

New students favoring full-time, on-campus engagement: what we're learning from the fall 2025 ESQ

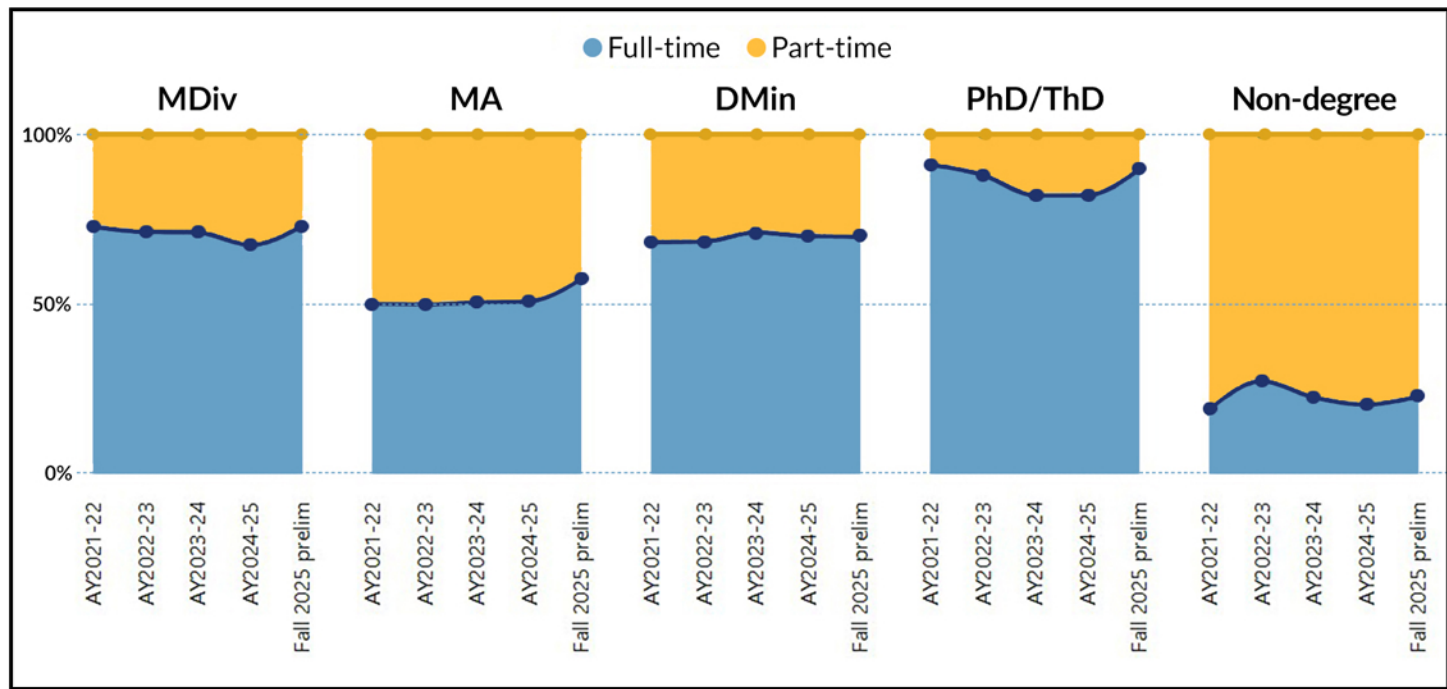
BY CHRISTOPHER M. THE

A recent ATS Student Data Services webinar highlighted the reemergence of incoming student interest in full-time, on-campus theological education. This renewed preference, supported by the latest Entering Student Questionnaire (ESQ) data from fall 2025, signals a reversal of multiyear trends in enrollment patterns.

More students choosing full-time study

Preliminary 2025–26 data reveal a noteworthy and statistically significant increase in the proportion of new students reporting full-time enrollment, rising from an overall range of 58–60 percent observed since the 2020–21 academic year to 63 percent in fall 2025. This marked

