

# What a difference a decade makes: As seminaries reverse a 10-year enrollment decline, what does the future hold?

By CHRIS MEINZER AND TOM TANNER

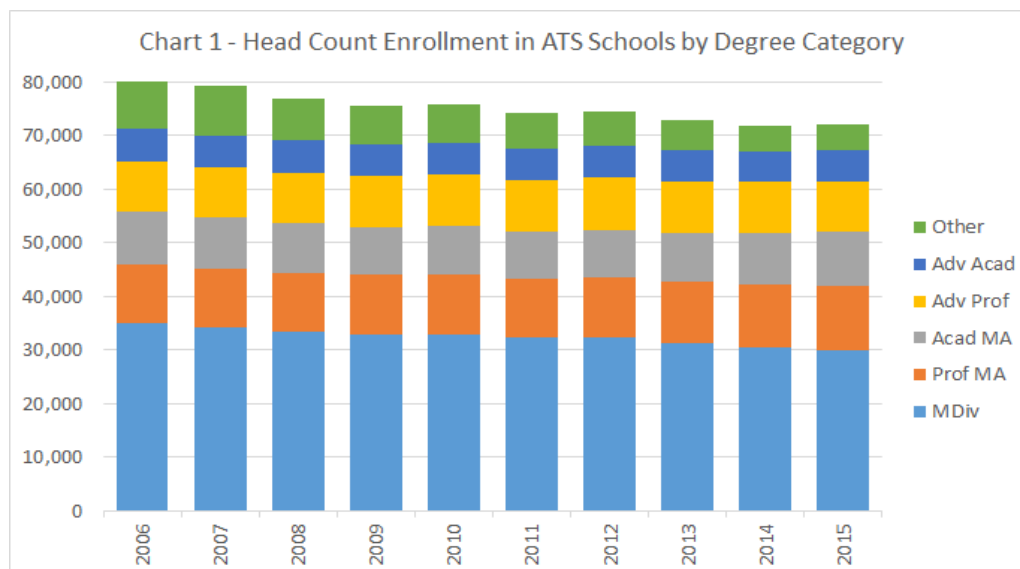
Thoreau reminded us to “never look back unless you are planning to go that way.” But if theology teaches us anything, it is to look back—with regularity and with great benefit. In the midst of our present challenging times, it can be beneficial to look back at some key data that illustrate the changes of the last decade and to highlight a few areas where those changes might take us in the coming decade—a look back to our future.

## Enrollment growth by degree categories

For fall 2015, the overall head count enrollment in ATS schools increased—the first increase in more than a decade that was not due to adding new schools.



Although the total increase was less than 1%, it reversed a decade-long trend that has reflected mostly annual decreases of 1–2% since 2004. There were, to be sure, slight enrollment increases in fall 2010 and fall 2012, but these were due exclusively to the addition of new member schools in those years. No new schools were added in fall 2015. This year’s enrollment increase is a positive development with some contributing factors (described below).



Head count enrollment in ATS schools by degree category in the last 10 years reflects an overall decline from 80,400 in 2006 to 72,116 in 2015, with significant decreases in the MDiv but significant increases in professional and academic MA programs. MDiv enrollment has declined by more than 5,000 students (15%) since 2006 (from 34,935 to 29,914) and has fallen below 30,000 for the first time since 2000. By contrast, professional and academic MA programs have grown significantly over the last decade, especially since the revision of the Standards in 2012. During the last five years, for example, professional MA enrollment has grown by 10% (from 10,932 to 11,929), and academic MA enrollment has grown by 15% (from 8,833 to 10,137). If present trends continue, MA enrollment will exceed MDiv enrollment by 2022.

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Head count enrollment in advanced ministerial and advanced research degrees are also up slightly in this current year. Overall, the enrollment in all degrees has increased by about 0.5%. Enrollment of students in certificate programs and other specialized, non-degree components continues its trend downward. In fact, enrollment declines during the last decade in non-degree programs (from 9,192 to 4,869) and in MDiv programs (from 34,935 to 29,914) account for all of the decade-long decline in ATS schools.

