Auburn

Theological Student Enrollment

A Special Report from the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education

Barbara G. Wheeler, Anthony T. Ruger and
Sharon L. Miller | August, 2013

About this Issue

This report analyzes longitudinal enrollment trends in theological schools, using data collected by the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). It is intended to provide information that will help theological schools and the religious communities they serve as they plan strategy and attempt to manage enrollments. It also serves as a backdrop for the comprehensive study of seminary students, *On Our Way: Pathways to Seminary* (2013), which provides an in-depth look at the experiences and influences that lead students to seminary.

To summarize the findings of this report:
Most schools saw growth in enrollment until the early 2000s and then enrollment decline, which appears likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Total head count and full-time-equivalency enrollments have declined overall, but some subsets of students, namely African American and Hispanic, show modest increases. In a number of schools, the demographics of the student body are changing as well, with increased numbers of young adults (under 30) and older adults (over 50) but fewer students in their 30s and 40s enrolling. Schools that can meet the needs and interests of this changing student body may be able to mitigate falling enrollment with careful planning and well-executed recruitment work, but it is unrealistic to plan for substantial enrollment increases in the years to come.

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The first years of the twenty-first century presented major challenges for theological schools in the United States and Canada. Most North American seminaries and divinity schools, small in size and bearing high overhead costs, were hit hard by the recession of 2008. Even before the financial downturn, however, many schools, small and large, were contending with a dismaying trend: declining enrollment.

Falling enrollment is the most corrosive problem a school can face. It inflicts financial damage on seminaries that rely heavily on tuition payments from students. In schools of all kinds, including those with student aid endowments that supply most or all tuition revenue, undersubscribed courses dampen the morale of both faculty members and students. Most troubling, a dearth of students raises fundamental questions: Is the mission of the school still relevant? Is the school any longer needed in its present form?

The Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education analyzed enrollment trends intensively, using data on students supplied by the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). Longitudinal information for most variables in this data set is available from 1989 to the present, so it is possible to analyze changes over time.[1] Of ATS's current membership of 274 schools, 205 reported consistently for the twenty-year period and were included in the analysis.[2] For some topics where the focus is on more recent trends, a larger number of schools reporting consistently over a shorter period is used.

This study of enrollment trends is intended to provide information that will help theological schools and the religious communities they serve as they plan strategy and attempt to manage enrollments. It also serves as a backdrop for the Center's comprehensive study of seminary students, *On Our Way: Pathways to Seminary,* which provides information about the experiences and influences that lead students to seminary.[3] Both projects follow up the Center's initial research on seminary students in 2001.[4] Taken together, they support these general conclusions:

- Overall, the population of seminary students will not grow substantially in the next period, though some subsets of it will increase in size.
- Theological schools that plan carefully may mitigate falling enrollments.
- Seminaries attract some excellent students, and, with deliberate effort, can continue to do so in the future.

This report provides evidence to support the first two conclusions; *On Our Way*, based on surveys and interviews, documents how students get to seminary and suggests how schools can attract the kind of students they would most like to have.

Many of the analyses in this report divide ATS member schools by religious tradition (Roman Catholic/Orthodox, Anabaptist, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical Protestant) and then further subdivide the Protestant schools into those that have denominational affiliations and those ("independent") that do not. The determination of whether a Protestant school is "mainline" or "evangelical" is based on its self-description. This variable has proved more useful than any other in explaining variances in data from and about theological schools. In a number of analyses in this report, the Anabaptist category is omitted, because subdividing the data for purposes of comparison yields numbers too small to convert to meaningful percentages.

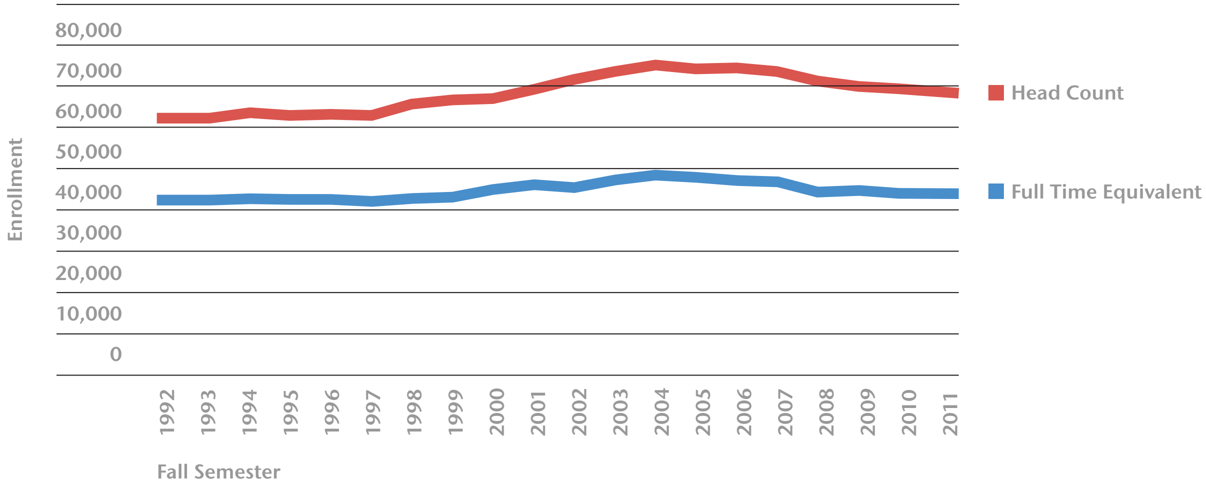
Growth and Decline: The General Pattern

In recent years, seminary enrollments have been declining. Over the last two decades (1992–2011), as Figure 1 shows, enrollments in US and Canadian theological schools first grew; they peaked in 2004 and then began to decline at about the same rate that they had grown—one percent a year.[5] The net gains were small. By the end of the twenty-year period, head count enrollment was 9 percent higher, gaining on average only one-half of one percent a year. Full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment was only 4 percent higher, gaining less than one-fifth of one percent per year on average.

Factors contributing to this growth and decline will be explored in detail in the section of this report that follows, but it seems clear that the overall pattern of recent enrollment decline is related to the decline of organized religion in North America. Today all religious groups, including the recently booming evangelicals, are losing strength. Seminary enrollment patterns track this change rather closely.[6] Other broad social forces and trends, such as economic constriction and changing patterns of participation in higher education, appear to be in play as well. Higher education is facing severe financial challenges, some of which have a dampening effect on enrollment, and most sectors of higher education are expecting slow or no growth in the next decade. The trends described below are not unique to theological education, though theological schools, which are generally small compared with other educational institutions and which have to cope with decline in their supporting religious bodies as well, may face special challenges in managing enrollment decline.

Figure 1: Total Head Count and Full Time Equivalent Enrollment.

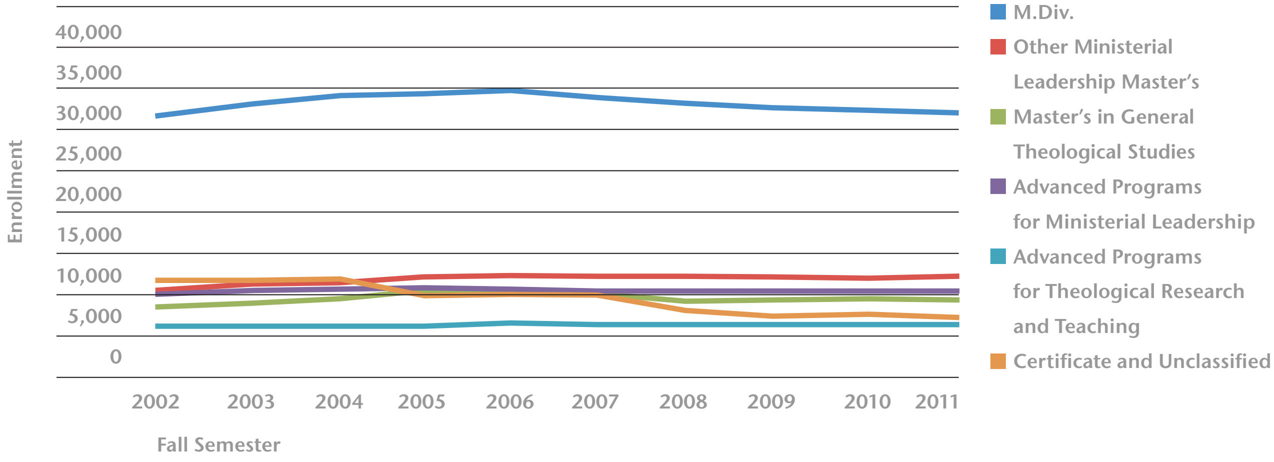
Same 205 theological schools reporting for twenty years.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

Figure 2: Head Count Enrollment Aggregated by Degree Groups.

Same 244 schools reporting for ten years.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

Factors Related to Enrollment

What factors come into play in this pattern of growth and decline?

Degree programs: Recent enrollment declines are not spread evenly across degree programs.

As Figure 2 shows, in a constant set of schools:

- One program, the master of divinity degree, has sustained significant losses (7.5 percent of its enrollment, or 1.25 percent per year) since its peak in 2006.[7]
- Academic master's degrees, not intended as ministerial preparation, have lost even more in percentage terms (11 percent since their peak in 2005).
- No program type has gained during this period, though non-M.Div. ministerial master's degrees have lost less (about 3 percent since their peak in 2008, or 1 percent a year), and advanced ministerial degrees such as the D.Min. have held fairly steady. (Additional detailed charts are provided online at http://auburnseminary.org/enrollment-appendix1. Among these is a chart, Figure 1, which shows more clearly the enrollment changes in the smaller, non-M.Div. master's programs.)

