

Rebounding Enrollment:

An Exploration of Factors that Influence Students' Decisions to Enroll in Graduate Theological  
Education at the Atlanta Campus of Reformed Theological Seminary

by

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Capstone Project

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## Table of Contents

<i>List of Figures</i> .....	<i>vi</i>
<i>List of Tables</i> .....	<i>vii</i>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Organization Context</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Problem of Practice</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Statement of the Purpose</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Conceptual Framework</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Project Questions</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>Project Design &amp; Methods</b> .....	<b>16</b>
ATS Data Set .....	17
Survey.....	18
Semi-structured interviews with students .....	19
<b>Data Analysis</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<i>Findings</i> .....	<i>21</i>
<b>Personal Characteristics: PQ1</b> .....	<b>21</b>
Survey Data.....	22
Interview Data.....	26
Religious Background and Call from God.....	27
Faith-Based Mentor .....	28
Intellectual and Spiritual Growth .....	29
High Academic Self-Efficacy .....	29
Personal Connection to RTS-ATL.....	30

Summary .....	30
<b>Institutional Characteristics: PQ2 .....</b>	<b>31</b>
Survey Data .....	32
Interview Data .....	34
Accessibility and Convenience .....	36
Course Curriculum .....	37
Supportive Administration and Faculty.....	37
Financial Aid .....	37
Perceived Drawbacks and Desired Campus Improvements .....	38
Summary .....	39
<b>Community Characteristics: PQ3.....</b>	<b>40</b>
Survey Data .....	41
Interview Data .....	44
Summary .....	45
<b>Factors Influencing Reasons for Not Attending: PQ4 .....</b>	<b>45</b>
Summary .....	47
<b>Recommendations.....</b>	<b>48</b>
Build a network of influencers .....	48
Bring more prospective students on campus.....	50
Build a sense of community.....	51
Explore student housing options.....	52
Expand distributed classroom options.....	53
Enhance financial aid.....	54
Focus admission staff on likely enrollees .....	55
Market the Edmiston Center .....	56
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>57</b>

<i>References .....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Appendix A: Invitational E-Mail Messages .....</i>	<i>62</i>
<i>Appendix B: Interview Questions.....</i>	<i>64</i>
<i>Appendix C: RTS Prospective Student Survey.....</i>	<i>65</i>
<i>Appendix D: NVivo Code Book.....</i>	<i>95</i>

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1.</b> Conceptual Framework .....	13
<b>Figure 2.</b> Degree Program Applied to by Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students .....	23
<b>Figure 3.9)</b> .....	24
<b>Figure 4.</b> Educational and Other Debts of Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students.....	25
<b>Figure 5.</b> Mean Importance of Personal Characteristics in Decision to Pursue Theological Studies among Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students .....	26
<b>Figure 6.</b> Method of First Learning about RTS-ATL among Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Student .....	32
<b>Figure 7.</b> Methods of Obtaining Further Information about RTS-ATL .....	33
<b>Figure 8.</b> Commuting Distance among Non-Enrolled Students .....	33
<b>Figure 9.</b> Mean Importance of Institutional Characteristics in Decision to Enroll among Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students.....	35
<b>Figure 10.</b> Elected or Appointed Leadership Positions Held by Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students .....	42
<b>Figure 11.</b> Mean Importance of Community Characteristics in Decision to Enroll among Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students.....	43
<b>Figure 12.</b> Mean Importance of Community Characteristics in Decision to Pursue Theological Studies among Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students .....	44

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1.</b> List of the Research Questions, Data Required, and Method used for Acquisition .....	16
<b>Table 2.</b> Demographic Characteristics of Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students .....	19
<b>Table 3.</b> Educational Characteristics of Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students .....	23
<b>Table 4.</b> Interview Participants Pseudonym and Gender .....	27
<b>Table 5.</b> Former and Current Denominations and Religious Traditions among Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students.....	41

## Executive Summary

This capstone project addresses the steady decline in student enrollment at Reformed Theological Seminary, Atlanta Campus (RTS-ATL), reflected in a two-year downward trend. The leadership team at RTS-ATL has set a goal of increasing graduates over the next 20 years, a goal that will be challenging if enrollment continues to decline. RTS would like to explore the factors that contribute to the decline in enrollment by gaining a better understanding of factors that influence prospective students' decision to pursue graduate theological education at RTS-ATL, and which factors contribute to potential students' decision not to enroll at RTS-ATL.

