

Research examined related factors in ATS schools to predict MDiv reductions

BY NATHAN J. MCKANNA

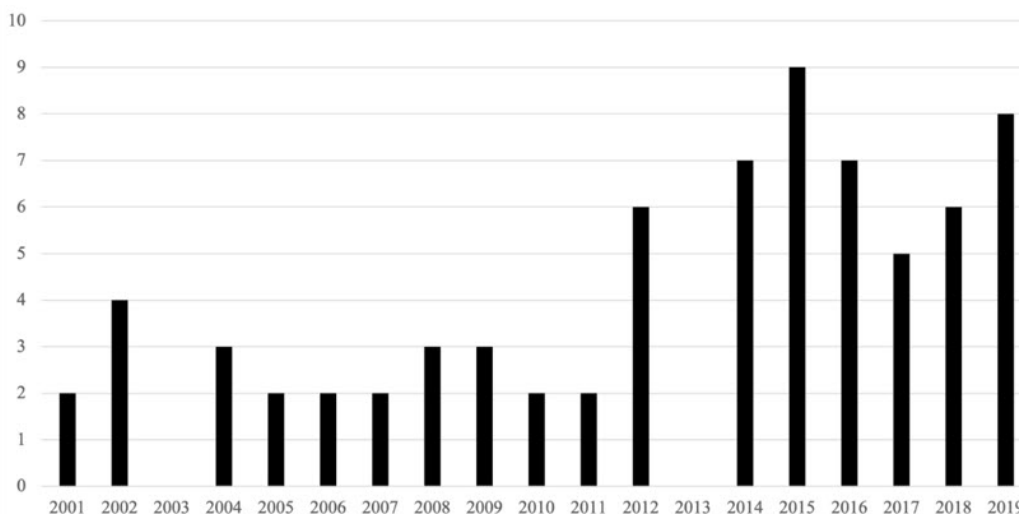
Given the longstanding tradition of offering a three-year program, why have so many ATS schools begun to shorten their MDiv programs? With the gracious assistance of the ATS research team, I was able to explore this issue in depth. My analysis revealed several notable findings that provide context for institutions' decisions to reduce the lengths of their MDiv programs.

I analyzed data from 2000 to 2019 for a sample of 113 US ATS institutions to examine the factors impacting the timing of MDiv credit-hour reductions. Institutions in the sample met all the following criteria during the entire study period (2000–2019): (a) they were full members



of ATS; (b) they offered an MDiv program; and (c) they annually reported institutional data to ATS. Data on institutions' reductions of MDiv credit hours were collected through a combination of phone calls and email queries in June and July 2021. All data in the dataset were de-identified by ATS so that institutions' information would remain anonymous. Nearly two-thirds of schools in the sample (73) reduced the number of credit hours required for their MDiv programs during the study

Figure 1: Number of Schools Making an MDiv Reduction by Year



period, with most of these changes (>70%) occurring after 2009. Many schools in the sample made multiple MDiv reductions; however, to adequately analyze subsequent reductions would have required the use of a different statistical method that fell outside the scope of the study. As you can see clearly in Figure 1, during only two years of the study period were no changes made.

Occurrences of MDiv reductions by ecclesial family

Catholic/Orthodox institutions were the least likely to make a change, as 64% did not reduce the length of their MDiv programs. By contrast, only 27.9% and 26.7% of mainline Protestant and evangelical Protestant schools, respectively, did not make an MDiv reduction. This reality is illustrated in the figure below, which displays the cumulative percentage of schools that reduced their MDiv programs. Horizontal lines represent periods of time during which no MDiv reductions were made; vertical lines denote reductions, and the longer the line, the more schools made a reduction during that year. Also noteworthy is the fact that Catholic/Orthodox schools made MDiv reductions during only six years of the study period and experienced the longest stretch of time (2007 to 2013) without one of their schools making a reduction. Meanwhile, mainline Protestant and evangelical Protestant schools made MDiv reductions during 14 years of the study period, and neither group went more than a two-year stretch without one of their schools making a reduction.

Statistical analysis of MDiv reductions

The statistical method employed in the study was event history analysis (also known as survival analysis). This approach allowed for the examination of both whether an institution reduced the number of credit hours required for its MDiv program and, more importantly, *when* such a change occurred in relation to other phenomena of interest. A standard regression approach (e.g., logistic

regression) was insufficient for several reasons that go beyond the scope of this article. The specific model used for the analysis was a Cox proportional hazards regression.

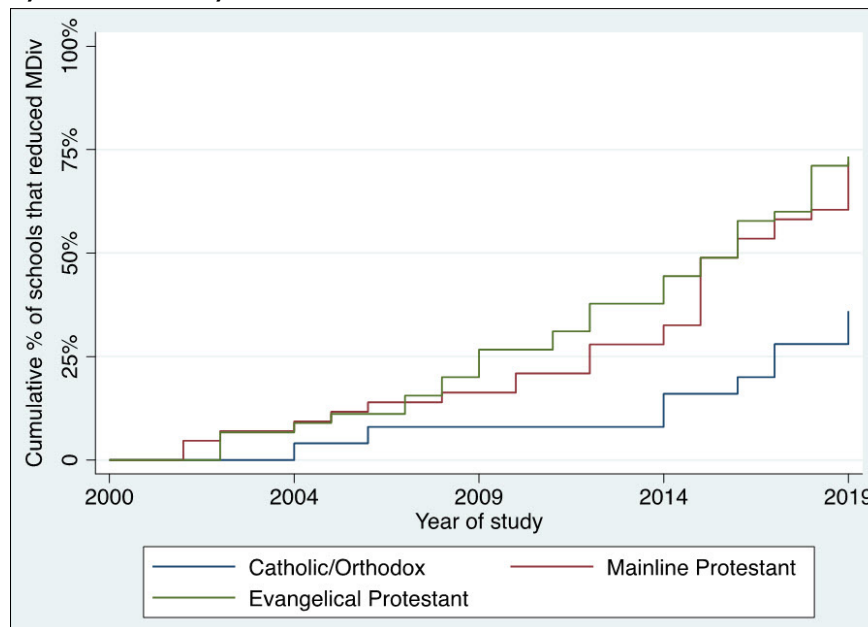
The most important output for my study was the hazard rate, which estimates the probability that an institution would reduce the length of its MDiv program at a particular time, given that such a change had not already been made.¹ In other words, I was able to examine the relationship between an institution's likelihood of shortening its MDiv program and a variety of other relevant factors that changed over time.²