## Enrollment growth by institution

While total ATS enrollment declined during the last decade, about 40% of ATS schools were growing their enrollments. The specific list of schools growing and declining was different each year, but the 40% increase to 60% decrease ratio held fairly steady in the last

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*... 45% of ATS schools are growing ...*

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decade. This past year, however, the ratio has improved to about 45% of ATS schools growing versus 55% declining.

Because of disproportionate enrollment growth in a handful of schools, the median total head count enrollment in ATS schools fell from about 150 total students in fall 2014 to 145 total students in fall 2015. The average total head count enrollment in ATS schools remained about the same at about 265 students. Between fall 2014 and fall 2015, the median full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment and average FTE enrollment remained constant at 90 and 165 FTE students, respectively.

## Changes in student demographics

During the last decade, the age demographic of seminarians has changed significantly—at least in terms of raw numbers, if not proportionally. Both 20-somethings and 40-somethings have experienced double digit declines (12% and 21%

respectively) since 2005, while those in their 30s and those 50 and older have seen increases of 3% and 5% respectively. If the total student population of ATS schools were reduced to 100, proportionately 31 would be under age 30, 27 would be 30–39, 20 would be 40–49, and 22 would be age 50 or older. A decade ago,

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*... there may be more 50+ students than 20-somethings in ATS schools by 2020.*

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the proportions would have been 32, 25, 23, and 20, respectively. If the last decade is any indication, there may be more 50+ students than 20-somethings in ATS schools by 2020.

When looking at gender distribution within the student body across ATS schools, there has been little change in two decades, with men representing about two-thirds of the student population and women about one-third. Gender distribution varies considerably, however, by degree category. For example, in fall 2015 women represented about 30% of the MDiv students and 35% of academic MA students, but about 55% of the professional MA students (the only ATS degree category with more women than men). Only about 20% of advanced

degree students are women. As a point of comparison, women represented approximately 25% of the full-time faculty at ATS schools in fall 2015.

ATS collects data every year on the racial/ethnic demographic of students. Over the last decade, the number of Hispanic students has jumped by 47%, though they still represent only 7% of all seminarians who identify their race/ethnicity. The number of Asian students has grown by 7% and now represents 9% of all seminarians. The number of African American students has grown by 2% and now represents 14% of all seminarians. International students have increased by 13% and represent

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10% of all seminarians. By contrast, Caucasian students have declined by 25% in raw numbers and proportionally from nearly 70% of all seminarians to 60%. Persons of color and international students now represent 40% of all ATS students, compared to 31% a decade ago. If present trends continue, by 2025 (less than a decade from now), today's minority students may be the ATS majority. Already, nearly one-fourth of all ATS schools have a majority racial/ethnic enrollment. For comparative purposes, approximately 20% of the full-time faculty at ATS schools represent racial/ethnic minorities.

## Growth in applications and new enrollees

ATS also collects annual data on applications, acceptances, and new enrollees. These data points provide some interesting trend developments for consideration.

In comparing the same set of 240 ATS schools over the last decade, this year represented the first time in five years—and only the second time in the last ten years—that the number of new seminarians increased over the previous year. For fall 2015 the number of applications

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was up across all degree categories for all ATS schools, while the yield ratio (new enrollees to completed applications) has remained constant at about 55% for many years. An increase in applications not only shows a growing interest in theological education but also normally equates to a greater number of new enrollees throughout the ATS membership.