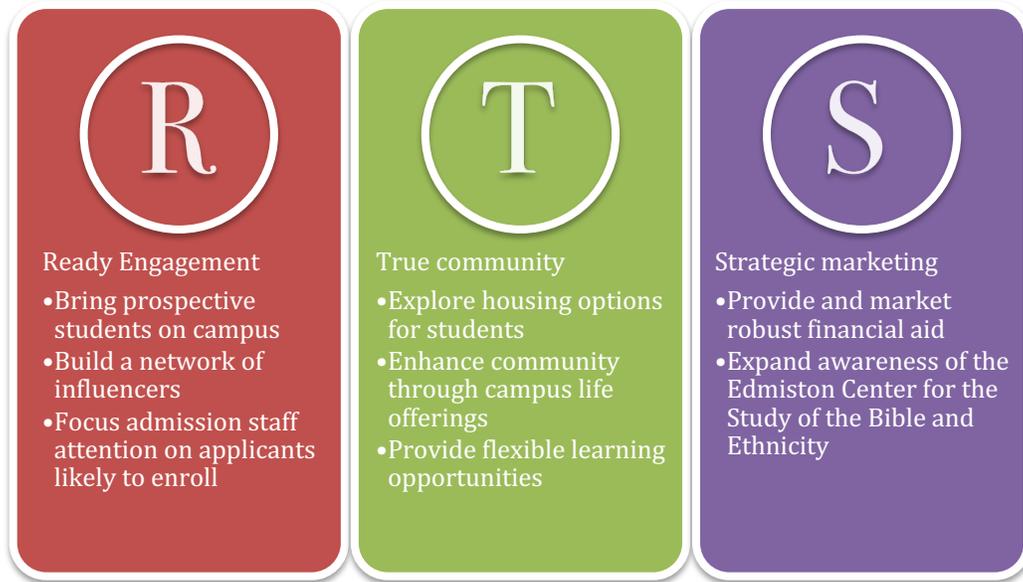
Because specific research into theological seminary enrollment is limited in scope, I expanded my literature review to include enrollment in graduate-level programs, many of which are applicable to seminaries, which are theological graduate schools that grant master and doctoral-level degrees in theology, counseling, and related disciplines. In reflecting on the studies available, I identified three primary categories that contribute to the decision to enroll in graduate schools: personal factors (Ethington & Smart, 1986; Kallio 1995), community factors (English & Umbach, 2016; Perna, 2004), and institution-related factors (Williams, 2008; Bontrager, 2004).

The broad research questions this capstone addresses are as follows: (1) what factors influenced current students to enroll at RTS-ATL, (2) what factors influenced non-enrolling applicants not to enroll, and finally, (3) what changes can this campus implement that would increase enrollment to align with the leadership's vision to increase their number of graduates. To address these questions, I analyzed survey data that was already collected by RTS-ATL at the time of enrollment for current students, conducted a survey of applicants who did not enroll, and

also did semi-structured interviews with enrolled students as well as applicants who did not enroll. During that process, the questions included personal factors about applicants (demographics, background, prior education, current family and work status, and financial stability), community factors (support from local churches, friends, etc.), and institutional factors related to RTS-ATL, as perceived by applicants (theological stance, academic rigor, availability of housing, financial aid packages for students, etc.), accompanied by specific questions that sought to capture how these factors contributed to each perspective student's decision whether or not to enroll.

The findings supported that personal characteristics such as a calling from God and clear vocational direction are important, as is the accessibility of education (in terms of location, schedule, and financial resources). Institutional characteristics such as location, academic rigor, theological doctrine, financial aid packages, and a sense of community are things that were important to most applicants who participated in this study. Community factors, such as church involvement and encouragement of a faith leader for a student to attend seminary also play a vital role in the decision to enroll. Students who enrolled at RTS-ATL were actively involved in their local churches, had strong contacts with church leaders and wanted to make a greater impact in their worshipping community. Prospective students who did not enroll were more concerned with financial issues and sought greater clarity for spiritual and academic directions in life.

Based on survey and interview responses, I have crafted eight recommendations that fall under three categories: ready engagement with applicants, true community at the campus level, and strategic marketing with enrollment goals in mind.



Ready engagement with prospective students starts with a focus on the positive impact of touring the campus or navigating an online virtual tour of the school. It also aims to engage alumni and church leaders to remain connected to the school’s activities and programs to establish a greater presence in local faith communities. Additionally, the admission office staff can prioritize their efforts on applicants who are more likely to enroll by engaging those prospective students who have a personal connection to the school through a mentor, exhibit a strong ministry calling, and live within commuting distance.