Overall, however, the proportion of enrollments in various degree programs has not changed dramatically. The most noticeable shift has been within the category of master's-level degrees. (In the remainder of this report, "master's degrees" refers to *all* master's level degrees given by a theological school, including the master of divinity and its equivalents, master of arts degrees in various ministerial leadership areas, and academic master of arts degrees. "Ministerial master's degrees" refers to all these degrees *except* academic master of arts degrees.) In 1992, 69 percent of students were enrolled in M.Div. programs; today, that has diminished to 63 percent. All the gain has been in the category of ministerial master's (14 percent to 20 percent over the twenty-year period). Academic master's enrollment has held steady at about 17 percent of the total master's enrollment, though if its sharp recent decline continues, this could change. (See online Appendix 1, Figure 2.)

Religious tradition and type of school: Gains and losses were spread unevenly across schools of different religious traditions and types, though almost all follow the same pattern of growth followed by decline. Figure 3 is an indexed graph that sets the 1992 total enrollment of all traditions and types of schools at a fictitious level of 100 in order to show different rates of growth over the twenty-year period. Evangelical independent (i.e., non-denominational) schools' enrollments grew very fast, then begin to decline in 2006; evangelical denominational schools and Roman Catholic schools also grew, though the growth started later and peaked sooner; mainline denominational schools grew slowly and then sustained heavy losses. Only Anabaptist schools, whose total enrollment is very small, and mainline independent schools varied the pattern. Anabaptist schools' falling enrollments recently rebounded slightly; mainline independent schools did poorly at the beginning of the period but rebounded to a plateau at the end.

Protestant independent schools—those not associated with a denomination—stand out in this analysis, the evangelical ones because of their very fast rate of growth and mainline Protestant ones because they have grown rather than declined recently. Non-denominational schools have a bigger pool in which to fish for students. The lack of their "own" denominational constituency may also give them the incentive to recruit more aggressively. Some evangelical independent schools have the added advantage of large size which, as the next section will show, makes it easier for them to create innovative program formats to extend their reach.

Program format: Offering programs in new forms (extension, online, and other distance formats) boosts enrollment in some but not all schools. In recent years, some schools have opened extension sites for students who cannot travel to the main campus. Creating and maintaining such sites requires resources and, perhaps for that reason, large schools have the most extension students. Slightly more than half of the schools with the largest extension enrollments had better enrollment trends—they have seen either more growth or less decline—than comparable schools that do not have extension programs. Since 2007, however, enrollment at extension sites has begun to decline, mirroring overall enrollment decline.

Many schools are planning or implementing distance-education programs, usually in the form of online courses, to bolster enrollments. Again, larger schools have the resources to launch and maintain such programs and report the largest distance-education enrollment.

Online education in these schools is mildly associated with more growth or less decline. In smaller schools, though a few online programs have had notable success, there is no overall association between online offerings and a favorable enrollment picture. Enrollments in distance education have continued to grow, in contrast to the overall pattern of enrollment decline. At an earlier time some online students might have enrolled at extension centers, so it is possible that online programs are cannibalizing extension programs. The decline in the former and the growth in the latter correspond chronologically. Because available data sources do not distinguish between online courses taken by students who are in residence on campus and those who are located at a distance from the school, it is very difficult to determine the extent to which online opportunities add to the enrollment pool persons who might otherwise have matriculated in seminary.

Gender: Enrollments of both men and women first grew and then declined, but they grew and declined at different rates. Figure 4 shows men's and women's enrollment in master's programs over

Figure 3: Total Head Count Enrollment Index by Denominational Classification.

205 Schools Reporting 1992–2011. 1992 = 100.

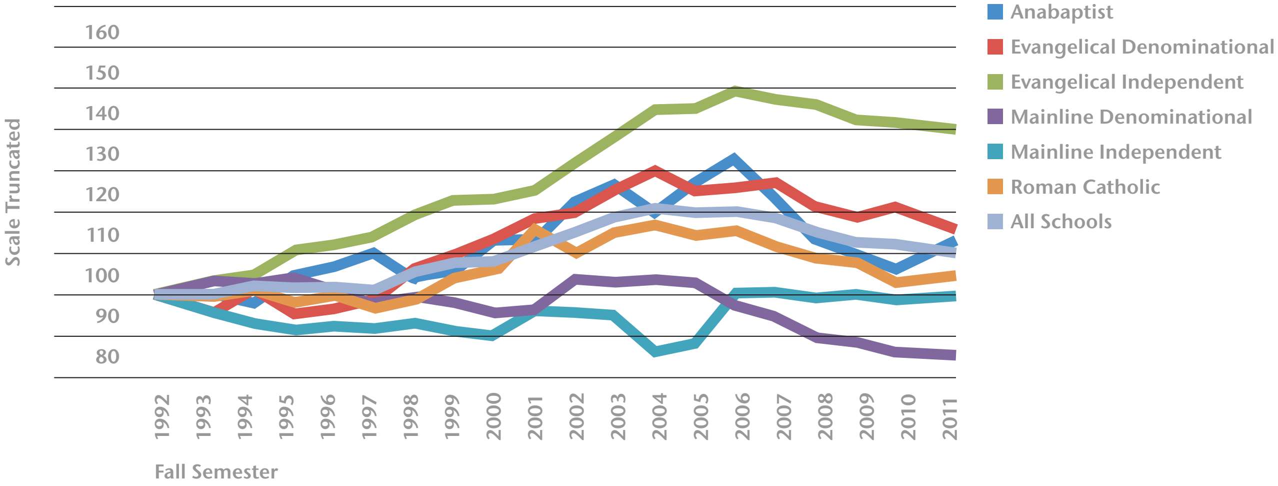


Figure 4: Head Count Enrollment of Men and Women in Master's Programs.

Same 205 Schools Reporting.

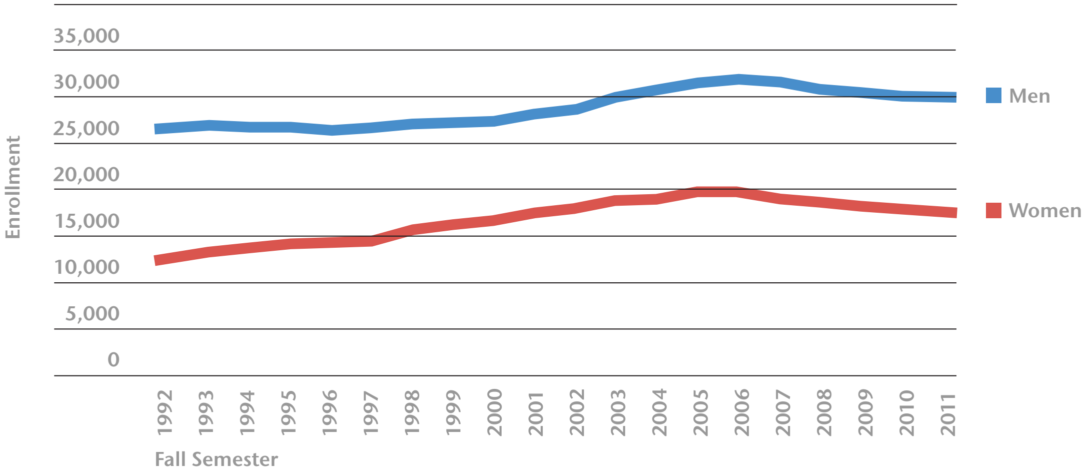


Table 1: Recent Changes in Racial Ethnic Head Count Enrollment as of Fall, 2011.

Same 244 schools reporting

Group	*Peak*	*Loss from Peak/ Gain from 2005*	*Loss Per Year From Peak/ Gain Per Year from 2005*
White	2005	- 17%	- 3.00%
African American	*	+ 7%	+1.75%
Hispanic	*	+ 26%	+ 4%
Asian American	2007	- 7%	- 1.75%
Visa	2008	- 9%	- 3.00%

**Had not peaked in 2011*

Source: Database of the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools.

twenty years. In 2011 there were 40 percent more women in North American theological schools than there had been twenty years earlier; meanwhile enrollment of men increased only 12 percent. Once enrollments began to fall, however, women's enrollment fell faster than men's. In the six years since men's enrollment peaked, the loss was 6 percent, or 1 percent a year; women lost 11 percent over a seven-year period, or 1.5 percent a year. The rapid growth no doubt incorporated the influx of women, especially older women, who came to seminary after mainline denominations began to ordain them in significant numbers and (later) when Roman Catholic and evangelical churches and agencies opened a wider range of ministries to women. The sharp subsequent decline may be due in part to the fact that much of that "backlog" has been used up. When mainline denominational seminaries, where large numbers of women are enrolled, began their steep enrollment decline in 2005, women's enrollment was affected more than men's. Still, because of women's earlier gains, the proportion of women to men has remained fairly stable. In 1992 women were 32 percent of master's-level enrollments. Less than a decade later, in 1999, they were 37 percent, and they have remained at that level ever since. (See online Appendix 1, Figure 3.)

