

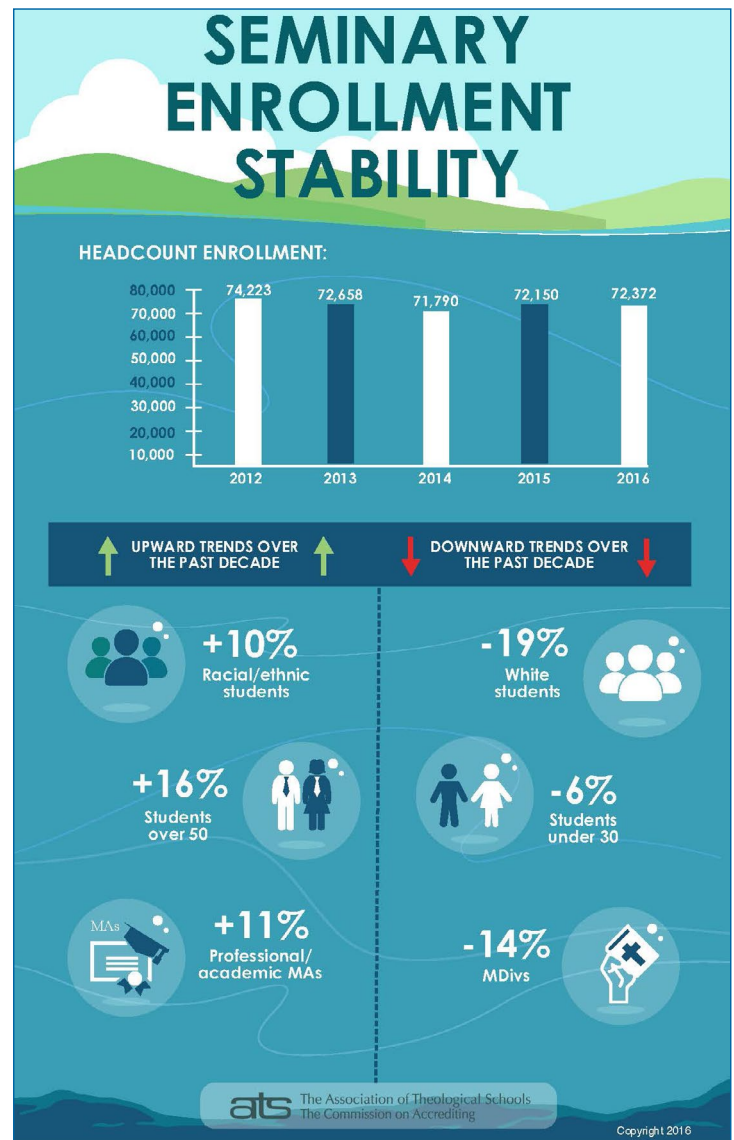
New data reveal stable enrollment but shifting trends at ATS member schools

By ELIZA SMITH BROWN AND CHRIS MEINZER

After nearly a decade of decline, total headcount enrollment at ATS member schools has leveled out for the second year in a row. The 2016–2017 Annual Data Tables have been posted on the ATS website, and they reveal a picture characterized by overall stability but complicated by notable underlying shifts in demographics and preferred degree programs.

Overall, headcount enrollment for 2016 has leveled off at 72,372, a .3% increase over 2015 and a cumulative .8% increase over 2014. Of course, in 2016 the Association admitted five new member schools with 993 students, which could account for some of the uptick. Looking instead at a “same set” of 257 schools that has been tracked since 2012, enrollment has declined by .8% . . . Still, the picture is relatively stable over the past four years.