The school can build true community by identifying housing options either by building on-campus student housing or identifying opportunities for clustered apartments nearby. Virtually all survey and interview participants desired to study at a school that offered more opportunities for community building and relationship formation, while also having more options for flexible and accessible course offerings.

As financial concerns and higher debt were key dissuasive factors among non-enrolled prospective students, strategic marketing initiatives should focus on communicating financial aid opportunities and how the school is making it a priority to help the majority of its graduates to

leave with no seminary-related debt. Lastly, as many project participants voiced their desire for a more diverse student body, the school should highlight the Edmiston Center for the Study of the Bible and Ethnicity as a key differentiator in promoting diversity in the Atlanta faith community.

## **Introduction**

Founded in 1966, the Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) is a multi-campus graduate school with eight locations in seven states. Each campus is operated independently, with its faculty and staff, while benefiting from some elements of system-wide back-office support and resource sharing. The Reformed Theological Seminary Atlanta-area campus (RTS-ATL) was launched in 2003 and is located in Marietta, Georgia, a northwestern suburb of the Atlanta metropolitan area.

The mission of RTS is “to serve the church by preparing its leaders, through a program of graduate theological education, based upon the authority of the inerrant Word of God, and committed to the Reformed Faith.” (Reformed Theological Seminary, 2021, p. 1) The seminary has built a strong reputation for academic excellence, theological integrity, and pastoral focus for the past five decades. Their flagship Master of Divinity (MDiv) program requires 106 credit hours, making it one of the longest and most rigorous degrees among all seminaries. The school also offers several shorter Master of Arts degree programs, as well as one-year certificate programs.

The problem of practice for the capstone project centers on the lack of evidence-based decisions regarding a knowledge gap of the RTS-ATL leadership team regarding the factors that influence student enrollment and how these contribute to a decline in enrollment. The school recognizes national trends in seminary enrollment and seeks to identify enablers and inhibitors that impact a prospective student’s decision to pursue theological education. In this context of the school’s purpose and potential pool of prospective students, RTS-ATL leadership is aware that Pew Research Center (2019) reports that the share of Americans who identify as Protestant believers (and therefore, their prospective applicant pool) is in continuous decline, from 51% in

2009 to 43% in 2019. Concurrently, the Association of Theological Schools data indicates a steady downward trend in seminary enrollment since 2005 and a slightly less drastic decline among evangelical schools. When analyzing the enrollment data, a source of puzzlement for school administrators in this educational sector is the sudden uptick in enrollment in 2018-2020, and particularly among entering MDiv students at evangelical seminaries (up 13.5% in 2018), plateauing in subsequent years and moving towards another decline (Association of Theological Schools, 2020). At RTS, the downward in headcount enrollment mirrors the national downward trend from 2006 to 2019, only increasing in 2020 by 7%.

Based on conversations with the leadership team, RTS-ATL, as a regional campus of RTS, would like to understand the factors contributing to enrollment fluctuation to adjust its institutional policies, processes, and organizational culture. Located in the middle of the Bible Belt and with an organizational experience of less than two decades, the seminary recognizes that it competes in a rather crowded space, even in the context of closely affiliated evangelical Presbyterian and Reformed denominations. Therefore, the purpose of this mixed-methods study is to identify factors that contribute to selecting RTS-ATL as a school of choice for prospective students and provide evidence-based recommendations for improvements to increase enrollment.

### **Organization Context**

RTS, the first seminary in the southeastern United States (U.S.) to follow reformed theology, was founded in 1966 in Jackson, Mississippi, with 17 students attending. Today, the organization boasts eight campuses in seven states, plus a campus in Brazil and online degree opportunities. Campuses are differentiated by degrees offered, faculty in residence, and connections and context within each local community. While students can complete their degree program entirely at a single campus, RTS provides the flexibility to earn credits at any of their

campuses. Localized campuses with strong community ties promote student internship opportunities, engagement with local ministries, and partnership with organizations that serve the community and its churches and parachurch organizations. RTS students tend to come most often from Presbyterian and Reformed Baptist backgrounds. Graduates have become church pastors, military and hospital chaplains, church planters, evangelists, missionaries, counselors, educators, and hold secular roles in corporate and nonprofit organizations. The primary unifying factor is adherence to reformed theology.