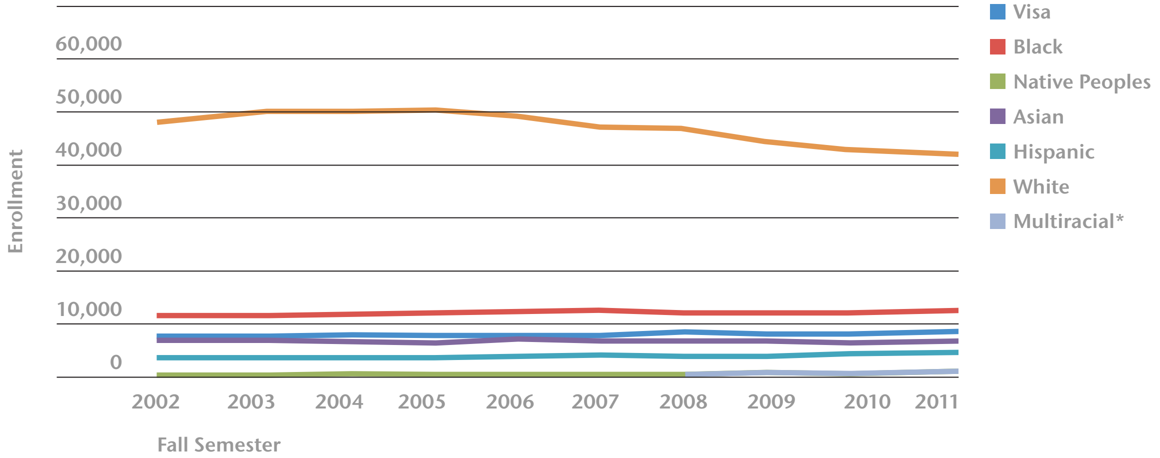
Because of women's earlier gains, the proportion of women to men has remained fairly stable.

Race: The only sectors that vary the general enrollment pattern (growth until 2005 or 2006 and steady decline since then) are non-white racial and ethnic groups. Figure 5 and Table 1 both illustrate the sharp contrast between enrollment of white students and enrollments of those in other categories:[8] (See online Appendix 1, Figure 4 for the racial/ethnic makeup of all ATS schools.)

While white enrollments have declined dramatically since their peak in 2005, losing almost 3 percent a year over the last six years, African American and Hispanic enrollments have grown, the latter group, small to begin with, quite dramatically. Asian American enrollments fell, but the decline began later and has been slower in rate. Enrollments of students on non-resident visas peaked even later, in

Figure 5: Head Count Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity.

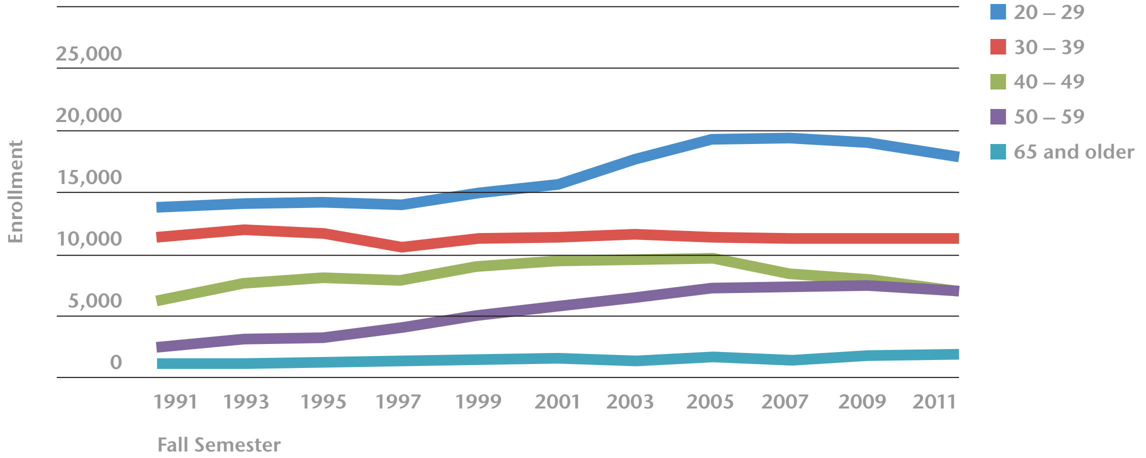
Same 244 Schools.



*New category in 2008

Figure 6: Head Count Enrollment in Master's Degree Programs by Age Cohort.

Same 198 Schools Reporting.



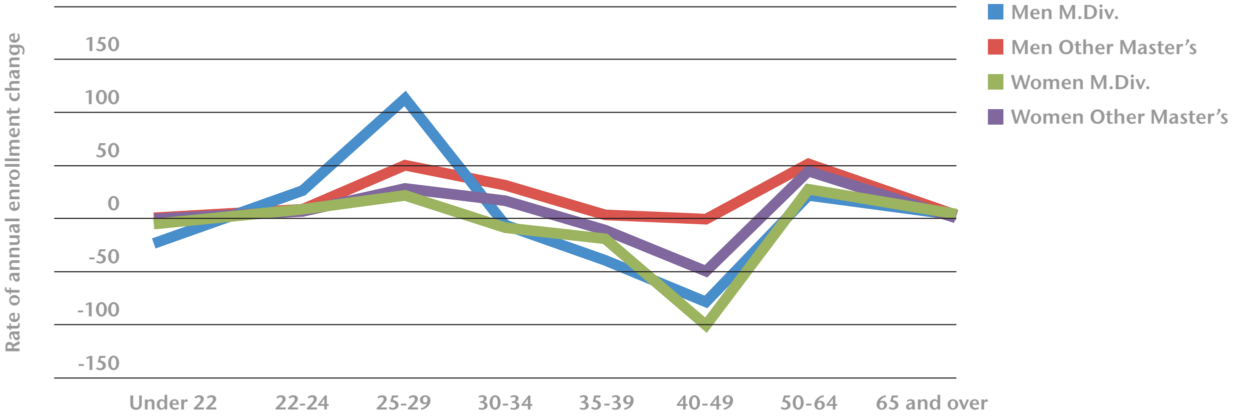
Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

2008; the subsequent fall is perhaps related to the worldwide global recession. The rate of loss of this group is a matter of concern: it is the third largest "racial/ethnic" contingent in the whole population of students.

Age: The cohorts of young students (under 30) and older students (50–64) have experienced more growth and less decline than other age groups. Ten years ago, the most discussed feature of the profile of student enrollment was age. The average age of a student entering a master's-level program was about 35 and the cohort of students between 30 and 49 was growing fast (31 percent in the last decade of the twentieth century).[9] In 2003, however, as Figure 6 shows, the growth of the 30–39 and 40–49 master's cohorts peaked, and both continue to decline (in 2011 they had decreased to the levels of the early 1990s). Meanwhile, there was steep growth in the 20–29 age group between 1997 and 2005 and decline since, and fast and continuing growth in the smallest age cohorts, students 50 and older. Because of these two developments—steep earlier growth in the youngest cohort

Figure 7: Ten-Year Growth Trend Comparison 2001-2011, Fall Enrollment.

Distribution of growth rate for student cohorts by degree program, gender and age. Same 198 schools reporting.

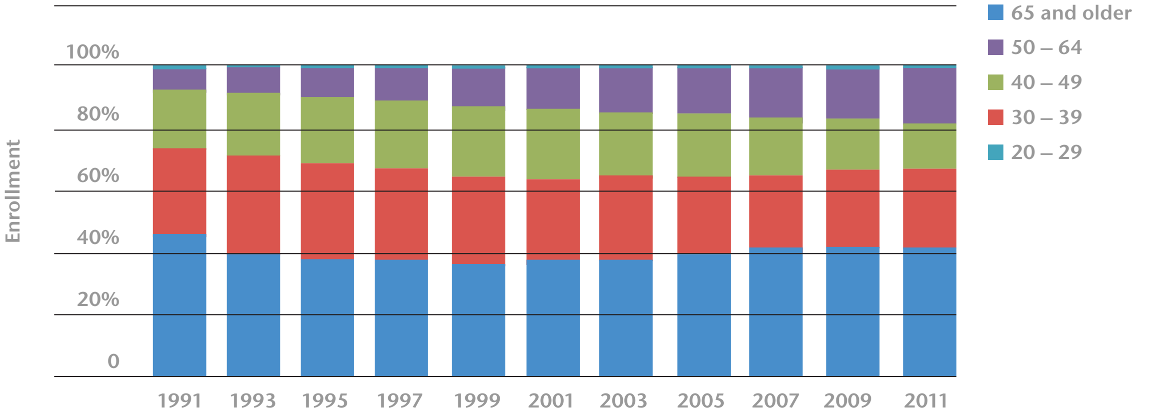


Fall Semester

Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

Figure 8: Head Count Enrollment in Master's Degree Programs by Age Cohort.

Same 198 Schools Reporting.



Fall Semester

Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

and continuous growth in the 50–64 cohorts—young and older students are the prominent features of the age profile of students today, and students in their 30s and 40s are less in evidence.

These developments are dramatized in Figure 7, a more complex representation of enrollment trends. The graph is based on the slope of straight trend lines and shows rates of growth and decline.[10] Higher positive values represent more rapid growth; lower negative values represent more rapid decline. The chart shows the dominant bi-modal pattern of growth in the youngest and oldest cohorts and decline in between. Figure 8 shows how the age balance in the student population has changed as a result of these trends. Students in their 30s and 40s are no longer the majority, as they were in 1991; the cohort of students in their 20s has returned to its pre-1990 level of more than 40 percent of the total population of master's students. The newly prominent group is students 50 and older, which is now as large as the group of students in their 40s.

