

Online learning at ATS schools: Part 1—Looking back at our past

By TOM TANNER

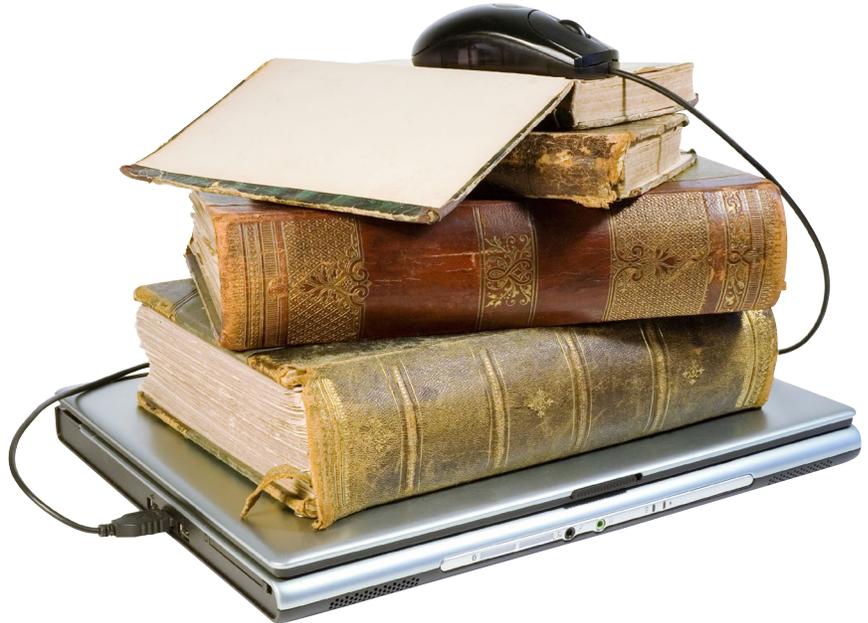
NOTE: This two-part article focuses on the past (Part 1) and present (Part 2) of a pedagogy that often invites controversy among ATS schools. Some view online learning as the next big thing (actually the now big thing), while others see it pretty much as the next/now bad thing. What does our brief history with this educational model have to tell us? And what does the present state of online learning among our schools have to teach us? These are the questions we will try to address in this two-part series.

Online learning among ATS schools has a rather brief, but intriguing history. 20 years ago, no ATS member school offered any courses online. 10 years ago, only a fourth of our schools offered any courses online, and less than a tenth of them had any substantive online programs. None offered any degrees completely online. Today, nearly two-thirds of our 273 member schools have online offerings. More than half have substantive online offerings, and more than a fourth offer entire degrees completely online.

Much has happened since the first two ATS schools were approved in 1999 to offer two MA degrees mostly online. The first mostly online MDiv (limited to two-thirds of the degree) was not approved until 2002, but the online trickle quickly became a strong stream, if not a flood. Between 2002 and 2007, some 70 schools began offering online courses—roughly a fourth of the membership. Between 2007 and 2012, another 40 schools went online for a total of 110, with 85 of them (a third of the members) offering courses online on a regular basis. Perhaps the pivot point in the Association's online history came in 2012, when the standards were revised to allow more online learning. That revision—only

five years ago—eliminated the residency requirement for academic MA degrees and reduced the residency requirement for MDiv and professional MA degrees, including an option for an exception that permitted those degrees to be offered completely online. The very first completely online MDiv and professional MA programs were not approved until August 2013—less than four years ago.

Since the 2012 revision of the standards, 65 more ATS schools have joined the online club, bringing the total today to 175—nearly two-thirds of the membership. Of those 175 schools, 141 are approved for



comprehensive distance education ([see ATS list](#)), nearly 60 of which were granted approval since 2012. Those 141 schools constitute 57% of the accredited membership (only accredited members may petition for that approval). Some 70 (half) of those 141 schools now offer more than 100 degrees completely or almost completely online, including two dozen MDiv programs, three dozen professional MA programs, and more than 40 academic MA programs. In the last few years, another six schools have received an exception to offer doctoral programs completely or almost completely online, including four PhD programs mostly online and two DMin programs completely online. ([See a complete list of ATS Commission-approved exceptions and experiments.](#))

In only 10 years, the number of ATS students taking at least one course online has nearly tripled, from fewer than 8,000 in 2006–2007 to well over 23,000 this year. That represents nearly one-third of all ATS seminarians, a ratio that could reach

more than half in the next few years—if recent trends continue. This online growth among ATS schools mirrors the larger higher education

landscape. While exact numbers vary by source, the number of US postsecondary students taking at least one course online has grown from around three million 10 years ago to nearly six million today—about 30% of all students. Currently, one third of all *graduate* students in the United States study online (similar to the ATS online ratio), including one-fourth who are exclusively online—double the percentage of *undergraduates* who study only online. ([See NCES Fast Facts.](#)) In Canada, nearly 30% of all university students are online ([see survey](#)), though no comparative numbers for Canadian graduate students exist.

The Association's history of growth with online learning appears poised to continue for some time. As just noted, seminary online enrollment (i.e., those taking at least one course online) has mushroomed from zero students

20 years ago, to nearly 8,000 students 10 years ago, to 14,000 five years ago, to more than 23,000 students today. If recent trends continue, *a majority of ATS students may be enrolled online within a few years*; one-third already are (vs. one-tenth 10 years ago). What is even more striking about our recent history is that during the last decade, when overall ATS enrollment declined by 11%, ATS online enrollment grew by 195%. To be sure, the number of schools petitioning for comprehensive distance education approval has slowed considerably, from about 15 per year 10 years ago to about five per year now. However, that may be because most ATS schools desiring to go online have done so by now. On the other hand, two-thirds (18) of the 24 schools that have joined ATS since the standards were revised in 2012 entered with online offerings; seven of them have more than 75% of their students online. Overall, 22 of our 273 ATS members have at least 75% of their students enrolled online; 50 have at least 50% online.

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All these trends point to continued growth in the number of seminarians going online. In fact, if you look at ATS enrollment trends over the last

year and the last five years, the growth potential seems quite strong. For example, over the last five years fewer than a third (30%) of schools without online students grew, while nearly half (48%) of schools with at least 100 online students grew (50 ATS schools have more than 100 online students). During this past year, a little more than a third (36%) of schools without online students grew, while 44% of schools with at least 20 online students grew (130 ATS schools have more than 20 online students). If one factors in schools with approved exceptions to residency, the growth differential during the past year is even greater: 36% without online students grew compared to 53% of schools with exceptions to residency for their online programs. To be sure, going online is no guarantee of enrollment growth, but it clearly seems to increase the odds.

Even MDiv enrollments, which have steadily declined over the past decade by a total of 16%, witnessed more growth among schools with at least 20 online students than among schools without any online students (43% vs. 33%). More pronounced was the difference for professional MA degrees, which has grown by 10% over the last five years among all ATS schools. During the last year, while just over a third (37%) of schools offering the professional MA as a residential degree saw their MA enrollment grow, more than half (51%) of schools offering that degree *fully online* grew in that program.

Numbers, however, are only part of the narrative. They tell only part of our story, part of the history of online learning among ATS schools. In the next part, we will move from looking back at our past to looking around at our present, with a special focus on what recent research among member schools has to teach us about the educational effectiveness of teaching online.



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