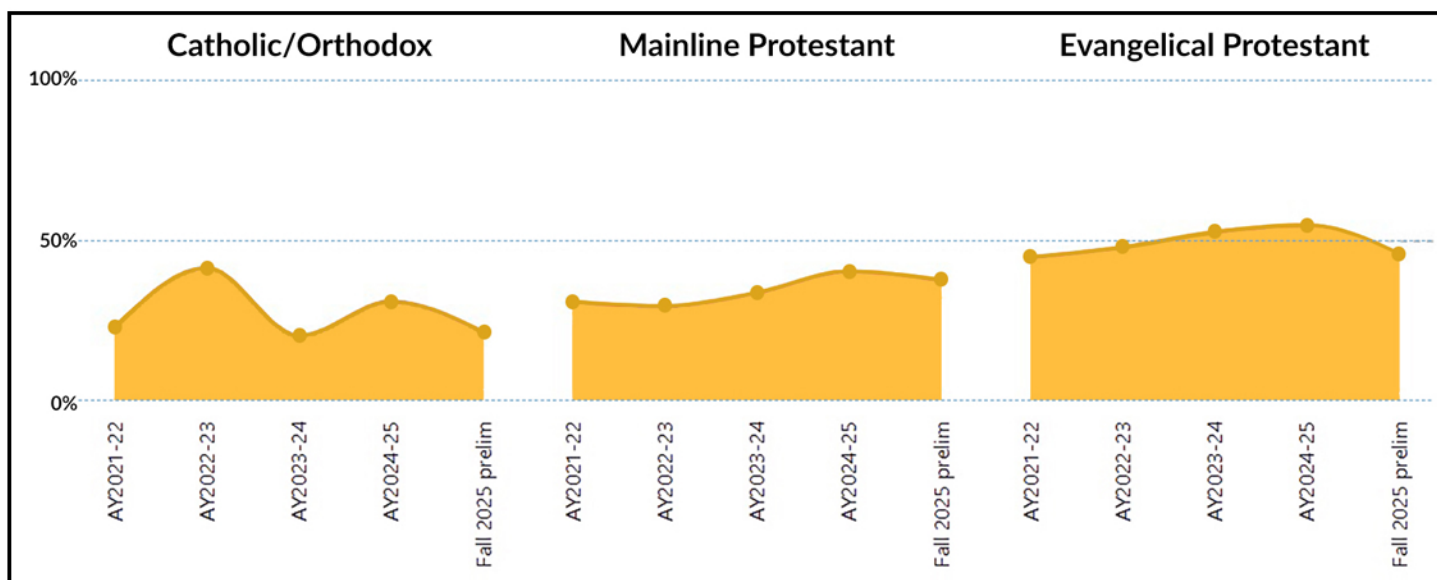
uptick is not only statistically significant compared to previous years, but it also remains robust when tested across different analytical approaches and demographic segments. The following chart illustrates the recent five-year trendlines for select programs of study.



We observe that the increase in full-time enrollment is especially pronounced in master's programs, with the Master of Divinity (MDiv) accounting for much of the net shift. The MDiv, which is notable for being the youngest degree program on average, is experiencing a particularly strong surge in new, full-time students. This trend closely aligns with institutional data and enrollment projections, which indicate a significant uptick in MDiv enrollment for this academic year. Such growth may reflect broader shifts in student priorities, particularly among those seeking more immersive and structured theological education experiences.

For some students, a commitment to full-time study may signal increased vocational clarity and a desire to “get to ministry faster,” prioritizing accelerated progress toward their professional or ministerial goals. If these trends continue to hold true within your context, it may be prudent for your school to thoughtfully consider the broader implications for academic planning—including adjustments to course sequencing, advising structures, and time-to-degree expectations. Proactively addressing these factors can help ensure that institutional offerings remain responsive to students’ evolving educational preferences and career objectives.