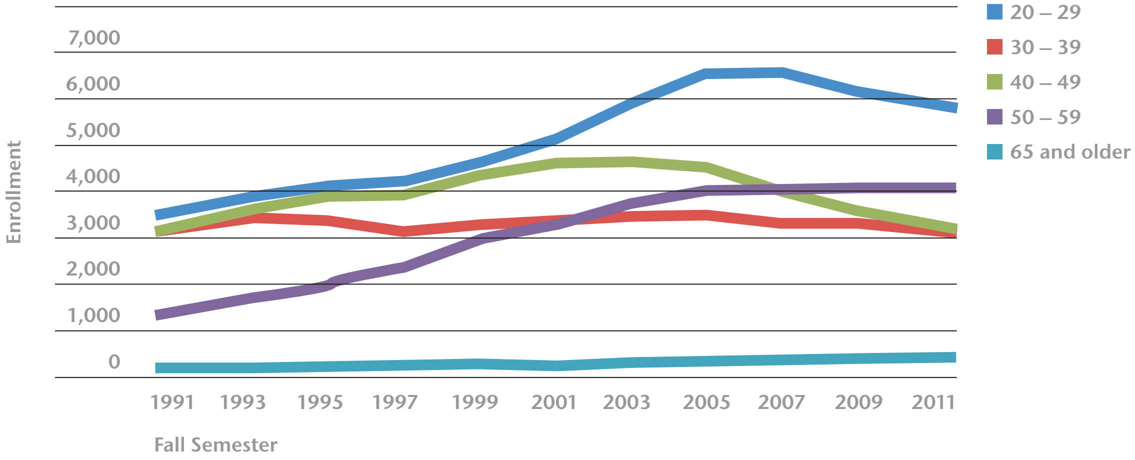
Interrelationships Among Factors

Age and Gender. Women students are older than men. Over the last two decades, the median age of women has consistently been four to five years older than the median age of men.[11] Women's enrollment in the youngest age cohort grew much faster than men's (as did women's enrollment overall) until recently. Both men and women show rapid growth in the oldest age categories, 50 and older, and recent decline in the middle categories, though for women, as Figure 9 shows, the drop in enrollment of master's students in their 40s, which used to be the second largest for women, has been especially steep (see online Appendix 1, Figures 5–7, for additional graphs of the cross-cutting age and gender categories).

Gender and School Tradition/Type. As Table 2 shows, women who are 37 percent of the master's-level student population overall, are unevenly distributed among schools of different traditions. There has been minimal growth in the representation of women in Roman Catholic schools; despite the fact that the numbers of women in master's programs more than tripled

Figure 9: Head Count Enrollment of Women Students in Master's Degree Programs by Age Cohort.

Same 198 Schools Reporting.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

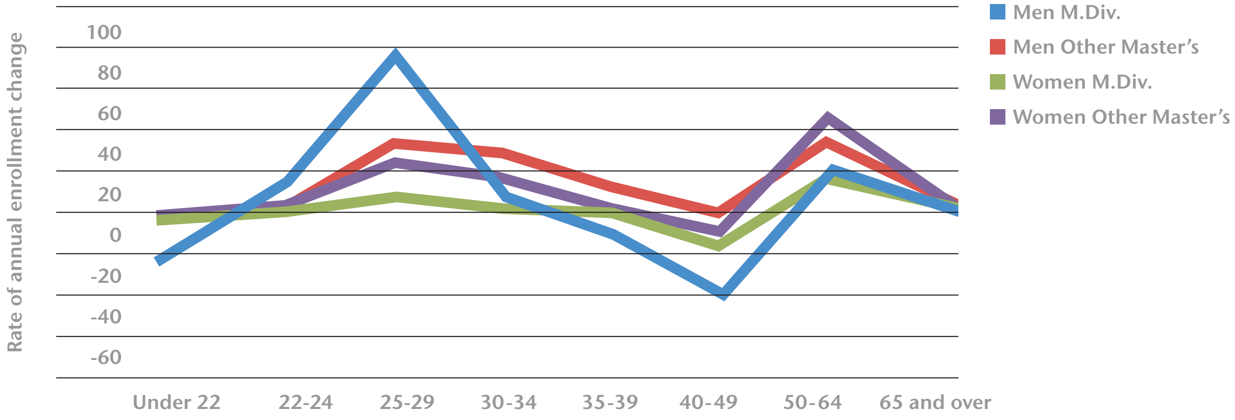
Table 2: Percentage of Women and Percentage Growth of Women in Master's Programs Since 1991 by School Tradition.

School Tradition	*Percentage of Women in Master's Programs in 2011*	*Growth in Numbers of Women in Master's Programs since 1991*	*Increase in Percentage of Women in Master's Programs since 1991*
Anabaptist	54	114	19
Mainline Protestant	53	15	10
Evangelical Protestant	31	109	5
Roman Catholic/ Orthodox	25	6	0

Source: Database of the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools.

Figure 10: Ten-Year Growth Trend Comparison 2001–2011, Fall Enrollment in Evangelical Schools.

Distribution of growth rate for student cohorts by degree program, gender and age. Same 198 schools reporting.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

in evangelical schools, their numbers were so small at the beginning of the period that their representation in the schools (whose overall enrollment is grown) has increased only 5 percent. In mainline Protestant schools, where women are heavily represented, growth has been slow and recently declines have been steep. Only Anabaptist schools, where the numbers are small, have both high representation and rapid growth.

Gender, Age, Program Type and School Tradition/ Type: The general pattern of enrollment growth and decline by age holds for most gender and program sub-groups in most types of schools:

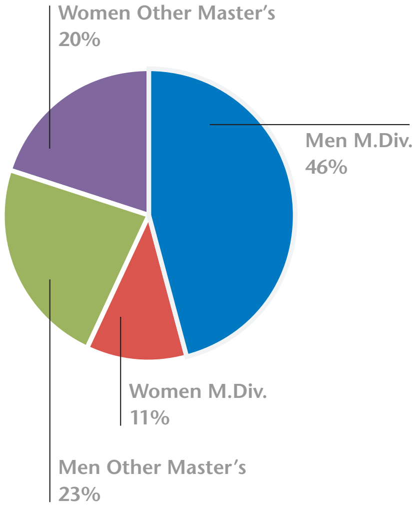
- 20s cohort: fast growth until the middle of the last decade; then a downward trend.
- 30s and 40s cohorts: growth until early 2000s, then decline.
- 50–64 cohort: steady and continuing growth. This is the only age category that shows almost continuous year-to-year growth and no overall decline for every sub-group: men and women, all degree program types, and all school traditions and types.

There are, however, some significant variations by school tradition and type.[12]

Evangelical schools. Enrollment of both men and women in both M.Div. and other master's programs in evangelical schools has grown in real terms over the past twenty years, and the pattern of growth is typically bimodal, with the highest rates of growth in the 20s and 50–64 cohorts. Figure 10, a slope-based chart, shows rates of growth of various age/gender/degree

Figure 11: Proportions of Master's Degree Students in Evangelical Protestant Schools by Gender and Program.

All schools reporting in Fall 2011.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools cohorts. Figure 11 shows proportions of enrollment by gender and degree type. (Planners, enrollment managers, and others who need detailed enrollment information can find charts for their school type on the website of the Auburn Center. Graphs of *actual* enrollment by gender, age and degree type for all traditions and types of schools and slope graphs with much more detailed breakouts by program, gender, and school tradition are provided in Appendix 2. (http://auburnseminary.org/enrollment-appendix2) The following variations in the enrollment patterns of evangelical schools are worth noting:

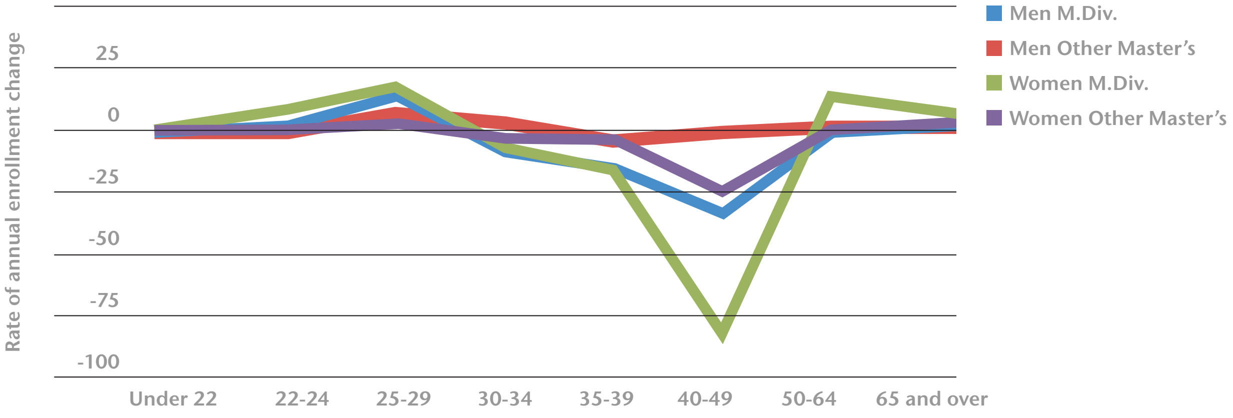
- Evangelical schools' students are younger than those in other institutions, and M.Div. men in their 20s have had the highest growth rate in these institutions over a twenty-year period, an encouraging development, because M.Div. men make up 46 percent of master's enrollment in these schools (Figure 11). Recently, however, all segments of this youngest age category (men and women, in both denominational and independent schools and M.Div. and other master's programs) have begun to decline in evangelical schools (see enrollment charts online Appendix 2, Figures 1–5).
- Growth rates for "other master's" are lower, but still positive, which is also good news, because these degrees make up almost half of all master's enrollments in evangelical schools.
- M.Div. enrollments for men 35–49 have diminished sharply and growth rates for women in these age brackets are low.