The analysis revealed three statistically significant predictors related to MDiv reductions (please email the author

for the full results of the Cox proportional hazards regression). First, total revenues had a negative relationship with an institution's likelihood of reducing its MDiv program—a 1% increase in total revenues predicted a 48.8% reduction in the likelihood of a reduction. The other two statistically signifi-

cant predictors both had a positive relationship with an institution's odds of adjusting its MDiv program. Schools in the middle-age group (founded 1870 to 1959) were 95.4% more likely to make an MDiv credit-hour reduction

Figure 2: Kaplan-Meier Estimates of the Failure Function by Ecclesial Family



1 For a helpful overview of event history analysis, see Melinda M. Mills, *Introducing Survival and Event History Analysis* (London: Sage Publications, 2011) and Paul Allison, *Event History and Survival Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014).

2 Independent and control variables comprised relevant finance, enrollment, and institutional-characteristics data. Please email the author for additional details on the specific variables included in the statistical model.

relative to schools founded before 1870. The final statistically significant predictor involved peer-group adopters: an institution was more likely to reduce the length of its MDiv when the number of its peers that had already made such a change increased. Because institutions' self-identified peer groups can change from year to year, it was necessary to create artificial peer groups for use in my statistical model. Ultimately seven were used, with the first group comprising all Catholic/Orthodox schools. For the remaining six groups, mainline Protestant and evangelical Protestant schools were divided, by ecclesial family, based on the following enrollment parameters: (a) ≤ 150 headcount; (b) 151–300 headcount; and (c) > 300 headcount.

To summarize, the analysis revealed that all else being equal, three factors were statistically significantly related to the likelihood that a school would reduce its MDiv program: (a) **experiencing an increase in total revenues reduced** a school's likelihood of making an MDiv reduction; (b) **being a middle-age institution increased** the likelihood of a school making a reduction; and (c) **having a higher percentage of peer institutions that made a change increased** the likelihood of a school making a reduction.

Personal reflections

The purpose of this study was not to make qualitative judgment about whether MDiv reductions are “right” or “wrong”; rather, the goal was to better understand if and when such reductions were made. By doing so, I hope to have helped leaders better understand some of the pressures impacting change at their institutions. In light of this purpose, I offer some brief reflections on the results of my study, particularly as they relate to the connections between this study and existing research on institutional theory.

Whatever one thinks about the suitability of MDiv reductions, we likely all agree that it is appropriate for institutions to adjust their curricula in response to changes within the faith communities their graduates serve. It is less clear, however, how institutional leaders should view the kind of change that may result from the coercive

competitive forces evidenced in my analysis (and which we have all intuitively felt for some time). For many institutions in my study, reducing the number of required MDiv credit hours may have been a carefully considered response to a data-driven evaluation process. It is also possible, however, that peer schools' decisions to reduce hours were the primary impetus for similar change at another institution that neither planned nor wanted to make such a reduction.

Certainly, such pressures create difficulties for decision-makers, and yet times of disruptive change also provide leaders with the opportunity to clarify and commit to their institutions' missions and the faith communities their institutions serve. Of course, having a clear, agreed-upon mission and vision for service is not a cure-all for avoiding the powerful pull from other schools toward change. Such clarity of commitment does, however, provide leaders with a concrete standard by which to evaluate the ramifications of such change.

Additionally, given the willingness of many institutions to make considerable adjustments to their flagship program, it seems appropriate to wonder what other mission-impacting decisions institutions may feel pressured to make in the near future (or perhaps even at present). For example, a school whose mission explicitly espouses a residential model of education may feel pressured to adopt distance-learning modalities to accommodate its peer group's implementation of a similar strategy. Or perhaps an institution with a long-standing relationship with a particular denomination or faith tradition may experience the pull to shift from those ties in response to what peer institutions are doing.

Whatever the particular scenario may be, the point remains the same: institutional leaders—particularly at schools whose financial positions make them more vulnerable to adopting change in response to their peers—may be more well-positioned to resist coercive pressures if their institutions have clearly articulated their missions and visions and their decision-makers are fully committed to evaluating responses to pressures from peers' changes in light of those missions.

Concluding comments

Admittedly, this study was designed primarily to *describe* the relationship between selected variables and MDiv credit-hour reductions. More research is needed to explore the efficacy of such changes. In other words, did reductions in MDiv credit hours yield the desired outcome for institutions? After all, this is really what leaders want to know in the face of mission-impacting decisions. This research could also be expanded to include the aforementioned mission-impacting decisions concerning distance-education modalities and denominational association.

I am well aware of how little data seminary administrators typically possess, a reality that leads to many critical decisions being made based far more on anecdotes than is preferable. I hope, therefore, that this study can play even a small role in helping ATS member schools and other theological institutions better understand the conditions under which they experience and respond to pressures to change. Ideally, both groups will be better equipped to navigate uncertainty in a wise, data-driven manner, as all involved in the critical task of theological education seek to fulfill their missions.



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