

# Seminaries Headed for a Cliff: A Problem & Proposal for Christian Seminaries

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## KEY WORDS

| Seminaries | Population Cliff | Statistics |  
| Christian Higher Education | Enrollment Decline | Demographics |

## ABSTRACT

Termed the “population cliff” of 2025 by demographers, a reference to a sharp population decline in the number of college-eligible 18 year olds, institutions of higher education are considering how to navigate their future in light of a lower-than-normal recruitment base attributed to the decline in birth rates stemming from the Great Recession of 2008. Christian seminaries, many of which are already struggling in student enrollment and finances, are particularly vulnerable due to their lack of diversification in program offerings, their traditional modalities of delivery, and their small endowments. If seminaries are dependent primarily upon their graduate programs for enrollment, they will likely experience the effects of the population cliff around 2029 or 2030, some seven years away from the date of this article. This article seeks to raise awareness of the population cliff problem and suggest solutions to Christian seminaries in hopes that they may be carried over the looming population cliff and towards a flourishing new frontier..

## THE LOOMING CLIFF

Christian seminaries have weathered many storms. Despite threats of secularization, cultural hostility, and (occasionally) physical persecution in the past, the Lord has been pleased and faithful to see these sacred ministerial training grounds through to times of health and sustainability. However, seminaries are presently weathering a unique storm regarding student enrollment. Recently, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) published sobering trends in Christian seminaries.<sup>1</sup> According to

enrollment data sent to ATS, 57% of member schools report decreased enrollment.<sup>2</sup> Before anyone assumes this statistic means doom and gloom for seminaries, we should keep in mind that a few years of enrollment decline do not spell disaster for any institution of higher education. Coming out of the crisis point of COVID-19, seminaries (like many colleges and universities) encountered fluctuation in student enrollment which, when taken holistically, should not cause great concern. However, when seminaries are already under current enrollment and financial distress, the ability to withstand additional stressors becomes more challenging. Regrettably, all institutions of higher education (public and private alike) must face another formidable and unavoidable challenge that

1 The Association of Theological Schools is a specialized, programmatic accreditation agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education with more than 270 graduate schools of theology in the United States and Canada. More information may be found at <https://www.ats.edu/About-ATS>. The focus of this paper will primarily be on Christian seminaries that are not formally tied to a Christian college or university. It is the assumption of this paper that the suggestions given for seminaries would equally apply to Bible colleges or divinity schools whose programmatic offerings are limited to ministerial and theological degrees.

2 Meinzer, “ATS Projects Another Year of Overall Stable Enrollment.”

is certain to have significant ramifications upon Christian seminaries, namely a sharp decline in the host nation's population which will correspond with a decline in the potential student pool from which to recruit students. Such a decline will make it difficult to maintain current enrollment numbers, much less grow them.

In 2018, economist Nathan Grawe of Carleton College in Minnesota predicted that the number of college-going people will drop by 15% between 2025 through 2029 only to be followed by a decline of one or two percentage points thereafter.<sup>3</sup> The term "population cliff" has been used by Grawe and others within higher education to refer to this dramatic drop in population, for the demographic charts show a noticeable drop in the number of future 18-year olds (the traditional starting age of college students).<sup>4</sup> Grawe attributes this decline to the 2008 financial crisis where young couples reduced fertility precipitously in light of economic uncertainty such as the closure of major banks and lending institutions as well as drops in stock value. Despite economic recovery, birthrates failed to rebound, and according to the Center for Disease Control, birthrates in the United States alone continue to decline into 2022<sup>5</sup> which amounts to 576,000 less students from before the population cliff.<sup>6</sup> This problem is not limited to the United States, however. In the United Kingdom, the natural (non-immigration) population will decline beginning in 2025 whereby birth rates will lag

3 Grawe, *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*.

4 See Tasneem, "What the Looming Demographic Storm Means for Your State," Education Advisory Board.

5 Hamilton, Martin, and Osterman. "Births: Provisional Data for 2022."

6 CUPAHR, "The Looming Enrollment Cliff"

behind death rates.<sup>7</sup> Similar demographics are being reported across Europe and Asia as well.<sup>8</sup>

Demographers anticipate most institutions of higher education will experience a 15% or more decline in "traditional" enrollment because of this population cliff.<sup>9</sup> Not all institutions will be affected equally, however. The Ivy League institutions in the United States are projected to maintain steady enrollment while the northeastern parts of the United States, where a large number of higher education institutions are located, will experience the hardest enrollment declines.<sup>10</sup>