Mainline Protestant schools. The pattern of enrollment in mainline Protestant schools has the same bi-modal shape as the general picture—growth in the 20s and 50–64 cohorts. After 2005, however, enrollment overall declined (see enrollment charts online Appendix 2, Figures 6-9) and, as Figure 12 shows, other groups did not fare well over the last two decades:

- There was slight overall growth in non-M.Div. master's programs for both men and women. But because the M.Div., the bread-and-butter program of mainline Protestant schools (enrolling three-quarters of all master's-level students, as Figure 13 shows) sustained considerable losses, enrollment suffered losses overall.

Figure 12: Ten-Year Growth Trend Comparison 2001–2011, Fall Enrollment in Mainline Schools.

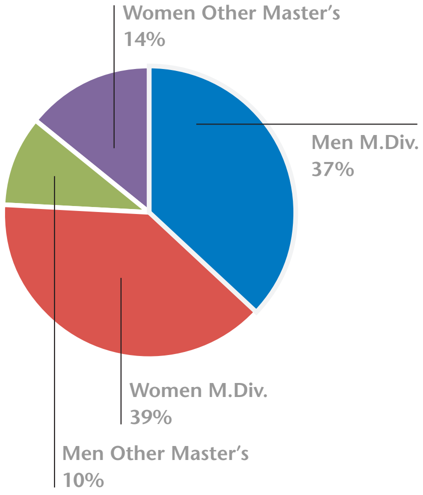
Distribution of growth rate for student cohorts by degree program, gender and age. Same 198 schools reporting.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

Figure 13: Proportions of Master's Degree Students in Mainline Protestant Schools by Gender and Program.

All schools reporting in Fall 2011.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

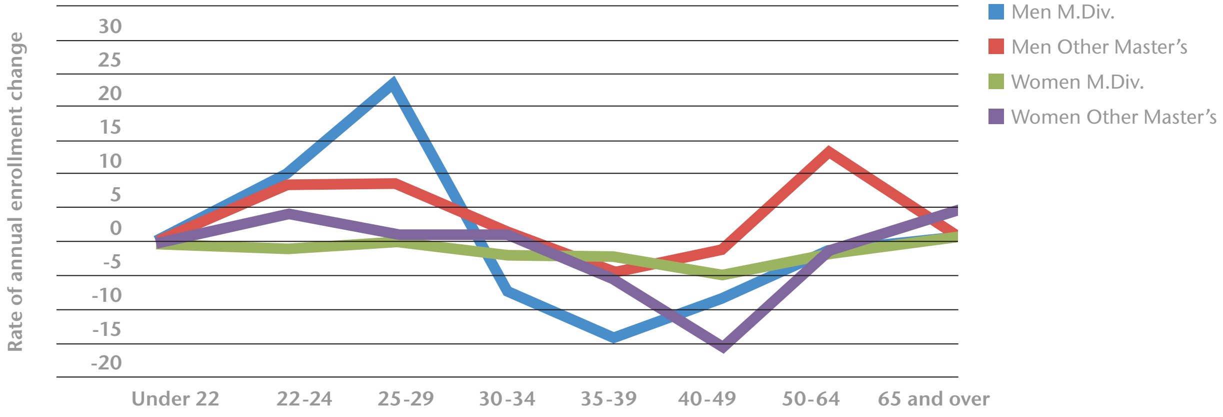
- The cohort of mainline women in their 40s, which twenty years ago was the mainstay of M.Div. women's enrollment in both independent and denominational seminaries, declined very sharply.
- The cohort of women 50 and older grew so fast over this twenty-year period that they are now the largest age group of women in mainline seminaries.
- Growth in the 50s cohort for all M.Div.s was almost as rapid as growth in the 20s cohort.

Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools. Roman Catholic and Orthodox enrollments exhibit the expected bimodal pattern (Figure 14), but with some significant differences. (See online Appendix 2, Figures 10-13.)

- In non-M.Div. master's programs, the older (50–64) cohort of men grew at a much faster rate than the 20s cohort; the opposite is true for M.Div. students.
- M.Div. women's enrollments faltered; only in the 20s cohort did they not decline.
- Counter to the prevailing trend, there has been no downturn in total men's enrollment in these schools. This is due partly to increases in enrollment of young M.Div. men but even more to increased enrollment of men 50 and older in non-M.Div. master's programs. Non-M.Div. master's programs account for half of total enrollment in Roman Catholic and Orthodox schools (Figure 15) and much more than that in non-diocesan Roman Catholic schools, so growth in any age sector in these programs is good news.

Figure 14: Ten-Year Growth Trend Comparison 2001–2011, Fall Enrollment in Roman Catholic and Orthodox Schools.

Distribution of growth rate for student cohorts by degree program, gender and age. Same 198 schools reporting.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

Age Profiles of Schools of Different Traditions.

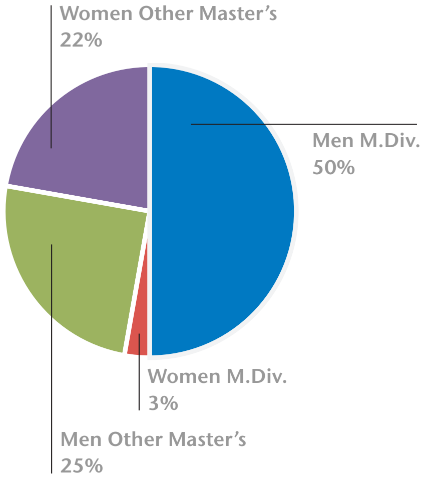
In each religious sector, different schools have different age profiles. Some schools are "destinations" that attract heavy concentrations of younger students who move to campus to enroll, often full-time. Others are regional institutions that attract students in all age categories and often from many different denominations. Still others are dominated by the steadily growing sector of students 50 and older; some of these are schools that serve a particular racial or ethnic group that is dominated by older students.

There are, however, tendencies within each religious sector. As Figure 16 shows, half of evangelical schools and 40 percent of Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools are young-dominant, and most other schools in those sectors have substantial enrollments of younger students. By contrast, most mainline Protestant institutions have mid-to-late career student bodies.

The graph also shows that the majority of schools have enrollments that are, to some extent, mixed in age. These schools face special educational challenges. Age often correlates with life circumstances (younger students are more likely to be residential and full-time; older to commute and study part-time). There may be differences in the schedules and learning styles of students of different ages and in their needs for co-curricular resources. Unless students of different ages are sorted neatly into different degree programs (which rarely occurs), it can be difficult to meet their various needs.

Figure 15: Proportions of Master's Degree Students in Roman Catholic and Orthodox Schools by Gender and Program.

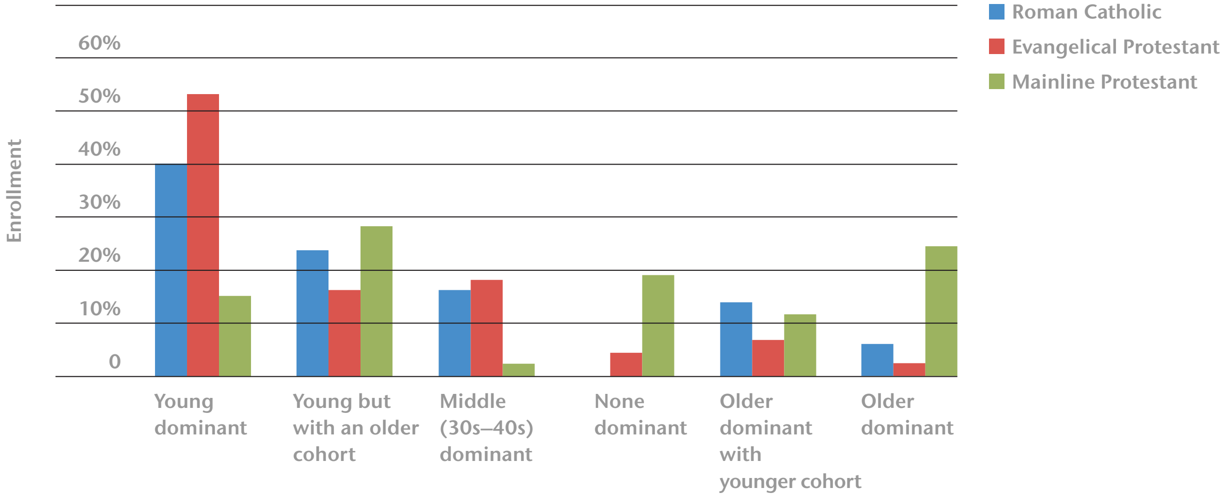
All schools reporting in Fall 2011.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

Figure 16: Distribution of Age Patterns of Master's Students Among Theological Schools by Ecclesial Tradition, Fall 2009.