As a relatively young educational institution, RTS-ATL finds itself in a prime geographic location with great potential. The campus has three full-time residential faculty and over a dozen adjunct and visiting professors who serve over 200 students. The organization relies on a staff of seven for student affairs, administrative, enrollment, and development activities. According to the campus president, most of the staff came on board in the last three years. Several RTS campuses are differentiated by special programs or degree emphases, such as counseling programs at RTS Orlando or the Chaplaincy program at RTS Charlotte. A key distinction of the RTS-ATL campus is the recent (February 2020) launch of the Edmiston Center for the Study of the Bible and Ethnicity to equip Christian leaders in the reformed tradition to minister effectively in multi-ethnic and cross-cultural contexts. The effort to develop these campus-specific specializations contributes to increased marketability and positive differentiation from other RTS campuses and similar educational institutions.

Approximately 120 students are enrolled at RTS-ATL, with 11 new students enrolling in the fall of 2020. This campus is a commuter campus that does not offer residential housing. Their students tend to be working professionals with families, who typically prefer evening and weekend course offerings. The school administration recognizes the challenge of not having

student housing, as it prevents them from attracting a category of prospective students who want to study full-time and take classes during workdays. Consequently, the school has fewer instructors who work full-time. This author is an alum of RTS-ATL's MDiv program, who graduated in 2016. Partially because of the lack of residential housing, the author began taking weekend classes while commuting from Tampa to Atlanta and relying on online course options to accommodate work and family commitments. The author's current level of engagement with the school is as a donor and a member of the Advisory Board. The activities associated with advisement have provided much of the information related to the current state of the organization and its goals for future growth.

As the school is considering overall enrollment trends in the theological education sector and recognizes its institutional opportunities and limitations, it becomes imperative that they understand how prospective students perceive their organization and value offering, especially as they work on prioritizing expenditures for campus improvements, curriculum evolution and staff recruitment and retention.

The stakeholders are prospective students, currently enrolled students, seminary professors and staff, local churches, and the overall Atlanta community. Surprisingly, RTS-ATL is the only in-person option for evangelical Reformed theological education in the region (Georgia, Tennessee, and Alabama). The leadership recognizes that churches that would benefit from hiring their graduates are often unaware of this educational option. It is not always at the forefront of consideration for many local prospective students.

This capstone project requires the consideration of the individual and community aspects that shape the perception about RTS-ATL and offers evidence-based solutions that would

support the efforts to connect the school to its local community, and through that – to a larger pool of prospective students.

### **Problem of Practice**

RTS-ATL recently launched a vision-casting campaign to have 750 graduates in the next 20 years. The campaign’s quantitative output target is fairly ambitious, and will require a specific plan to reach that number of graduates. To put that number in context, they are currently graduating roughly 20 students per year, which breaks down to a desire to increase annual graduation by 85%. The faculty and staff recognize that this campus is in the shadow of other more established and well-known institutions that compete for the same prospective students and that the school must find ways to raise its profile and communicate more efficiently about the benefits and opportunities of studying at this campus. Student enrollment has been declining for the last two years at RTS-ATL, which parallels a decade-long nationwide trend at 55% of theological schools (Meinzer, 2020). The leadership team would like to explore what factors contribute to the decline in enrollment at their campus while gaining a better understanding of factors that influence prospective students’ decision to pursue graduate theological education at RTS-ATL, and which factors contribute to potential students’ decision not to attend this particular school. The problem is that although the organization has a vision to increase enrollment, the vision casting process was only marginally informed by specific factors that have contributed to prospective students’ decisions to attend.

### **Statement of the Purpose**

The purpose of the study is to explore the key factors that influence students’ choice to enroll in graduate theological education. This analysis offers recommendations that can support RTS-ATL leadership team in their organizational change efforts.

## Literature Review

In what follows, I will review existing research on graduate school choice and enrollment management. Collectively, this body of research will inform the conceptual framework and research questions that guide this investigation. A search of existing literature on EBSCO and ProQuest yields a heavily interwoven collection of resources, with Perna (2006) and English & Umbach (English & Umbach, 2016) forming the theoretical foundation of graduate school choice, defined as the decision to pursue any graduate levels degree programs, which is shaped by the confluence of multiple personal and organizational characteristics. While specific research into theological seminary enrollment is not widely available, expanding the search to include enrollment in broad graduate-level programs produces better results, many of which are applicable in most ways to seminaries, which are theological graduate schools that grant master and doctoral-level degrees in theology, counseling and related disciplines. Reflecting on the studies available, two key categories are identified in terms of factors that contribute to the decision to enroll in graduate schools: personal and institution-related factors.