A deeper dive into the data, below the overall surface stability, reveals significant shifts in the make-up of the student population and its academic interests. Looking at racial/ethnic identity, enrollment of racial/ethnic and international students (the majority of whom would classify as racial/ethnic) has grown significantly since 1977, from 9% to 41%. The Hispanic student population alone has almost doubled as a percentage of the total in 15 years (from 3.5% to 7.1%), although it is still below the proportion of the general population, at least in the United States (7.3% versus 17.4%). Growth has also occurred in the Asian student population to 9% of the total, which matches the Asian percentage of the general population. Conversely, enrollment of white



students has declined by 19% over the past decade versus the 9% drop in overall headcount prior to the current leveling off.¹

A longer view of the last two decades reveals some interesting shifts as well in percentage enrollments by age. While the under-30 crowd currently still makes up the

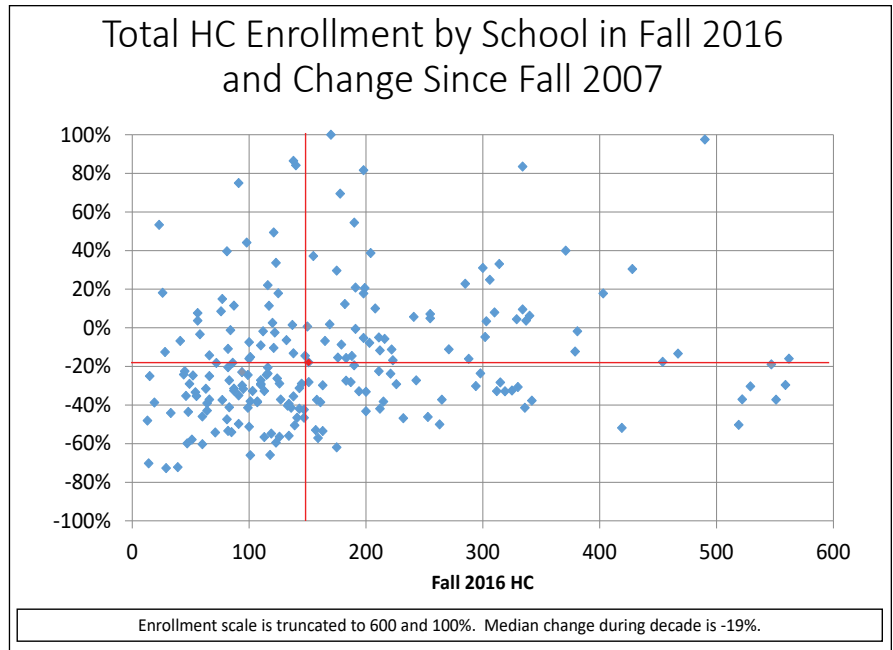
¹ It should be noted that headcount enrollment at the Canadian schools (under 40 in number) has remained fairly steady throughout the decade of decline and leveling off, hovering between 5,100 and 5,900 students.

largest cohort of students (30% of those reporting age), the over-50 cohort (now 22% of those reporting age) is the fastest-growing, up 16% in absolute numbers over the past 10 years alone. In fact, the over-50 crowd has been increasing for the past two decades, from 12% of those reporting age in 1995 to 22% in 2015. During this same period, students in their 30s have been the second fastest-growing group. This group has seen an increase in its percentage of total headcount over the past 10 years, from 25% of those reporting age in 2005 to 27% in 2015. Meanwhile, the absolute numbers and percentages of students under 30 and in their 40s have been declining.

A look at the degree programs favored by today's students also reveals shifts below the stable surface. Overall, enrollment in MDiv programs has declined by 14% in the last decade, but the decline is not evenly distributed across the three ecclesial families in the ATS membership. MDiv enrollment has declined 24% among mainline Protestant schools and 6% among evangelical Protestant schools (which account for 65% of ATS enrollment), while it has grown by 9% among Roman Catholic schools.

At the same time, continued strength is evident in the professional and academic MAs, a trend that has been evident since 2009. See "[Seminaries set six enrollment records](#)," (*Colloquy Online*, February 2015) and "[What a difference a decade makes: As seminaries reverse a 10-year enrollment decline, what does the future hold?](#)" (*Colloquy Online*, March 2016).

Is size of the school a factor? It would seem not. A look at how schools are distributed according to their rises or declines in enrollment over a decade illustrates that significant changes can—and do—occur at larger schools (above the median of 150 students) as well as at smaller ones.



Ultimately, the data tell us that school size is not a predictor of either enrollment or economic viability nor does any one model ensure growth. Each school must find the combination of curricular and degree program offerings that works for its context. What does seem to make a difference is creativity, as engagement in innovative programming seems to correlate with enrollment growth over the past five years.



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