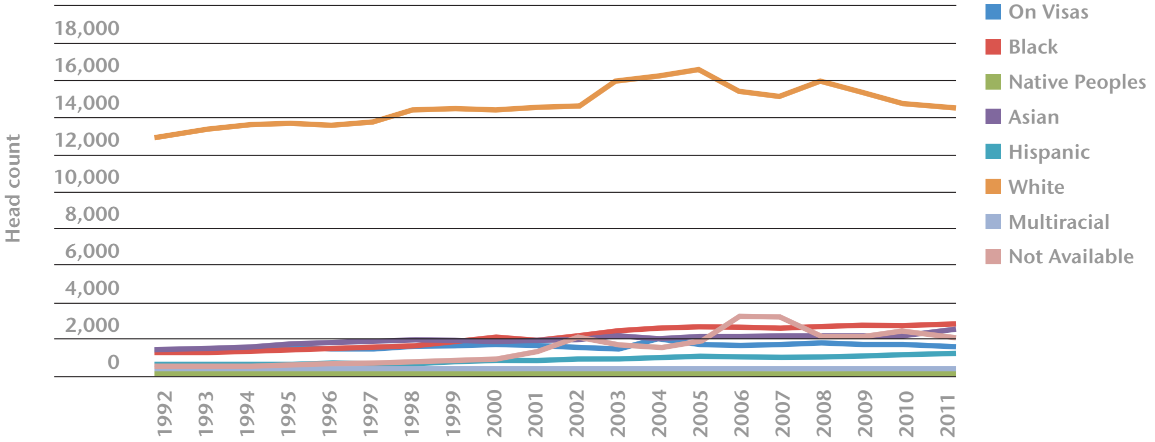
Percentage of schools with each pattern.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

Figure 17: Master's Degrees for Ministerial Leadership by Race, Evangelical Schools.

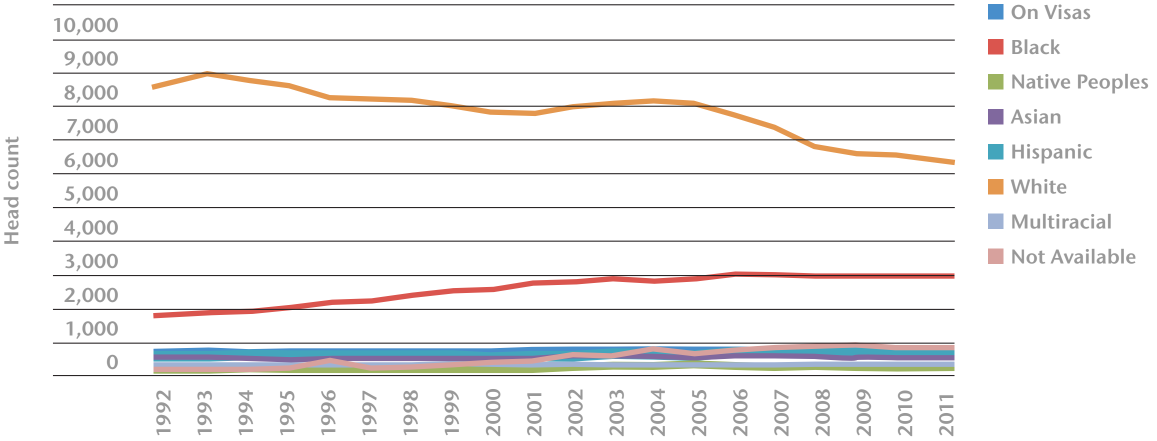
Same 64 schools reporting for twenty years.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

Figure 18: Master's Degrees for Ministerial Leadership by Race, Mainline Schools.

Same 88 schools reporting for twenty years.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

Race, Degree Type, and School Tradition. Schools of all traditions and types have experienced decline in enrollments of white students, as defined by ATS, and growth in other groups, though rates of white decline vary and different growing racial/ethnic groups are prominent in different religious traditions.

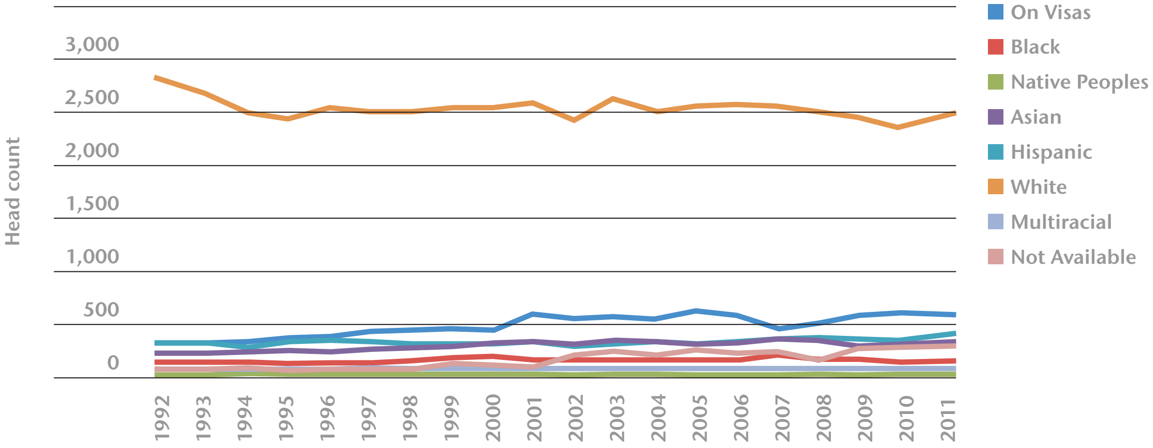
Evangelical schools. In evangelical schools, the white student population grew slowly over the twenty-year period (about one half of one percent a year) in ministerial master's degree programs (Figure 17). Decline in the white student population began in 2005 and in five years was steep enough to wipe out the previous ten years' gains in this category. Meanwhile, over the same twenty years, the enrollment of African Americans, the largest non-white group, more than doubled (155 percent gain), and the enrollment of Hispanics more than tripled (226 percent growth). No category of students classified as "non-white" by ATS declined over the twenty-year period, though growth in the "visa" category is minimal.

Mainline Protestant schools. In these institutions (Figure 18), white student decline was precipitous from 1992 on (28 percent). At the same time, African American enrollment increased 82 percent and Hispanics, a very small proportion of the enrollment in ministerial master's programs in these schools, increased 72 percent.[13]

Roman Catholic and Orthodox schools. As Figure 19 shows, in these institutions' ministerial master's programs, the decrease in white student enrollment was slower: until a recent slight decline and then a bounce back, white enrollment had plateaued for over a decade after a sharp drop in the early 1990s (over twenty years it has decreased 13 percent). The most growth has been in the category of students on visas, reflecting the increasing recruitment of candidates for the priesthood from outside of North American; enrollments of Hispanics (31 percent gain) and Asian Americans (53 percent gain) grew as well, as did the small group of African American students.

Figure 19: Master's Degrees for Ministerial Leadership by Race, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Schools.

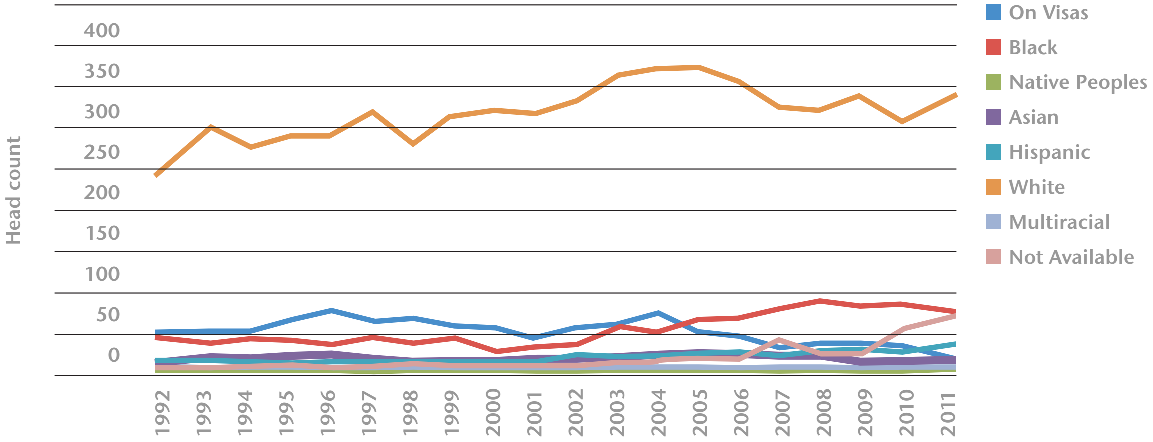
Same 48 schools reporting for twenty years.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

Figure 20: Master's Degrees for Ministerial Leadership by Race, Anabaptist Schools.

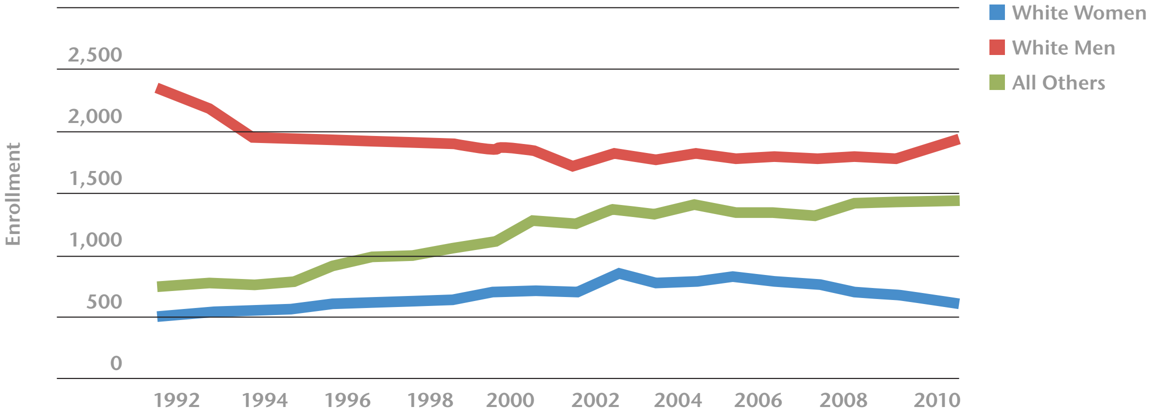
Same six schools reporting for twenty years.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

Figure 21: Master's Degrees for Ministerial Leadership by Race and Gender, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Schools.

