

Reports of the MDiv's death are greatly exaggerated.

By TOM TANNER

“Our seminaries are dying, and the Master of Divinity degree has been discredited.” So began a rather famous Patheos blog eight years ago this March, written by an ATS seminary professor. Six years ago, Christianity Today asked: “Does the MDiv Have a Future?” A year later, an ATS seminary president wrote an article for In Trust titled, “A Radical Proposal: Let’s Eliminate the MDiv.” This past May, Religion News Service published “More Seminary Students Leave the Master of Divinity Behind.” It was not surprising then to hear a veteran seminary dean ask at a recent ATS event, “Is the MDiv really dying?”

Such statements call to mind Mark Twain’s response when a major newspaper mistakenly ran his obituary: “Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” It is true that ATS MDiv enrollment has been declining since its peak in 2006, decreasing 19% from 34,935 to 28,396 a year ago (see Master’s Enrollment: A Changing Landscape by Chris Meinzer). Total ATS enrollment also decreased then, but by less than half as much at 9%, from 80,388 to 72,896. But something new has happened this year— **for the first time since 2010, MDiv enrollment did not decline.** It actually grew 9% (from 28,396 to 30,960, with a few schools yet to report), though almost all of that growth was due to one newly-admitted school.

Year-to-year changes aside, the MDiv is still by far the largest enrolled ATS degree, claiming nearly 40% of all students and 50% of all course credits. In addition, the



percentage of all ATS students enrolled in the MDiv has remained relatively stable for the last two decades—43% in 2006 at the MDiv’s enrollment peak, and 41% ten years earlier in 1996. Perhaps even a bit more surprising than the relatively stability in those percentages is that *there are nearly 10% more ATS students studying for the MDiv now than in 1996 (30,960 vs. 28,192)*—hardly signs of a “dying degree.”

After more than a century, the MDiv still seems to be what many—even its critics—have called the “gold standard.” It’s a degree offered by 94% of the 279 ATS member schools—the highest percentage by far for any ATS degree. Three factors may account for why this degree still holds its luster—duration, denomination, and vocation—but in ways that may be quite surprising. *Duration* refers to the “minimum of three academic years of full-time work or its equivalent” required in the ATS standards for the MDiv. *Denomination* refers to how MDiv enrollments that are identified with the “Top 20” denominations (those with the most MDiv students enrolled)

have changed over the last few decades. *Vocation* refers to areas where recent ATS graduates are serving, especially among those who earned the MDiv. A conversation about the MDiv seems timely, as the ATS Redevelopment Task Force is in the first year of a two-year process to develop a new set of standards, including for the MDiv. This is the first major redevelopment since 1996 and only the third in ATS history (the first was in 1972).

Duration

One of the distinctives of the MDiv is that it requires three years of study. That long-standing length was due apparently to British influence on early North American seminaries, with many British universities in the nineteenth century requiring three years for a master's degree. That, of course, is now the exception, not the norm, in North America. In fact, the MDiv may be the only professional master's degree that still requires three years. Long ago, medicine and law changed their first professional degrees to doctorates (MD and JD), and virtually all other professions have gone to two years, or even one year, for their master's degrees. Regional accreditors require a minimum of 30 semester credits for a master's degree—professional or academic.

ATS requires a minimum of 36 semester credits for a professional MA, but 72 credits minimum for an MDiv, though the norm has long been 90 credits. The 72-credit minimum dates back several decades, based partly on the long-standing practice of many university divinity schools offering a 72-credit MDiv and partly on the US military chaplaincy requirement of at least 72 graduate credits. It was formalized as a minimum in the 2012 revision of the standards (under MDiv equivalency for DMin admissions). A 2017 ATS staff study of MDiv programs found that 50% of all ATS schools required less than 90 credits (27% required less than 80) and 50% required 90 or more credits (30% required more than 90 credits—about half of which required more than 100).