Institutional factors that contribute to successful enrollment in post-baccalaureate degree programs are addressed in five studies related to graduate enrollment focus on enrollment management (Bontrager, 2004; English & Umbach, 2016; Hossler & Hoeszee, 2001; Perna, 2004; Williams, 2008) with a heavy reliance on Resource Dependence Theory (RDT), which provides a theoretical framework for how the school and the enrollment management offices respond and adapt to external influences. When demographic, cultural, financial, or public policy shifts occur, the school must react and change how it allocates and prioritizes resources to restore a sense of stability. Through the enrollment office, these institutional factors are communicated to prospective students. Hossler and Hoeszee (2001) tend to have a more complex view of

enrollment management than their peers, using RDT as one of six frameworks with which to examine enrollment management, arguing that in times of uncertainty, universities use their resources to create a unique connection to the external environments and dependencies, such as the need to increase enrollment. One interesting caveat they address as separate from RDT is viewing enrollment management as a courtship between the institution and the prospective student, which some might consider being a subset within RDT.

Williams (2008) and Bontrager (2004) both focus on the institutional structures, values, and organizational cultures as a function of RDT. While internal structures and processes are important, Williams and Bontrager connect those to organizational culture to create a student perspective of the right fit for further studies. As most studies that utilize RDT points out, successful enrollment management requires data-driven planning and evaluation. A better understanding of perspective students' influencing factors for enrollment decisions could fuel transformative efforts for stabilization and growth for educational institutions and guide efficient resource allocation for the whole organization.

Next, the prospective students' personal factors form the second category of factors that play a pivotal role in students pursuing higher education beyond the baccalaureate level.

Ethington & Smart (1986) and Kallio (1995) both looked at broad student characteristics like race, age, income, and family's educational level as factors that can prompt or dissuade students' decisions to enroll or persist in graduate school. Perna (2004) presented an econometric approach to college choice, which considers a person's economic value system, viewing the decision to enroll in graduate studies to balance the potential benefits of getting a graduate degree vs. the costs of graduate study. Aside from typical demographic information such as age and gender, English & Umbach (2016) and Perna (2004) consider the impact of cultural and social capital on

personal factors, which refers to cultural knowledge and social networks that provide a person the necessary background to consider and pursue further education. Cultural and social capital can include language spoken at home, parents' level of education, family's financial contribution to education. Additionally, Mullen et al. (2003) used Bourdieu's theory of habitus to stress the role of parents' educational levels, finding that the odds of enrollment in professional degree is increased 16% per year of parent's education. Jones (2014) and Miller (2015) noted the impact of calling and social and cultural capital on school choice among gender and ethnic minority students entering seminary training.

While there are very few studies that specifically explore the choice to enroll in theological graduate schools, the studies that exist have presented a third category of factors that must be considered – that of community-based factors (Ferguson, 2015; Wheeler et al., 2014). Ferguson (2015) found that a sense of acceptance, or belonging, in the seminary community was an important factor in persistence in theological studies. Wheeler et al. (2014) looked at the students' backgrounds from a broader perspective, specifically as it applies to seminary education, finding that involvement in similarly focused organizational models (like youth groups and summer camps) helped students test out their vocational direction, which contributed to their decision to pursue theological studies.

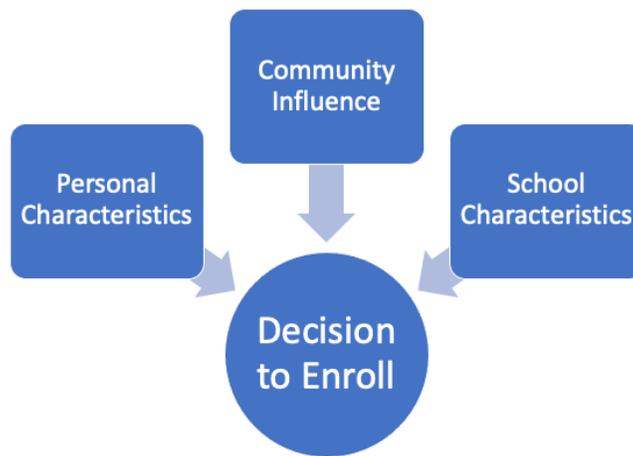
### **Conceptual Framework**

As suggested above, understanding declining enrollment in a graduate school, especially a seminary, requires a multi-faceted approach to investigating the interrelationships between the educational institution, prospective students, and students' respective communities. Therefore, the following conceptual framework considers the elements that are unique to the school and prospective students and the factors that shape the relationship between the two. The framework

for this study is based on Perna's (2004) economic and sociological approach to college choice that reflects applicants' personal characteristics and values, and English & Umbach's (2016) framework with the inclusion of institutional characteristics that influence the student's choice, and will add community-related factors that are relevant in the area of a person's religious experience and support network.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual Framework*



The first category of influencing factors in this framework includes the individual applicant's background. These represent general demographic information (gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, number of dependents, employment, and weekly workload, undergraduate education, and student loans), as well as personal interest in acquiring additional knowledge and skills for personal edification or professional development, or desire to pursue ministry job opportunities.