(Same schools reporting for twenty years)



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

Anabaptist schools. In these institutions, ministerial master's enrollments (Figure 20) show similar patterns: recent decline in enrollments of white and visa students, impressive growth in numbers of African Americans enrolled (although, as mentioned previously, actual numbers in this category are small). (See online Appendix 2, Figures 14-17.)

Race, Other Degrees and School Tradition. Trends in academic master's programs are similar to the patterns for ministerial master's: white enrollments are declining to different degrees (mainline Protestant, again, see the most and earliest decline), and enrollments of other groups are increasing.

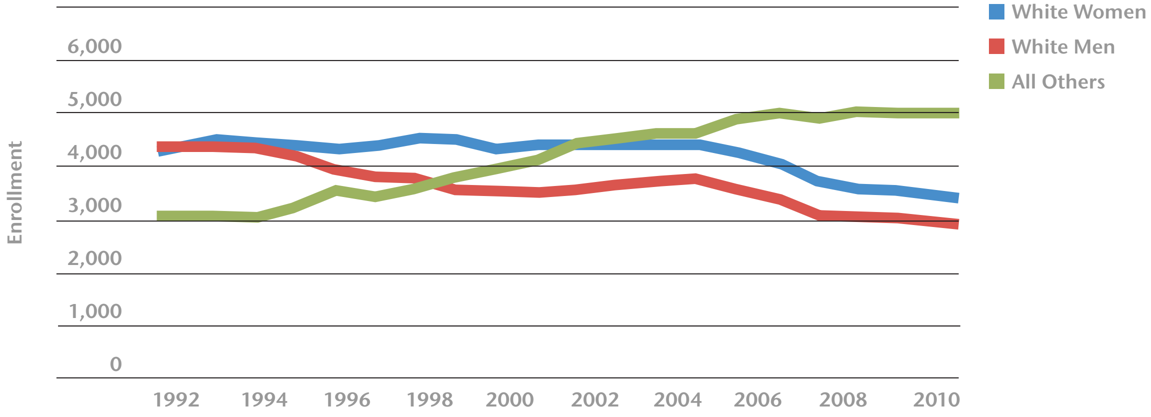
Advanced ministerial leadership degrees exhibit some differences within the same framework (see online Appendix 1, Figures 8-10). White enrollment in these programs in evangelical schools has oscillated over a twenty-year period, declining overall and dropping off quite steeply since 2009. In the programs of Protestant schools, which pioneered the doctor of ministry degree that dominates this category, enrollment of white students has been plummeting for twenty years and is now about half what it was in 1989. In Roman Catholic schools, however, many of which have begun doctor of ministry programs only recently, white enrollment is climbing. So is visa enrollment in Roman Catholic and evangelical programs. The pattern of growth in some racial-ethnic groups is evident in this degree category too: African American enrollment in Protestant programs and Hispanic enrollment in Roman Catholic advanced ministerial degree programs is increasing.

Race, Gender and School Tradition. Enrollments of both male and female white students are overall declining or flat, though again there are variations by the religious tradition, while the aggregate of all other groups is growing.

Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools. These schools (Figure 21) saw a sharp decline in enrollment of white men in the early 1990s and slower decline since; the decline in white women students began more recently. Meanwhile, enrollments of all other groups have increased steeply.

Figure 22: Master's Degrees for Ministerial Leadership by Race and Gender, Mainline Protestant Schools.

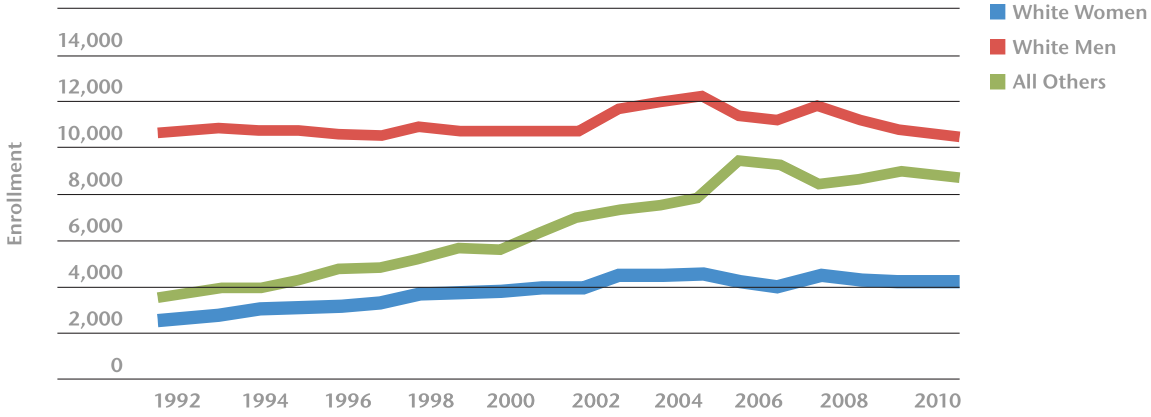
(Same schools reporting for twenty years)



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

Figure 23: Master's Degrees for Ministerial Leadership by Race and Gender, Evangelical Protestant Schools.

(Same schools reporting for twenty years)



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

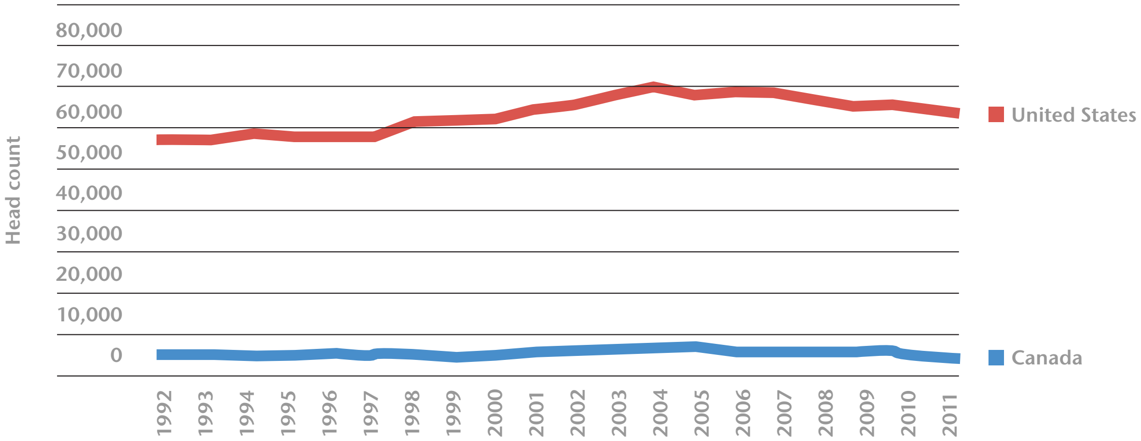
Mainline Protestant schools. As Figure 22, shows, these institutions have experienced steep declines in enrollments of both white men and women. In this category too, enrollment growth for other groups has been rapid.

Evangelical Protestant schools. These institutions (Figure 23) present a somewhat different picture. Enrollment of white women, a relatively small proportion of the total student body, has been flat and enrollment of white men has declined over the past decade, though more slowly than in other sectors. These schools, like others, have had dramatic growth in enrollments of other groups.

US/Canadian differences: The Association of Theological Schools is a bi-national organization. US and Canadian religion and education have some markedly different features, but because the students in Canadian institutions are only 7 percent of

Figure 24: Total Head Count Enrollment in ATS Theological Schools, US and Canada, 1992-2011.

Same 205 schools reporting.



Source: Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools

total enrollment and 6 percent of master's enrollment, these differences are usually not visible in most analyses of general trends. A separate look at Canadian enrollments clarifies the picture.

Figure 24 shows that although Canadian enrollments, like those in the United States, have been relatively flat, with only slight gains over twenty years and recent losses, the twenty-year gains have been even smaller in Canada. One reason that Canadian enrollments have lagged is that evangelicals, whose schools have been growing, are less prominent in Canada. It is also the case that the racial, ethnic, and national groups that are growing fastest in the total student population, African Americans and Hispanics, are not numerous in Canada. There are other national differences as well.

Women are a larger proportion of the Canadian student body in schools of every tradition which suggests that the religious character of Canada is different in significant ways.

- Women are a larger proportion of the Canadian student body in schools of every tradition. Women are, for instance, 41 percent of the master's enrollment of Canadian evangelical schools (compared with 31 percent of master's evangelical enrollments in the United States), which suggests that the religious character of Canada is different in significant ways.[14]
- Canadian students are also older (median age in their mid-30s) than US students (median age in their early 30s). This is partly an artifact of the higher percentage of women, who are older, and partly related to the fact that the 20s cohort in Canada did not grow rapidly as it did in the United States.

Growth and Decline: A Summary and Reflections

The foregoing analysis confirms the reports of seminary leaders that enrollments are declining. Most schools saw some growth in the 1990s, so the stagnation of the early 2000s and the recent downturn in almost all sectors were probably surprising as well as unwelcome.