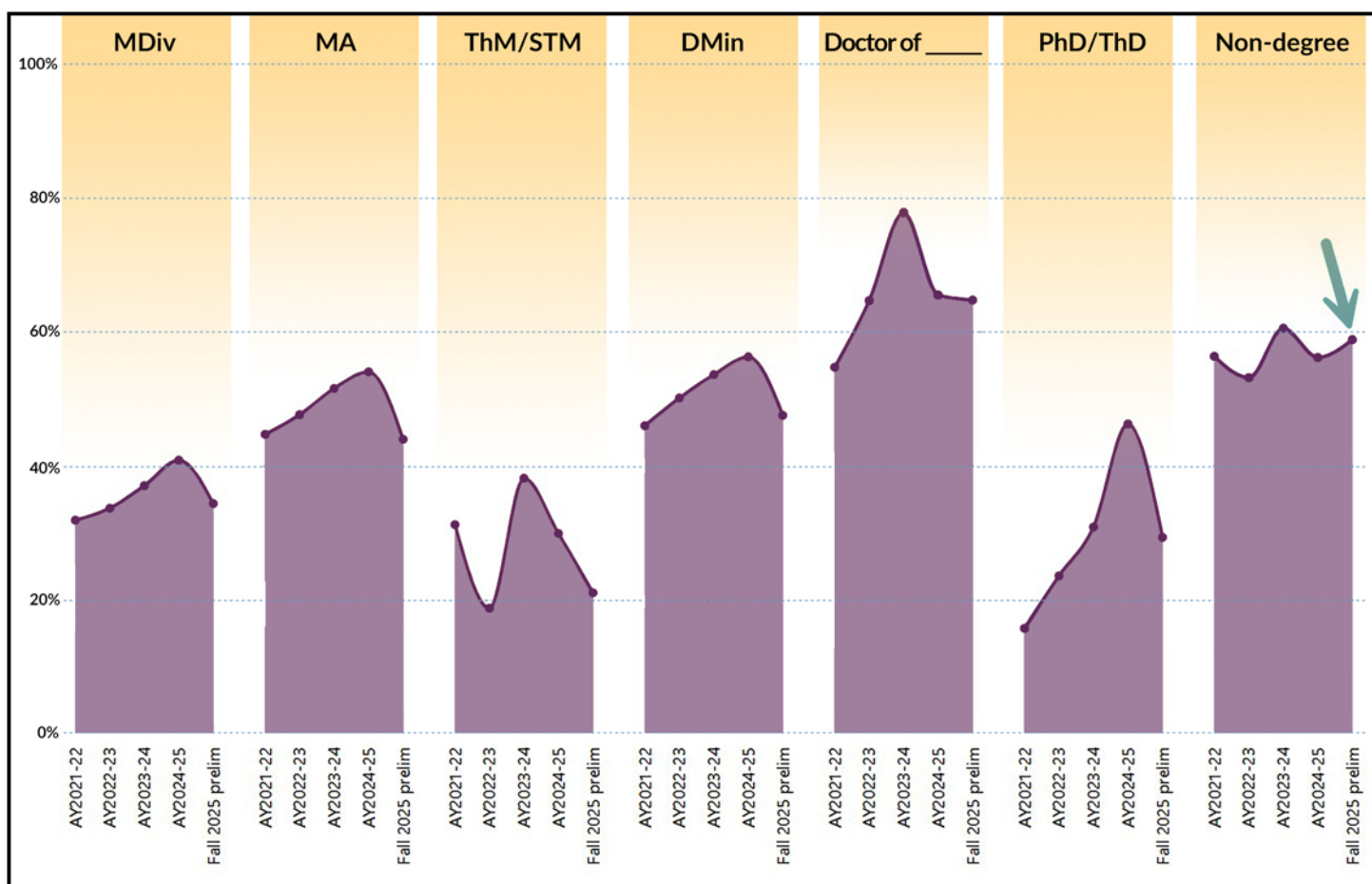
Fewer students opting for fully online theological education



Across religious traditions and in nearly every degree program, fewer incoming students are opting to pursue all their coursework entirely online. Fully online programs are neither ubiquitous nor passé, and perhaps many ATS member schools have discerned that a hybrid approach is here to stay. The decreasing interest in exclusively online programming this fall appears to be broad based, as shown in the chart above, grouping member schools by major ecclesial family.

As indicated on the next graph, the decline in fully online interest among new students this fall is evident across every degree program, highlighting a broad-based shift in

enrollment preferences. The chart demonstrates that nearly all academic tracks have seen a reduction in students choosing to pursue their coursework entirely online. The only notable exception to this trend is found in non-degree programming, where new student interest in fully online modalities has actually increased, rising by more than two percentage points compared to the previous year. This suggests that while degree-seeking students are gravitating toward more traditional or hybrid educational experiences, non-degree seekers continue to value the flexibility and accessibility offered by fully online options.



If such trends continue to hold in future years, important questions may arise for ATS institutions regarding not only the stock of housing available to students, but also how various resources are allocated to support a growing population of full-time, residential learners. Schools may need to assess the availability of housing, while also revisiting the distribution of campus services, advising, and community-building initiatives. Come what may, for students who decide to relocate, it will be essential for institutions to explore proactive strategies to help them feel fully connected and supported by their new community—concerns that are equally important for exclusively online students, even as differences in modality suggest creative approaches are necessary.

