

Tending the flock: Is retention the answer to enrollment declines?

By ELIZA SMITH BROWN

The steady decline in enrollment at ATS schools—approximately 1.5 percent per year since 2006—is a phenomenon with which the Association and its 266 member schools are all too familiar. While 35 percent of schools are bucking the trend with rising enrollments, the majority are studying the declining numbers and exploring



various strategies for counteracting them. Some contend that retention is a significant part of the problem and have focused attention on strategies to keep their hard-earned students from walking out the door.

Persistence and Retention at ATS Member Schools

4.2	years to complete MDiv (average)
3.8	years to complete professional MA (average)
125%	new enrollments versus completions (average)
20%	estimated average attrition rate
50-100%	range of retention rates at ATS schools
18-20 credits	point at which many students drop out

The retention problem

A number of circumstances likely contribute to the retention challenge. Extended completion times certainly offer greater opportunities for interruption. The average time at ATS member schools for students to complete the MDiv, designed to be a three-year degree, is 4.2 years. The average duration for completion of a professional MA, typically conceived as a two-year degree, is 3.8 years.

In the process of working through these protracted completion times, an estimated average of approximately 20 percent of students are lost along the way. Looking at the full range of ATS schools, some lose nearly 50 percent, while others lose practically none; longer completion times add to the growing problem of student debt that, in turn, comes full circle to contribute to the attrition rate.

According to Mario Guerreiro, director of enrollment management at Assemblies of God Theological

Seminary in Springfield, Missouri, a prime factor in retention can be the motivation that draws students to seminary in the first place. “Over the past twenty years,” he explains, “fewer students have come to enter seminary with a clear sense of calling to ministry. More and more students arrive as ‘seekers,’ searching for an elusive faith and calling that they may or may not find in theological school.”

Paul Wilson, associate dean of student services and chaplain at Moody Theological Seminary–Michigan, advises his peers to expect attrition. “Students come for various reasons,” he explains, “some with the expectation that they will be part of the seminary community for a ‘short-term reason’ and, consequently, for only a ‘short-term season.’”

Some students will decide that they are not up to the academic challenges of graduate school in general, or of theological study in particular. Academic support, mentoring, or intervention can be the answer. The situation is further complicated by a tension between, on the one hand, identifying students for whom the academic work and formational expectations of seminary are simply not a good fit and, on the other hand, the pastoral desire to wrap around struggling students and support them to succeed.

The reasons for student attrition are often based, however, in unexpected life changes—health

problems, financial setbacks, family issues, work conflicts, or general time pressures. These problems become more prevalent as degree completion times are extended. As Chris Meinzer, senior director of administration and CFO at ATS, puts it, “The longer it takes a student to get through a program, the more likely it is that life will get in the way.”

Retention strategies: 8 approaches that are working

At a recent gathering of enrollment management and related student services personnel from ATS schools, participants shared a variety of strategies for keeping students in the fold:

1 *Retention begins with admissions.* Some of the strategies for boosting retention are rooted in admissions programs that place a high priority on a prospective student’s potential for success. Schools that are candid about completion times and realistic prospects for placement after graduation are likely to enjoy higher retention rates. A webpage at the Seattle School for Theology and Psychology lays out a range of career paths where the Master of Divinity degree can lead. With a clear sense of the road ahead, students are less apt to become discouraged. Some schools have found success in recruiting groups of students from the same faith community or undergraduate program who may choose to apply and attend seminary together. And some schools require psychological evaluation prior to enrollment, either conducting their own testing or supplying a list of providers where students can have the testing done themselves. (Schools choosing to require testing should refer to applicable ADA regulations.)

2 *Orientation offers opportunities for boosting retention.* Union Presbyterian Seminary uses a proven prematriculation program designed to build community and introduce biblical and theological concepts online before admitted students actually land on campus.



At Seattle School of Theology and Psychology, a “reorientation” program—required of both new and continuing students—reconnects and reengages all students on an annual basis. Likewise, Anderson University School of Theology has changed its orientation program to be community and connection oriented rather than logistics oriented.

3 *Pricing strategies can encourage students to persist with their programs.*

Students at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary are guaranteed a fixed tuition rate throughout their degree programs if they stay on full time. In an attempt to persuade the one-course-a-term student to take a larger course load, some schools are targeting their financial aid to encourage part-time students to add additional classes by, for example, offering discounted rates for the second course and beyond. Students can also be reminded that financial aid decisions are reconsidered annually to respond to changes in circumstances.