Losses are most prominent in the recent history of enrollment.

- Total head count and FTE enrollments have declined in recent years. In the 205 schools for which twenty-year data are available, the decline began in 2005. Even when all schools that are currently members of ATS are included (some of them added to the base quite recently), total enrollment is still trending downward.
- There are now *fewer male students* in master's level programs than there were twenty years ago, and losses of male students have accelerated in schools of all religious groups except Roman Catholics.
- Losses in both *master of divinity and academic master's degree enrollments* began earlier and have been steeper than losses in other programs.
- Accelerating even faster is the decline in numbers of *women students*, a group that, after gaining considerably since 1992, began to shrink in size five years ago.
- Numbers of *white students* are also declining fast.
- The categories that provided the majority of students twenty years ago—*students in their 30s and 40s*—have been getting smaller steadily throughout the period.

As noted earlier, enrollment decline seems to be closely related to wider developments in North American religion. North Americans are increasingly less likely to identify as related to a religious group and even less likely to participate regularly in organized religious activities, and diminishing student interest in theological education corresponds to those developments in various religious sectors.

Mainline Protestant decline began decades ago and so did enrollment decline in its theological schools. Losses of what had been its traditional constituency, white male recent college graduates, have been enormous. In the 1980s and early 1990s, women took up some of the enrollment slack, but now their numbers are declining as well.

Evangelical Protestantism enjoyed a boom period in the late twentieth century, and the enrollments of schools associated with the movement mushroomed as well. Sociologists say that the boom in membership in evangelical churches has now subsided and decline has set in.[15] Enrollments too have turned downward recently. Total head count enrollment is declining. Full-time equivalent enrollments are declining even faster, as more students enroll part-time. Total course credit levels are falling too, as more students take longer to earn their degrees and some enroll in shorter M.A. programs and fewer in longer master of divinity programs. The losses are not great—they do not yet erode the considerable gains of the prior period—but they are felt keenly, because most evangelical theological schools are heavily tuition dependent.

Enrollment decline seems to be closely related to wider developments in North American religion.

Roman Catholicism presents a complex picture. "Membership," as measured by those who self-identify as Roman Catholic, continues to grow, but participation and many institutional features (numbers of schools, membership in religious orders, numbers of clergy) have declined sharply since the 1960s. Roman Catholic theological schools felt the impact of these shifts well before the period covered by this study. A number of institutions closed or merged as a result, so there is less overcapacity in the Roman Catholic schools than in some other sectors of theological education. Thus the impact of recent losses (which are not as substantial as Protestant losses) has been less severe for Roman Catholics than it has been for Protestants.[16]

Implications of Enrollment Trends for Theological Schools

Several implications for theological schools, the religious communities they serve, and the organizations that support their work emerge from the foregoing analysis.

Schools should plan cautiously for future enrollments. The downward direction of enrollment trends is sobering. Few institutions can count on substantial enrollment growth in the next period. Powerful religious and social trends, including shrinking college enrollments now that the numbers of 18-year-olds has peaked, make an enrollment turnaround unlikely.

Therefore schools that plan to stabilize themselves financially by greatly expanded enrollments should revisit those plans. The pool of prospective students is shrinking, and it is not realistic to expect substantial growth. Any school that is counting on such growth should have in place alternative strategies in case their enrollment hopes are not realized. Alternative strategies might include reducing expenses in order to function with less tuition revenue and raising funds to supplement streams of tuition revenue that are stagnant or drying up. Or, because smaller numbers of students almost always raise the cost per student in order to provide an adequate school infrastructure, schools that are already small and those that face major enrollment challenges should seriously consider whether it would be prudent to join a large educational configuration (forming a federation of schools, for instance, or becoming part of a university or partner with a college).

New educational formats do not necessarily improve the enrollment prospects for theological schools. Many schools are now experimenting with distance education to bolster enrollment. These experiments are relatively new. It is too early to make conclusive judgments about the roles that distance education can play. The partial data available for this study, however, point in the direction of caution. Most small schools that have added distance education do not have stronger enrollment records than their peers of similar size, and success in larger schools, though more common, is by no means guaranteed.

Schools can increase their competitive edge. The trends mapped in this study suggest that good recruitment programs can help schools to attract more students from the pool of prospects.[17] Enrollments of students in their 20s have increased at a faster rate than most other age cohorts. This may be due in part to changing values: there is evidence, such as the increasing popularity of teenage and post-college volunteer service (and service learning programs for college students), that young people are more altruistic today than they were twenty years ago.[18] Whether or not that is true, theological schools have made strenuous efforts to recruit this cohort of students. They have been aided by special programs for college and pre-college students, many of them funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. in collaboration with a wide variety of denominations and institutions. Some schools that previously had few younger students have succeeded in attracting a critical mass of them in recent years. Their experience seems to be evidence that well-planned and well-executed early exposure and recruitment efforts work.

The steady growth of the cohort of students 50 and older—a phenomenon observed in both US and Canadian schools of all traditions and types—is less well understood. It is not clear what compels these students toward seminary and ministry, and the qualitative part of this study, which focuses on younger students, does not provide many explanations. Some of the older students interviewed for this research seemed to be affected by changing cultural norms that have made it respectable to retire fairly young from one profession or occupation and begin another. Other demographic factors may also be in play. For example, the baby boomers, who have constituted a bulge in the population throughout their lives, are now in their 50s and 60s. Schools that discover what motivates their older students to enroll may be able to recruit more in the same category.

In planning recruitment strategies, the experience of non-denominational schools may be instructive. These institutions have been less damaged by the recent enrollment downturn. One reason may be that schools not aligned with a denomination may appear accessible to larger pools of potential students. Such schools do not, however, have a guaranteed constituency: they attract students only if their educational offerings or other institutional and program features are more appealing than those of their competitors. It is likely, then, that they achieve their relative enrollment success by energetically fitting their educational offerings to the needs and interests of potential students. This is a strategy that all schools, including denominational ones, can adopt.

Real growth in some enrollment sectors may offset decline in others. Well-organized recruitment efforts can give a school a competitive edge over other institutions seeking to attract the same applicants, but they do not necessarily expand the pool of potential students for theological education as a whole. One demographic trend seems actually to draw new constituencies to theological education and holds promise to continue to do so in the future. Enrollments of African Americans, Hispanics and, to a lesser extent, Asians in theological schools continue to increase, mirroring the growth of those groups in the wider population. Rising African American enrollments probably reflect both rising educational expectations for ministry in black churches and a larger pool of college graduates eligible for further study.[19] Hispanic and Asian enrollments are no doubt bolstered by immigration, and in the case of Hispanics, the fastest growing sector in undergraduate education, educational advances play a role as well. Schools that make deliberate efforts to serve these groups are likely to see sustained and increased enrollment as a result.

Notes

1. Anthony T. Ruger, Senior Research Fellow at the Auburn Center, performed most of the analyses of enrollment data.

2. For analyses of developments in some shorter time frames, a larger number of consistently reporting schools was available.

3. To obtain a printed copy of *On Our Way: Pathways to Seminary,* contact Sharon Miller at: smiller@auburnseminary.org, or call (212) 662-4315. The report may also be downloaded as a PDF: www.auburnseminary.org/pathways-to-seminary

4. Barbara G. Wheeler, *Is There a Problem? Theological Students and Religious Leadership for the Future*. Auburn Studies No. 8, July 2001. Available online at www.auburnseminary.org/students-and-graduates

5. These figures described 205 schools that reported consistently through the period. Any school that did not report for more than one year was eliminated from the calculation (some of the non-reporting schools joined ATS during the period).

6. Cary Funk and Greg Smith, "Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation." *Pew Research Center, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*. October 9, 2012.

7. The certificate and unclassified categories also show sharp decline. These are non-degree programs.

8. In the ATS data, students categorized as visa are not defined by race/ethnicity.

9. Wheeler, *Is There a Problem?,* pg. 5.

10. This and similar graphs are created as follows: the enrollment data for each age cohort are plotted and a straight trend line is drawn using the least squares regression method; the difference between the first and last points of the trend line, divided by the number of years in the period, is expressed as the slope of the line. Those slope values are plotted on this chart.

11. These are estimates. The Association of Theological Schools collects age data in categories. The median estimates assume that ages are evenly distributed within each age category.

12. Graphs for Anabaptist schools are available online at http://auburnseminary.org/enrollment-Appendix2, Figures 14-17, though the slope charts should be used with care, noting the small numbers and differences in most categories.

13. This is an important enrollment segment for mainline independent schools in particular. This sector includes schools that are predominantly non-white in enrollment and predominantly white schools with substantial racial ethnic enrollments. As a result, more than half the students in this category of schools are non-white.

14. See John Stackhouse, "Canadian Evangelicalism: Hanging On," in *Evangelical Studies Bulletin,* Issue 82, Summer 2012, 1-4.

15. Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

16. Eastern Orthodoxy presents an even more complex picture, with much debate about membership statistics, and has too few seminaries to make generalizations possible.

17. Surveys and interviews analyzed in the companion report, *On Our Way: Pathways to Seminary,* also lead to the conclusion that recruitment programs can make a major difference in a school's enrollment success.

18. Corporation for National and Community Service. *Building Active Citizens: The Role of Social Institutions in Teen Volunteering*. Brief 1 in the *Youth Helping America* series. Washington, DC. November 2005.

19. Between 1990 and 2010, the number of African Americans enrolled in undergraduate programs more than doubled and the number of Hispanics tripled. National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics,* available at http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts

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