One of the 18 peer groups in the ATS Educational Models and Practices Project examined the issue of MDiv duration in 2017 and 2018. In its final report (p. 31-40), this group raised several issues for consideration in a new

MDiv standard, including the desirability of “stackable credentials” (allowing the three-year MDiv to build more seamlessly upon the two-year professional MA) and the need for “defining a better benchmark for adequacy” than duration. Another peer group looked at “accelerated BA/MDiv” programs (p. 41-47), which also addressed issues of duration. ***Undoubtedly, the current three-year duration for the MDiv is both a detriment and a draw—a detriment because of its cost in time and tuition, and a draw because of its rigor and rarity.***

Denomination

One of the shifts in MDiv enrollment over time has been in the denominations with which those students are identified. The “Top 20” in the accompanying table on the next page refers to those 20 denominations that enrolled the most MDiv students in 1996 and in 2018, accounting for more than 80% of all MDiv students and all ATS students in both years. “Denominations” here refers to 112 different ecclesial groups (including Buddhist, Jewish, and Muslim) that ATS schools identify in the ATS Annual Report Forms for their students (see list in Table 2.16 in the ATS Annual Data Tables). That list also includes “Other” for students who list a denomination “other” than one of the 112, or for students who choose not to identify their denominations.

Among the shifts in the MDiv over time is that one-fifth of the “Top 20” denominations for MDiv enrollment in 1996 are not on that list in 2018. Perhaps the biggest shift since 1996 is that the number of MDiv students in “Top 20” denominations that typically require the MDiv for ordination has declined 32%, while the number of MDiv students in denominations that typically do not require the MDiv for ordination has increased 66%. ***The biggest growth in the MDiv has been among denominations that typically do not require the MDiv for ordination.***

Vocation

The popularity of the MDiv is also somewhat surprising in light of a 2017 survey of ATS graduates from the classes of 2011 and 2015 (see Where Are Graduates Serving? by Jo Ann Deasy). Barely one-fourth (27%) of all 940 respondents indicated that the MDiv was required

Top 20 Denominations for MDiv Enrollments: 1996 and 2018								
	1996	1996	1996		2018	2018	2018	
	MDIV	MDIV	TOTAL		MDIV	MDIV	TOTAL	
Top 20 in 1996	Rank	Students	Students	Top 20 in 2018	Rank	Students	Students	
Southern Baptist Convention	1	4418	9231	Southern Baptist Convention	1	4680	11461	
United Methodist Church	2	3832	6214	Other	2	4574	14178	
Roman Catholic	3	2790	7319	Roman Catholic	3	2771	7172	
Other	4	1876	9450	Nondenominational	4	2627	7827	
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	5	1732	3510	United Methodist Church	5	2297	3768	
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	6	1474	2592	Baptist	6	1640	4252	
Nondenominational	7	1019	2931	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	7	819	1314	
Episcopal Church	8	819	1862	Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)	8	799	1699	
American Baptist Churches USA	9	659	1240	Presbyterian Church in America	9	675	1540	
United Church of Christ	10	636	1161	Episcopal Church	10	597	1238	
Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	11	633	1047	Seventh-day Adventist	11	532	1881	
Presbyterian Church in America	12	590	1238	African Methodist Episcopal	12	441	673	
Baptist	13	422	1087	Assemblies of God	13	373	1256	
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	14	414	665	Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod	14	371	847	
Unitarian Universalist	15	369	488	United Church of Christ	15	350	578	
African Methodist Episcopal	16	368	490	Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	16	292	547	
National Baptist Convention	17	363	600	Korean American Presbyterian Church	17	286	628	
Assemblies of God	18	350	981	National Assoc. of Cong. Christian Churches	18	252	616	
Christian and Missionary Alliance	19	287	767	Baptist General Convention of Texas	19	249	323	
Seventh-day Adventist	20	282	615	Church of the Nazarene	20	237	472	
All Other Denominations		4,859	12,104	All Other Denominations		5,573	14,960	
Total		28,192	65,592	Total*		30,198	76,758	
% of Students in Top 20		83%	82%	% of Students in Top 20		82%	81%	

*NOTE: The "denominational" total for 2018 is slightly lower than the actual headcount total due to different ways of counting those.

for their present vocations, though nearly half (44%) of all respondents had earned an MDiv. Of the 45% of respondents serving in congregational contexts, half (51%) indicated the MDiv was required, increasing to 62% for those identified as pastors or associate pastors. Put differently, only 60% of MDiv graduates were using their degrees to serve in a congregational context, with less than half of all MDiv graduates (49%) serving as pastors or associate pastors. ***The MDiv seems to be serving different vocations than it did just a few decades ago.***

Concluding Question

If the MDiv is “dying,” why do 40% of all ATS students—a percentage that has remained relatively stable for two decades—continue to enroll in a degree that (1) is no longer required by a growing number of denominations, (2) is not required for most vocations among ATS graduates, and (3) requires more years of study than virtually any other professional master’s degree? That seems to be a question worth exploring.



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