It is very important to note here that studies in higher education enrollment within the United States reflect that public institutions are affected far more significantly than private, Protestant institutions of higher learning. Between 2010 to 2019, religious institutions experienced a .1% reduction in enrolled students (compared to 2010 enrollment) versus a 4% decline by public institutions.<sup>11</sup> The University of West Virginia, the State's flagship university, had to cut \$75 million from its budget to make

7 Staton, "UK Natural Population Set to Start to Decline by 2025."

8 Russia, Ukraine, Italy, most Eastern European countries, and Japan are projected to decline, many by 10% or higher. See National Intelligence Council, "Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World," 39. The population of China has also begun to drop by approximately 850,000 people. See United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, *World Population Prospects 2022*.

9 Barshay, "College Students Predicted to Fall by More Than 15% After the Year 2025." The *Hechinger* Report. Traditional students, as defined here, refer to 18–20-year-olds who attend college near or upon graduation from secondary school.

10 Ibid.

11 National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, "Fall Enrollment and Number of Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions, by Control and Religious Affiliation of Institution: Selected Years, 1980-2020." See also Glanzer, "Which Institutional Types Are Experiencing Significant Enrollment Decline? Examining the New Data," in *Christian Scholars Review*, September 8, 2023.

up for a 5,000-student enrollment decline. Rutgers University faces a \$125 million deficit while Penn State University is cutting programs and faculty to make up for a \$150 million loss.<sup>12</sup> Contrast those statistics with ones that show some small signs of growth amongst some Christian colleges and universities, like member schools of the International Alliance for Christian Education, and one might assume that there are bright days for student enrollment at Christian higher education institutions.<sup>13</sup> However, such a conclusion needs further examination.

While Christian leaders should draw encouragement that Christian colleges and universities are not as adversely affected by current enrollment trends as are public institutions, two significant points must be noted which frame the focus of this article. First, current enrollment trends like the ones just previously described do not account for the future population cliff of 2025. The data just described reflects trends over the past several years, trying to discern how perceptions in higher education and the pandemic have affected college enrollment. The enrollment cliff is still yet to come, so we have not experienced the effects of population decline in present enrollment numbers. Second, the Christian institutions mentioned above are mostly colleges and universities, not standalone seminaries or Bible colleges. As mentioned above, 57% of ATS member institutions, many of which are seminaries, experienced an enrollment decline. The causes of seminary enrollment decline are not immediately clear (whether it relates to smaller endowments,

fewer program offerings, or the membership decline of many denominations). Regardless of the cause, all institutions of higher education, including seminaries who are not affiliated with a Christian college or university, will be forced to reckon with the upcoming enrollment cliff. Below are some suggestions on how these seminaries can prepare for the drop in student population.

### MODIFYING MODALITIES

One of the primary ways seminaries can navigate the population cliff is through distance learning. The traditional model of expecting students to go to seminary has been replaced by seminaries going to students; at least, that is the expectation from students. If a seminary is unwilling to do distance learning, there are plenty of competitors willing to fill that gap. It is unfeasible for everyone who desires to attend seminary to uproot their families, careers, and ministry contexts to attend seminary in another location. Any seminary that is to cross the gigantic hurdle of the cliff will most certainly have to modify (without forsaking) its traditional face-to-face modality to include distance learning.<sup>14</sup>

Distance learning can take many forms. The primary form is through online courses which can range from fully online (synchronous or asynchronous), hybrid (some face-to-face and some online), and high flexibility (the opportunity to attend either in person or online in one, single course). Satellite or extension campuses are also options, though they often prove to be cost prohibitive. It is difficult to say

12 Knox, "Slimming Down to Stay Afloat."

13 The International Alliance for Christian Education (IACE) is a network of evangelical Christian education institutions. See <https://iace.education/about>. See also Glanzer, "Which Institutional Types Are Experiencing Significant Enrollment Decline?"

14 Face-to-face modality is still the preference of 31% of students, so it is not recommended that seminaries abandon in-person instruction if it currently offers it. See Tyton Partners, *Time for Class 2023*. The other 69% prefer fully online, hybrid, blended, or hyflex delivery.

how many seminaries today utilize distance learning for their teaching modality. Presently, the ATS accredits 207 institutions out of their 255 schools for online delivery, though not all these institutions are seminaries, and not all these institutions have fully online programs.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, there are many other seminaries not accredited through ATS which cannot be accounted for. Positively, many seminaries are more open to the idea of distance learning than they were twenty years ago when the modality was emerging. Negatively, however, not all online seminary courses are equal, nor will offering distance learning programs be enough for most seminaries to overcome the population cliff.

