

# Persistence under pressure: what the 2024–25 GSQ reveals about student life, work, and study

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*On September 17, 2025, ATS Student Data Services presented findings from the 2024-25 Graduating Student Questionnaire (GSQ). More than 70 attendees learned the latest broad-level trends reflecting recent graduates of ATS schools. This article gives a further analytic snapshot of the balancing act students face today to complete a theological program.*

Member schools that participate regularly in student data collection may have multiple reasons for gathering information through the ATS Student Questionnaires. Instruments like the GSQ can offer direct benefits for the accrediting process and should inform an institution's evaluation and planning. Yet, the unmistakable value in these data-gathering efforts often extends beyond any single institution. Participating Canadian and US schools, both large and small, contribute together to a robust understanding of graduate theological education in our time.

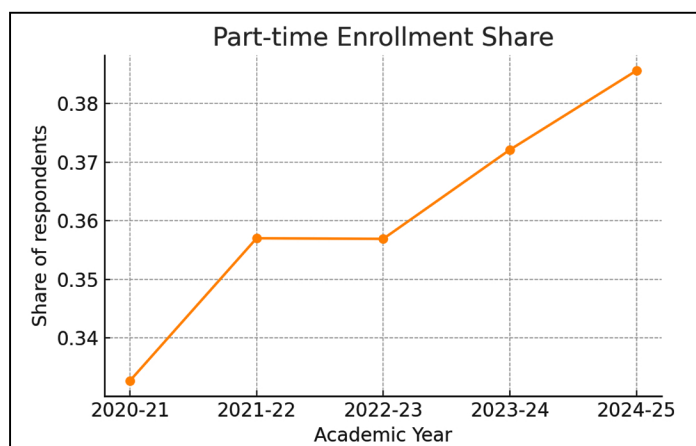
The 2024–25 GSQ Total School Profile report reflects responses from 5,801 graduating students across 151 participating ATS member schools, allowing us to address sophisticated questions at higher degrees of confidence. Yet, many complex realities are reflected in posing simple, necessary questions. Asking “What do we know?” often enables us to wonder, “How should we proceed?”

What do we know about the lives of ATS students today? How do these adult learners self-report spending their valuable time, and what might the implications be for your theological school?



## Less dedicated study time

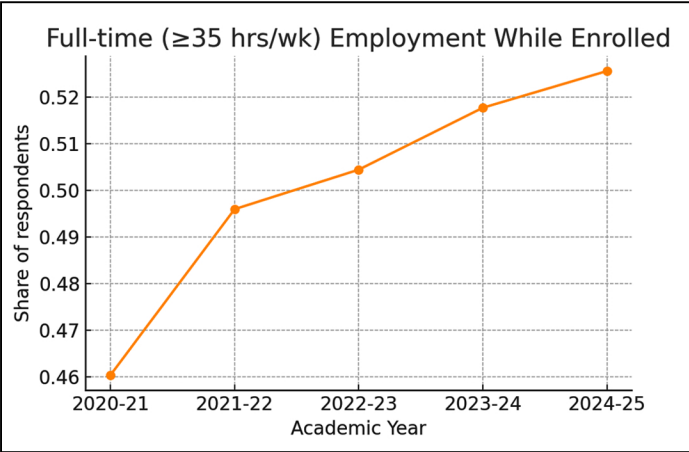
Part-time enrollment status has grown steadily in recent years, with 38.7 percent of graduates reporting part-time status in 2024–25 for a 5.3 percentage point increase since 2020–21. This shift is modest though statistically significant, continues pre-pandemic trends away from full-time study, and is most pronounced this past year for students of ATS member schools located in the US South, which saw the largest half-decade jump (more than 10 percentage points).



The rising overall share of part-time enrollment can signal important differences in how ATS students balance theological education with responsibilities such as work and family. As your students seek greater flexibility to accommodate myriad commitments, those shifts in priority may impact how your institution designs its course offerings or assembles resources through the various support services available.

### More job hours worked

In recent years, we see a proportional rise in theological students who are managing full-time jobs while in graduate school. In 2024–25, 52.8 percent of ATS graduates reported working at least 35 hours per week—a 6.5 percentage point increase over five years (2020–21). This modest but statistically significant bump in full-time employment highlights broader changes in student needs and priorities that sit (perhaps uncomfortably) alongside their studies. Factors including economic pressures and family responsibilities directly shape educational pathways, informing how students navigate their programs and negotiate the length of time it takes to graduate.

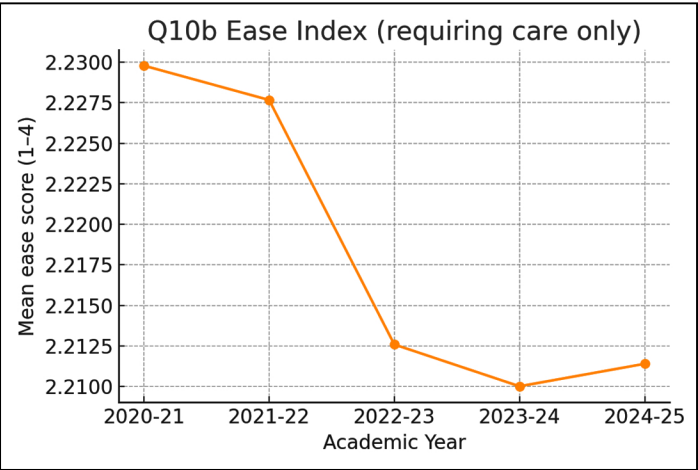


The growing prospect of balancing a 35-hour-plus work-week with study responsibilities strongly suggests less time overall for coursework—let alone for extra- or co-curricular engagements and opportunities. Understanding the degree to which these overall trends affect your school can help you discern how to plan and evaluate programming and resource support to help your students more effectively, which in turn may promote improved persistence and completion rates.

### Busier caregivers

Nearly half of recent graduates reported caring for one or more dependents. In recent years, we can observe a statistically significant increase in the share of students who spend substantial time providing care for their dependents. In 2024–25, 37.3 percent of ATS graduates reported providing dependent care at levels that may be considered intensive (30 or more hours per week). The effect size, while small, is more than two percentage points higher than even the initial year of COVID (2020–21).

Among those who needed care, there was no meaningful change last year in how easy or difficult it was to arrange. Since 2020–21, about 28 percent of graduates consistently said that finding care arrangements was "not easy." Although statistically flat, when calculating item Q10b as a continuous measure, we see the resulting ease index score slightly weaker in the years following the pandemic.



As ATS member schools know, the operational definition of dependent caregiving can include a range of responsibilities related to the direct physical, medical, and/or emotional needs of a person who cannot fully care for themselves. Observable shifts in these and other demanding obligations would suggest that, as your students juggle substantial caregiving duties alongside their studies, your institution might need to adapt and to more effectively evaluate the very support systems and program structures that can help students succeed. Recognizing and responding to fluctuating realities is key to educational mission, demonstrating that your institution's real competition is less other theological schools than life itself.

## Ongoing lessons

“Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might,” counsels Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes 9:10a, NRSVUE). The Teacher’s teaching, which goes on to give a sobering reminder of human finitude, may also describe the “hands” of our graduate students who these days find more and more needing to be done in addition to their theological studies. These and other emerging needs present an opportunity for theological schools to respond, recommit, and further accompany their students toward completion of their educational and formational goals. With better student data to accompany increasingly robust institutional data, ATS member schools can not only ask what they know but press into how best they can achieve the mission.

### GSQ: Highlights from the 2024–25 GSQ Total School Profile (TSP)



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