4 *Academic support can make a world of difference.*

Writing workshops and resource centers at many schools help students who are struggling to better respond to the academic challenges they face. Delphine Hwang, assistant dean for academic programs and registrar at Pacific School of Religion, recommends offering alternate courses of study for students who decide that a particular program is not the best fit for them. For instance, she says, Pacific has been able to retain students by directing them to other master’s degrees when they discover that their vocational interests lie in less traditional ministries that do not require a three-year MDiv.

5 *Intentional and consistent advising is critical, not only to direct students’ academic programs but also to guide them in responding to life issues.*

Faculty advisors at Anderson are instructed to check the plans of the students before they leave for the summer. This has helped administrators determine who might be considering dropping out and how they might intervene. Graduating Student Questionnaire data reveal that this relationship

matters a great deal to students. Some schools have expanded the advising role even further by holding “retention meetings” or assembling “care teams” of administrators who meet regularly—as often as weekly—to review the cases of individual students who may require extra support or intervention.

6 *Schools can identify attrition candidates early by monitoring attendance and registration indicators.*

A number of schools use attendance records as a red-flag indicator and track students who are missing classes with phone calls to determine if there are problems that the administration can help the students resolve. Ingrid McLennan, director of enrollment management and student services at Asbury Theological Seminary’s campus in Orlando, advocates “multiple touch points” and tracks not only students who have not registered but also those who register for fewer than 30 credits. The school requires a consultation with an academic advisor or faculty guide for those under the 30-hour threshold. Through phone calls and emails, Asbury staff tracks “registration persistence” with a goal of “restarting” those students in the next round of registration. This is especially important, says McLennan, because “once a student is out longer than a year, he/she is not coming back.” A new early registration process at Anderson requires students to register for the upcoming academic year before the spring semester ends, and administrators make individual contacts with those students who have not registered by graduation if they believe those students might return. At the other end of the process, exit interviews—a routine practice at New York Theological Seminary—not only gather instructive data from those completing degree programs and those leaving prior to completion, but they can also provide yet another touchpoint for keeping students in the fold.

7 *An attentive and savvy student services function can avoid many problems before they occur.*

The student development office at Anderson reinvented itself as a one-stop-shop so that students don’t have to go from place to place to get information and assistance. The office coordinates with the

registrar and financial aid offices and works closely with students from first inquiry to graduation, coordinating all registration, direct scholarships, questions about degrees, and so forth.

8 *Building community—both on campus and online—can encourage students to persist.* This can be as simple as a weekly community dinner or it can take the shape of assigning peer mentors/ prayer partners to keep students connected with one another and with the school. An intentional curricular strategy at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary of Cornerstone University requires students to take Greek I at a prescribed point early in their programs, building camaraderie in a cohort of learners who share that challenging experience and then travel through the rest of the program sequence together. Chapel also provides a community-building opportunity that has dropped by the wayside on many seminary campuses.

Moody Theological Seminary—Michigan has tackled the retention challenge with a “Strategic Student Retention Plan” that outlines a seven-step process for schools to assess and respond to the retention landscape:

1. Investigate—What should we know?
2. Identify—What are we doing?
3. Integrate—What should we coordinate?
4. Innovate—What should we create?
5. Improve—What should we do better?
6. Implement—What should we start/ stop doing?
7. Inspire—What should we celebrate?

According to the Moody plan, “retention is everybody’s business.”

According to David Niedert, director of student development at Anderson, “Bottom line, relationships matter, especially as they focus on student success and helping them get from Point A to Point B. I come out of the business area, and what we know about customer service is that customers view relationship with a vendor as a chain. When the chain is weak overall, they vote with their feet. Most often, internally we see ourselves as a link. Every link must be on the same page to create a strong chain.”

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~David Niedert

Anderson University School of Theology

As schools engage with issues of retention, there is a wealth of data to inform them and a variety of metrics to measure retention success, such as headcount enrollment, full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment, or credit hours. The ATS Entering and Graduating Student Questionnaires and other internal data can help determine issues or places that need attention. Registrars are rich in data on these issues, although there may be gaps in tracking longitudinal statistics as schools switch among data management systems.

Closing the loop

Effective retention programs, in the final analysis, can ultimately have a positive impact on admissions. According to Shonda Jones, associate dean of admissions and student services at Wake Forest University School of Divinity, “Students who feel cared for and well served by their seminary experiences can become some of the school’s most avid recruiting ambassadors. They offer authentic voices that prospective students long to hear.” —*ed.*