It is critical that seminaries not only put their programming online but that they put their programming online *well*. Few professors teaching online seminary classes could immediately explain upon request Mayer's Principles of Multimedia Elearning, or Fitt's Law, or dual coding.<sup>16</sup> If these terms are unknown, the online seminary professor is not alone as most academics are not trained in instructional design. However, these online design principles matter and dramatically affect student learning and satisfaction outcomes. Students need consistency in course design

15 Association of Theological Schools, "Schools Approved for Online Delivery." Some of the schools listed herein are approved for limited distance education (meaning the school has at least one online course) or comprehensive distance education (meaning the school may offer half or more of a degree online).

16 These terms refer to various best practices of instructional design. Developing these principles would sidetrack the focus of this article; however, the point being made is that designing online courses according to best practices in education and design has been shown to improve student success, course completion, course satisfaction, and student engagement. See LaForge, "Confessions of a (Former) Killer Course: Using the QM Review Process to Improve an Undergraduate Research Course." Simply putting coursework online in order to increase enrollment will not suffice, for student success and retention are tied to quality course design.

from one course to another, spending their energies on digesting the material rather than navigating the course. They need teaching methodologies that are proven to be effective rather than whatever meets the preferences of the instructor.<sup>17</sup> The difference between seminaries and many other larger institutions of higher learning is that the latter typically have a team of instructional designers ready to support a subject matter expert in designing and assessing online courses. Today, incoming students come to institutions of higher education with years of online experience from their time in secondary schools. These students expect a positive and accessible online experience that looks consistent from one course to the next. Seminaries that not only offer online courses but train and support their faculty in the best practices of online learning will fare better than seminaries that rely on traditional classroom modalities or have haphazard online learning environments.

As it relates to the population drop off, distance learning (when designed with the highest quality standards in mind) will be a way seminaries can recruit and retain more students. Students today may literally enroll in a seminary anywhere in the world; thus, a seminary's recruitment base is limited only by their own efforts and imagination. The idea of being a commuter or regional seminary must be abandoned and sights set to becoming a global leader in theological education if the seminary is to overcome the enrollment cliff. Additionally, the costs of maintaining a learning management system are significantly less than building and maintaining buildings. Seminaries must consider their current liabilities and expenditures related to building costs to

17 Sanga. "Doing Instructional Design for Distance Education: An Analysis of Design and Technological Issues in Online Course Management."

determine if they can withstand the impending enrollment drop.

## EXPANDING PROGRAMMING

Related to offering distance learning opportunities is the necessity to expand programming. Current trends show today's students are looking for seminary degrees that are shorter and faster to complete. Evidence for this demand can be found in the continual decline of MDiv enrollment and the increase in enrollment for a MA. Doctoral programs, both PhD/ThD and DMin, also are increasing enrollment by 4 to 5% from previous years.<sup>18</sup> These trends found in seminaries reflect trends across higher education whereby students want shorter programs at the graduate level. Thus, seminaries whose flagship degree is the standard MDiv should consider adding other master's and doctoral degrees to their program offerings to reach more students.

However, seminaries wishing to remain competitive may wish to explore other program offerings which reflect trends across higher education. Here, I suggest that seminaries explore the options of micro-credentialing and certifications. Micro-credentials are short, competency-based programs that show mastery over a particular area.<sup>19</sup> When tied to a major platform, like Accredible for example, seminaries may issue badges that students can post on resumes, social media, and email signatures showing they attained mastery over a particular area. As an example, suppose a faculty member holds a PhD in a specific field of Christian Studies but is asked to teach a

course outside his or her primary area of study. A micro-credential course can be taught by the seminary so that person has the fast, accurate, and relevant information needed to teach that course all from a reputable institution. Another example may entail someone who needs to polish up on Greek or Hebrew or needs to hone their skills in preaching. These micro-credential courses typically require no prior credential or lengthy application process. They give people the specific information they need, and it often comes with a badge that links to the metadata provided by the seminary demonstrating the learning outcomes achieved.<sup>20</sup>

