described in the following paragraphs.

- In these last two decades, enrollment in evangelical schools grew in the first half and then stabilized in the second half. Total enrollment across evangelical schools was 38,000 in 1998, hit 48,400 at the midpoint in 2007, and has reached its current peak at 49,100 in 2017. As the enrollment in

**Figure 1—Students Enrolled in Master's Degrees**



**Figure 2—Master's Students as Percent of Total Enrollment**

	MDiv		MAs		Total Master's	
	1998	2017	1998	2017	1998	2017
Evangelical	40%	35%	25%	35%	65%	70%
Mainline	50%	50%	15%	17%	65%	67%
Roman Catholic/ Orthodox	40%	40%	30%	40%	70%	80%

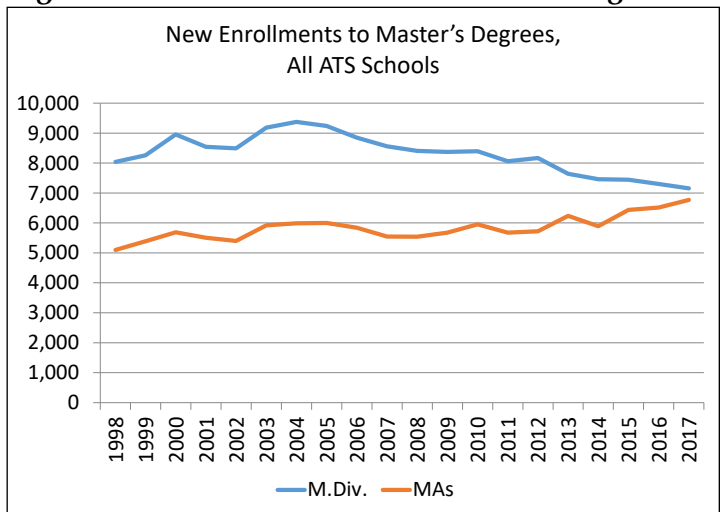
the MDiv had recently declined across evangelical schools, the enrollment has been replaced with students enrolled in MAs. As shown in Figure 2, in 1998, MDiv students represented 40% of all students enrolled in evangelical schools, and the figure was down to 35% in 2017. Conversely, MA students now represent 35% of all students enrolled compared to 25% in 1998.

- In the last two decades, enrollment across mainline schools grew a bit in the first half and declined more sharply in the second half—consequently, enrollment is down overall in the two decades. Total enrollment across mainline schools was 23,200 in 1998, peaked at 24,000 in 2002, settled to 22,400 in 2007, and was down to 16,300 in 2017. Figure 2 shows that there has been no change in the proportion of MDiv students or MA students relative to all students enrolled. Students enrolled in the MDiv still represent a significant proportion of all students enrolled in mainline schools, so the decline in the MDiv enrollment has driven the decline in overall enrollment.
- In the past 20 years, enrollment among Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools has fluctuated, but not wildly. Total enrollment across these schools was about 7,700 in 1998, hit 8,500 at the midpoint in 2007, and had settled back to 7,500 in 2017. MDiv students have remained a steady proportion of overall enrollment, but MA students have grown from about 30% to 40% and this has helped balance some of the loss in other degree categories.

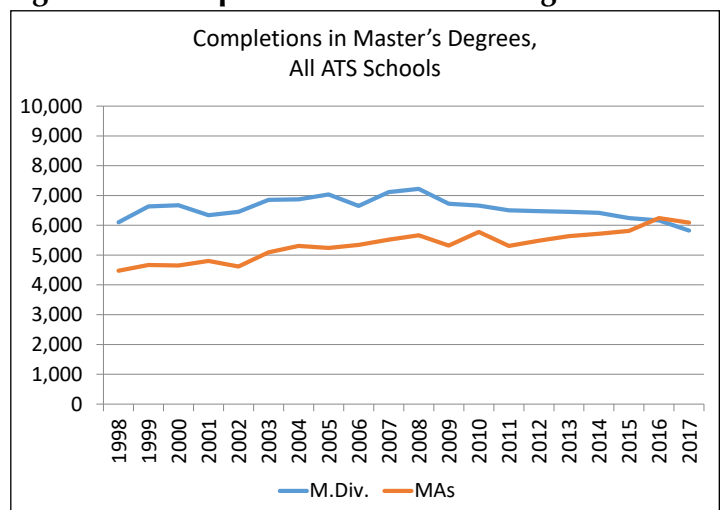
The changing patterns of enrollment in MDiv students and MA students have been led by and have led to some other interesting developments. Applications, acceptances, and new enrollments in MA programs have also been growing markedly as one might expect. Figure 3 shows the number of new enrollments in MAs (new students entering MA programs) across the last two decades. Applications to MA programs across all ATS schools was fairly stable at a little fewer than 6,000 students through 2014, but has now grown and is converging to the MDiv at about 7,000 students. Figure 3 also

shows the steady decline in new enrollments in the MDiv from a peak of more than 9,000 students in 2004 to near 7,000 students in 2017. In terms of completions, MDiv graduates and graduates in MAs have been converging for some years and, in 2016, the number of graduates in MA degrees surpassed the number of MDiv graduates for the first time.

**Figure 3—New Enrollments in Master's Degrees**



**Figure 4—Completions in Master's Degrees**



These changing patterns can have implications for all aspects of the institution, including student recruitment and retention, teaching, formation, fundraising, budget, and so much more. It also has implications for ATS as a membership organization and, likely, the redevelopment of the standards. The ATS membership will need to acknowledge, embrace, and lead into these changes as it transforms the institutions.

As you read this article, it would be important to think about your own school's patterns of enrollment across the decades. School representatives can see ten years of enrollment patterns in their institutions' *Strategic*

*Information Reports* and five years of enrollment patterns compared to specific peer schools in their *Institutional Peer Profile Reports*. How have your enrollment patterns changed? Were these changes intentional? How does the trajectory of your enrollment patterns portend a different future? How have changes in matriculation been led by application, acceptances, and new enrollments? How have changes in enrollment led to the graduates your school is sending into the world? How, if at all, are enrollment changes also altering your institution? How can you acknowledge, embrace, and lead into these changes?



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