## Graduation rates

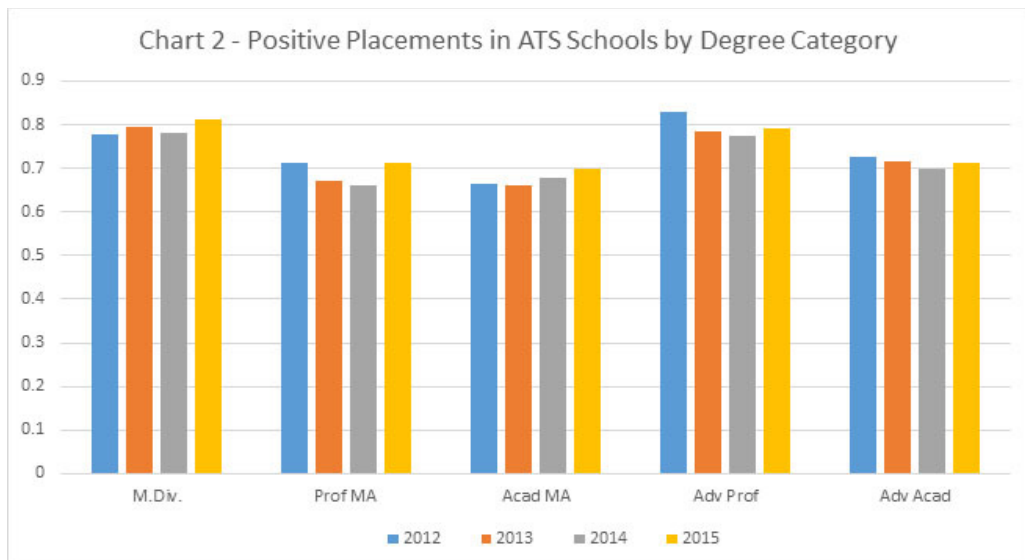
For the first time in fall 2015, ATS began collecting graduation rates in response to member schools' requests. Graduation rates can also be an important measure of how effectively and efficiently schools are fulfilling their respective missions. Schools were asked to report their graduates and the percentage of those graduates who were able to complete their degrees within twice the normal length of the degree (e.g., complete the MDiv, within six years or twice the normal three-year length). Graduation rates are an indication of the percentage of students who are graduating in a timely manner, and it can be a useful benchmark. The table below shows the percentage of students who graduated within the noted timeframe for certain degrees and degree categories.

**2015 Graduation Rates for ATS Schools**

	All degrees	MDiv	Prof MA	Acad MA	DMin	ThM/STM	PhD/ThD
75th percentile	70%	80%	75%	80%	75%	100%	67%
50th percentile	60%	67%	55%	60%	55%	75%	50%
25th percentile	45%	50%	40%	40%	33%	50%	40%
Graduated within	various times	6 years	4 years	4 years	6 years	2 years	8 years

## Placement rates

Placement rates have now been collected by ATS for four years for each degree category. Positive placements can be an important measure of a school's mission because they can demonstrate graduates' ability to utilize their degrees in meaningful ministries. For purposes of this measure, positive placement is defined as a graduate who either received a vocational placement, received a non-vocational (volunteer) placement, or went on for further study within one year of graduation. Average positive placement rates across ATS schools in the last four years, by degree category, range from a high of 81% last year for the MDiv to a low of 70% for the academic MA, with an overall placement rate of about 75% for all degrees. Encouragingly, every degree category saw an increase in placement last year over the previous year.



## Conclusion

What a difference a decade makes. Based on the patterns established during the past 10 years, the ATS of 2025 will no doubt look considerably different than the ATS of 2005—or of today—particularly in student demographics and program enrollment patterns. Hopefully, this article will help engender informed conversations about how each member school might better fulfill its mission in these changing times.



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## Further Resources

The **Annual ATS Data Tables** include lots of data for theological schools to review and consider. This article has lifted up a few significant trends related to inputs and outputs that impact institutional mission. ATS offers other resources that help narrow these data to provide strategic benchmarking and peer analysis. The ATS **Strategic Information Report (SIR)** and ATS **Institutional Peer Profile Report (IPPR)** are being emailed to chief executive officers of each institution this month. The SIR is designed to provide ATS member schools with a variety of strategic indicators to help assess overall financial strength and performance. The IPPR is an annual data comparison of a requesting institution of 5 to 15 peers of the institution's choosing. These two reports can be helpful in analyzing the enrollment, finances, development, and other resources of a school. If further data analysis is desired, a school can contact **Chris Meinzer** to discuss data, trends, and benchmarks that can further institutional assessment of a school's mission.