Industry certifications are also a new and popular trend in higher education. Students enroll in courses offered by major corporations like IBM, Meta, and Google while they are enrolled in their formal studies. Thus, they do not have to wait until they graduate to have something that credentials them for employment. In a similar vein, seminaries may look at certificates they could offer to students as they pursue their course of study. As an example, at my previous institution, we issued a Certificate in Christian Studies to students who reached the 15-hour mark of their graduate degree. This certificate did not carry the full weight of a diploma (much like the industry certificates above do not carry any formal accreditation recognized by the U. S. Department of Education). Nevertheless, they are tangible recognitions of accomplishment from reputable institutions that students can use while they pursue their degree. As a potential revenue source, seminaries can offer these certificates to people who do not want a full degree but would like some type of recognition for their work completed.<sup>21</sup> Many

18 Meinzer, "ATS Projects Another Year of Overall Stable Enrollment," 1.

19 For an overview of micro-credentials, see National Education Association, "Micro-Credentials."

20 Perna, "Small But Mighty."

21 This is to say that there is a market for people who

seminaries, while accredited to award degrees on the bachelor's, master's, and/or doctoral levels, are not accredited to award certificates, but this is to the seminary's advantage. The seminary may then define what qualifies for a certificate any way it wishes. The certificate may be nine hours long, twelve, or fifteen. It can be as broad or narrow as it desires. Through the issuing of certificates, another funding source is developed which will help sustain the seminary through future days of enrollment decline.

### EXPANDING MARKETS

Implied in the section above on expanding programming is the potential to meet needs for people that do not fit the traditional seminary population.<sup>22</sup> The more that seminaries can strategically target these markets, the better it will fare through the population cliff. Below, I will suggest three markets that seminaries may wish to consider for further investment.

The first of these untapped populations are prisons. A growing movement across the United States, led by the Prison Seminaries Foundation, is the formation of seminary classes inside correctional facilities.<sup>23</sup> The first prison seminary began with a partnership between New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and the Louisiana State Penitentiary (also known as Angola Prison).<sup>24</sup> These

want a credential or certificate beyond the narrow focus of a micro-credential.

22 If by "traditional seminary population" we mean adult professionals with an undergraduate degree attending classes upon a physical campus.

23 The Prison Seminaries Foundation exists to bring about moral rehabilitation through seminary education by partnering theological schools with prisons and correctional facilities. See Prison Seminaries Foundation, *Why We Exist*.

24 For more information on this, see Kirkpatrick, "The New Christian Campus: Prison Seminaries Making a National and Eternal Impact."

seminaries have led to unprecedented moral rehabilitation and gospel transformation in prisons.<sup>25</sup> These prison programs are often privately funded; however, through the passing of the FAFSA Simplification Act of 2020, qualifying institutions of higher education can apply to become a Prison Education Program (PEP) with the U.S. Department of Education. Upon approval, qualifying inmates will be able to receive Pell Grant funding to pay for the cost of tuition, fees, and textbooks. Should a seminary not wish to pursue that option, there are 21 current programs affiliated with the Prison Seminaries Foundation, most of which are sustained through private donations. Institutions willing to do the work of fundraising and telling their story of prison work can have another meaningful program to offer.

The second population worthy of mention is lay people, many of whom might benefit from seminary training. While some seminaries have had lay-study programs for years, they often have remained traditional on-campus programs. Seminaries should prioritize the programmatic suggestions above with a focus on lay leaders. Said another way, seminaries should think of forming micro-credentials and certificates directed to this population for matters that concern them. Suggestions for course offerings include: Small group/Sunday school training, lay elder and/or deacon training, Vacation Bible School director training, child discipleship and safety training, and more. It may be difficult for some churches to create and administer these training courses on their own; however, through seminaries, these church lay-leaders can gain the training they need by quality academic professionals. Seminaries can, and should, fill that gap for the sake of the church

25 Hallett, Hays, Johnson, Joon Jang, and Duwe, *The Angola Prison Seminary*.

and as a way to sustain itself during times of enrollment decline.

The final untapped market I suggest is international students. While many seminaries have done well in offering seminary programs to international students, more can be done to serve that population through use of distance learning. The costs and challenges of moving overseas to attend seminary are formidable and prohibit many well-deserving students the opportunity to study overseas. As an American who desired to study for his Ph.D. in the United Kingdom, I found it most convenient to utilize a hybrid model of distance education for the completion of my doctorate. The more that seminaries can do to offer fully online or hybrid seminary programs, the more it can serve the greater needs of the global church and (secondarily) increase its enrollment through underserved communities.