Declines in international student status not as drastic

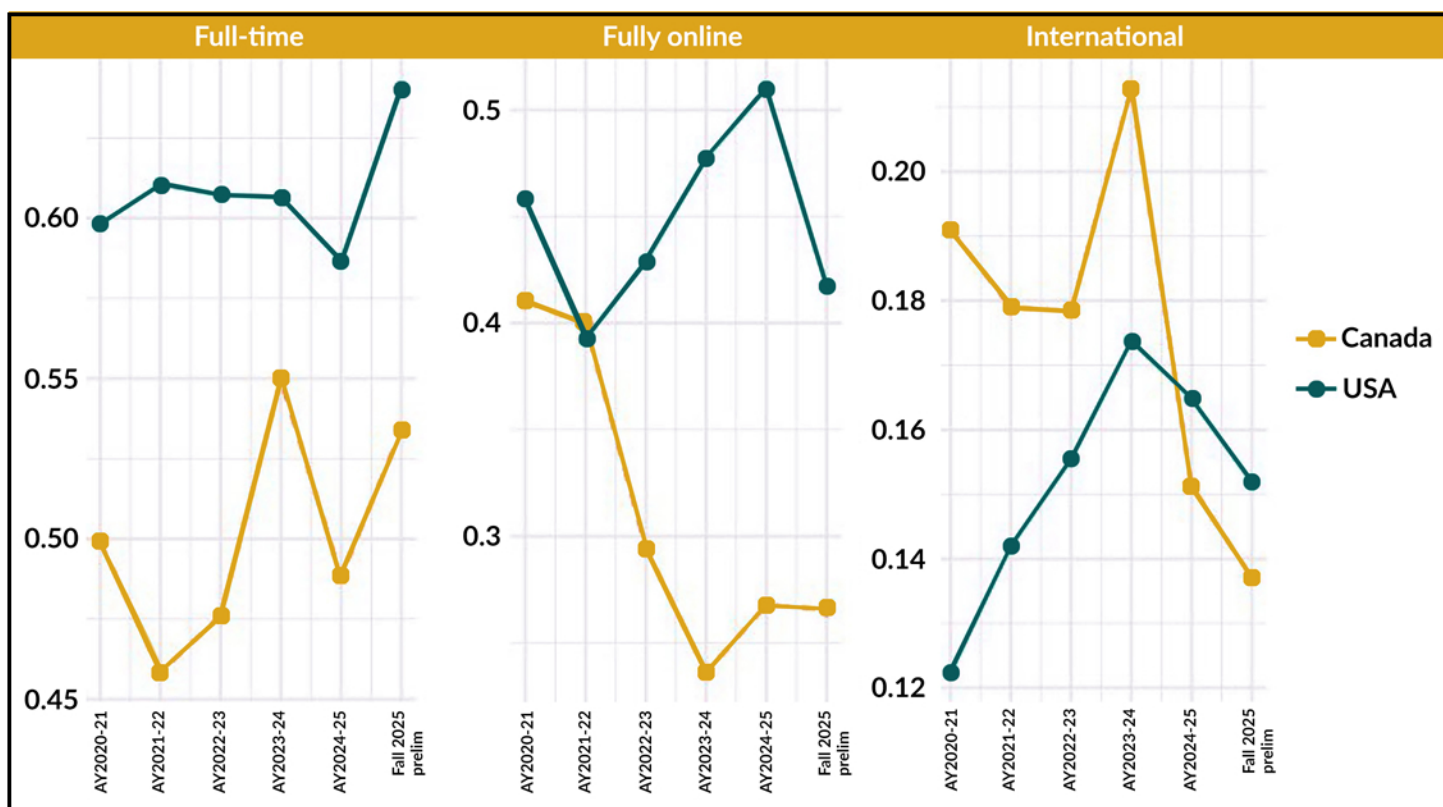
Some have speculated or wondered whether fall 2025 would reflect a dramatic drop off in international students, given recent national and international developments. Despite weakening by one-fifth of one per-

cent compared to last year, ESQ respondents who self-identify as international students still reflect 15 percent of all matriculated students. This relative stability suggests that, although there are ongoing challenges, international student interest in theological education remains resilient. When the data are disaggregated by member school location, some notable differences emerge, as illustrated in the charts on the next page.

Questionnaire data beg further questions

As more students choose to engage fully in residential programs, institutions may need to revisit strategic planning processes, including course sequencing, advising structures, and time-to-degree expectations.

These shifts could also affect how resources are allocated, particularly regarding housing availability, campus services, and program delivery formats. In addition, schools may need to consider how best to support an increasing number of full-time, residential learners, which could involve reimagining orientation



programs, peer mentorship opportunities, and extra curricular activities designed to foster student belonging and engagement. Ultimately, adapting to these changes will help ensure that institutional offerings remain responsive to student needs and evolving educational preferences, while also maintaining a supportive campus environment that encourages personal and professional growth.

If you missed or wish to review the ESQ Webinar held on November 19, 2025, please follow the links shown for access to the replay, slides, and related report.

ESQ: Highlights from the November 19, 2025 webinar



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