Fall 2019 enrollment shows stability and shifting

By Chris Meinzer

The data collection and analysis process for fall 2019 is nearly complete. The ATS Strategic Information Reports (SIR) and the Institutional Peer Profile Reports (IPPR) should be emailed to chief executive officers by early March. The ATS Annual Data Tables (ADTs) should be updated and available on the ATS website by the end of February. The new ATS Data Visualization Tool should be updated to include the fall 2019 data by mid-March. For those interested in data and in understanding broader industry trends, it's a very exciting time!

The projections for enrollment show some overall stability. As shown in the chart below, the overall change in head count enrollment is projected to be down to just under 1%, which is not a significant change from the prior year. In fact, it represents marked stability in total head count, given the number of schools reporting, resulting from a few mergers and closures that occurred in the last year. There are some notable differences, however, when reviewing enrollment among degree categories as shown below. The chart shows—by degree category and in total—the fall 2019 head count, the fall 2018 head count, the percentage change between the fall enrollments, and the percentage of ATS schools that reflected head count increases.

The chart at the top of the following page shows the five-year trend by degree category. It is important to observe that the addition of new schools in fall 2018 (eight new schools were added; two schools withdrew) impacted the total enrollment numbers positively by almost 6,000 students. After periods of decline across ATS schools from fall 2005 to fall 2014, the last five years have reflected relative stability in total head count as reflected in the 256 schools that were part of ATS for each of these last five years.

Shifts within degree categories have continued over the last five years. The Professional MA degrees continue their growth patterns, while the number of students within the Academic MA degrees decreased a bit after several years of increases. The largest increase this year is within the Advanced Professional degree category, but it should be noted that nearly three-fourths of the 800 student increase came from two schools.

Head Count Fall 2015–2019	Fall 2019	Fall 2018	% Change	% Schools w/ Increase
MDiv	30,803	30,873	-0.2%	45%
Professional MA	13,461	13,105	2.7%	55%
Academic MA	12,878	13,438	-4.2%	45%
Advanced Professional	10,713	9,896	8.3%	55%
Advanced Academic	5,362	5,900	-9.1%	55%
Other	4,382	4,834	-9.4%	50%
Total	77,599	78,046	-0.6%	45%

Head Count Fall 2019 vs Fall 2018	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Schools	270	272	268	276	272
MDiv	29,937	29,288	28,581	30,873	30,803
Professional MA	12,010	12,411	12,148	13,105	13,461
Academic MA	10,151	10,474	11,165	13,438	12,878
Advanced Professional	9,562	9,474	9,533	9,896	10,713
Advanced Academic	5,709	5,881	5,764	5,900	5,362
Other	4,869	4,698	5,954	4,834	4,382
Total	72,238	72,226	73,145	78,046	77,599
Same Set 256 Schools	70,813	69,960	71,224	70,344	69,851

Finally, during fall 2019, a school changed the way it reported about 600 of its students from Advanced Academic to MDiv. This represents the majority of the change in the Advanced Academic students and makes it appear as if the MDiv enrollment was flat. Without this recharacterization of students, the MDiv would have been down by 670 students, or 2%, and Advanced Academic students would have been up slightly.

The enrollment changes by ecclesial family are interesting. Within evangelical schools, half of the schools had increases in enrollment, with an overall increase of 1.4%. Within mainline schools, half reflected increases in enrollment, but the overall change was a decrease of 4.1%.

Among Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools, only three of ten had enrollment increases, and the overall decline was down by 7.1%. The Jewish school had a notable increase year-over-year. These trends continue what has been the pattern over the last several years, with the exception of what is occurring in Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools.

Head Count by Ecclesial Family	Fall 2019	Fall 2018	% Change	% Schools w/ Increase
Evangelical	54,454	53,677	1.4%	50%
Mainline	15,590	16,249	-4.1%	50%
Roman Catholic/Orthodox	7,505	8,079	-7.1%	30%
Jewish	50	41	22.0%	100%
	77,599	78,046	-0.6%	

As schools look into their own enrollment trends, it is important to understand their patterns in the broader context of theological education—the ATS standard reports, such as the SIR and IPPR, can help to do this. The newly-minted data visualization tool can be a fun way to explore the context.

If a school would like a specifically-tailored presentation to better understand its own SIR to use in its strategic planning process or to expand its board and staff education, it should consider a focus on Mission & Money using the 5-Phase Approach. Data is just one way that ATS seeks to be a resource for you and your leadership as you navigate these exciting times.

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