#### EMBRACING REMOTE CLASSROOMS AND STAFF

One final recommendation to help seminaries cross the cliff relates not to increasing income but to reducing expenditures. One way seminaries can reduce their expenses is through use of remote employees. For most institutions of higher education, employee payroll is the largest expense for the institution. Finding ways to reduce that expense while still hiring quality employees will be essential to navigating a future drop in enrollment and revenue. Across the industry, only 13% of executives support having fully-remote employees.<sup>26</sup> While not being the preference of executives, remote work has become the preference of 60%-68% of all workers, and it is at a 417% increase from pre-

pandemic levels.<sup>27</sup> Granted, there are concerns of hiring remote employees (such as doubts of productivity, concerns of losing workplace culture, and fear of losing communication). These concerns, however, are unfounded. Research has shown that remote work increased productivity up to 47% compared to in-person work.<sup>28</sup> Studies also show employees are happier and workplace satisfaction is greater through use of remote work.<sup>29</sup> Such an increase in workplace happiness and satisfaction can be attributed to the financial savings received through not commuting, ability to work in a more comfortable space, more time to focus on work rather than commuting, and fewer distractions from coworkers.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the advances in telecommunications have overcome most potential communication barriers.

While remote work has great advantages to employees, it has greater advantages for employers (like seminaries). In addition to increased productivity from employees, employers experience reduced operating costs from not having to provide office spaces in maintained buildings. What is more, they can broaden their employee recruiting base when employees are able to work from anywhere. Some seminaries are located in rural areas that are difficult to attract quality professionals. Other seminaries are in urban areas where the cost of living is cost-prohibitive to some candidates. Whether faculty or staff, offering remote employees the choice to work off

26 PwC, "US Remote Work Survey."

27 Pew Research Center, "COVID-19 Pandemic Continues to Reshape Work in America." Ryan, "Here's What's Happening to Remote Work in 2023."

28 Apollo Technical, "Surprising Working from Home Productivity Statistics (2023)." See also Owl Labs and Global Workplace Analytics, "State of Remote Work 2021."

29 Robinson, "Remote Work Increases Employee Happiness by 20%, New Study Finds."

30 Owl Labs and Global Workplace Analytics, "State of Remote Work 2021."

campus opens the opportunity to acquire exceptional talent from a broader pool of candidates and (potentially) at less pay than someone residential. While some in-person staff will most certainly be a necessity for most seminaries, a survey on students' feelings about remote higher education employees finds that the majority of students are fine with working with higher education employees remotely.<sup>31</sup> Especially if the institution finds itself growing in its remote student base (who rarely, if ever, step foot on campus), it is only natural to find remote students willing to meet with faculty and staff remotely. Thus, seminaries can save significantly on its payroll expenses by acquiring remote talent that is statistically validated to be productive and cost effective.

It was mentioned above that online learning decreases the need for physical buildings. That is to say, there are significant expenses related to building, maintaining, insuring, and providing utilities to a building that are simply not there when an online learning management system is utilized. While having a wealthy benefactor donate money to build a strong online learning platform is virtually unheard of (compared to constructing a building with that person's name on it), the time may come when such a gift will prove far more valuable than building a new building. Seminaries must find ways to reduce their overhead, and the less that traditional buildings are used, the more money they will save.

## CONCLUSION

Higher education, as a whole, faces a significant hurdle from an impending drop in population. This article attempted to raise awareness of

31 Ezarik, "Students Vote for Remote (Employees)" and College Pulse, "Students as Customers on Campus."

that enrollment cliff with particular attention to Christian seminaries, many of whom rely upon traditional modalities of instruction, have narrow recruitment bases, and have smaller revenue streams. It has been suggested here that seminaries modify their modalities (particularly regarding distance learning). Additionally, it was recommended that seminaries expand their programming to include things such as micro-credentials and certificates to supply the needs and desires of untapped markets. Finally, it was suggested that seminaries reduce their greatest expenditures of payroll and building maintenance by utilizing remote employees and remote, online delivery modalities. While no institution of higher education (public or private) will be immune to the impending enrollment cliff, the hope is that Christian seminaries may glean insight from the suggestions offered here as they prepare for possible enrollment declines so that they can continue to prepare men and women to faithful service to our Lord.

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