The second category of influencing factors represents the characteristics of the educational institution. These factors demonstrate ways that the decision to enroll is influenced by the prospective students' perception of the seminary and the quality of the established relationship between the prospective student and the admissions office. Hollser and Hoezee

(2001) use the metaphor of courtship to describe the “matchmaker question” that helps the institution and prospective student recognize whether they are a good fit for each other. This idea of courtship is the area that explores how the school communicates its value and engages in this relationship in a way that it will be perceived as relevant and attractive to certain students. This influencing factor category also includes timely and personalized communication (Hayek and Hossler, 1999, as cited in Hollser and Hoezee, 2001), campus visits, the reputation of faculty and alumni, geographic location, surrounding community features, religious denominational ties, etcetera.

The last category of factors in this conceptual framework seeks to elucidate the influence of the prospective students’ communities as they consider the seminary a viable graduate school option. This includes their relationship and support of family and friends, and the impact of social or religious organizations that they joined in the past (Wheeler, 2014), or the presence of mentors who guided them onto this path. In examining these factors within the conceptual framework, the goal of data collection and analysis is to evaluate key factors that play a significant role in the decision-making process. The relationship between a prospective student and a graduate school or seminary is a complex interplay of facts, feelings, and perceptions; the decision itself eschews scientific qualification and this study does not attempt to oversimplify, but rather to identify primary factors that influence the decision.

### **Project Questions**

The following research questions will guide this investigation:

1. What are the personal characteristics of prospective or current students that influence the decision to enroll at RTS-ATL?

- a. What do prospective or current students see in their personal backgrounds that make them feel they should pursue graduate studies at seminary?
  - b. What provides a sense of confidence that they made the right choice in selecting a seminary?
2. To what extent do institutional characteristics of RTS Atlanta campus influence the prospective or current student's decision to enroll?
  - a. What institutional characteristics are important when selecting RTS-ATL as a school choice for graduate theological education?
  - b. What was the prospective or current student's initial perception of RTS-ATL?
    - i. How was RTS different from other seminaries?
    - ii. What are the perceived drawbacks of this campus?
  - c. If a student enrolled at RTS-ATL, how did their perception of the school change once they started the program?
  - d. What do students desire to see or have at this campus?
3. To what extent did the characteristics of the student's community influence the prospective or current student's decision to enroll?
  - a. What kind of community do prospective students desire?
  - b. Who are the people who supported the student in deciding to enroll?
  - c. Who supports the student after they enroll?
4. For prospective students who ultimately chose not to enroll, what factors influenced the decision to not attend RTS-ATL?

## Project Design & Methods

I used a national data set, survey data, and semi-structured interviews in order to answer the research questions outlined above. Table 1 lists the research questions, the corresponding data required, and method of acquisition.

**Table 1**

*List of the Research Questions, Data Required, and Method used for Acquisition*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Data Required</b>	<b>Method to Acquire</b>
<b>Q1: What are the personal characteristics of prospective students that influenced the decision to enroll at RTS?</b>	Gender Age Marital Status Race/Ethnicity Number of Dependents Degree Program Application Undergraduate Degree (Area) Undergraduate School Type (Public/Private) Educational Debt Non-Educational Debt Current engagement with ministerial work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Association of Theological Schools – Entering Student Questionnaire (2020-2021 Profile of participants)</li> <li>• Survey of non-enrolled students</li> <li>• Follow-up semi-structured interviews</li> </ul>
<b>Q2. To what extent do institutional characteristics of RTS Atlanta campus influence the decision to enroll?</b>	Financial Aid Commuting Distance Channel to first learn about the school Methods of gaining more information about the school Importance of School visit Need to relocate to attend school Housing availability Quality of the faculty Academic reputation Online course delivery options Quality of admissions staff Diverse/Multicultural community Sense of community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Association of Theological Schools – Entering Student Questionnaire (2020-2021 Profile of participants)</li> <li>• Survey of non-enrolled students</li> <li>• Follow-up semi-structured interviews</li> </ul>

<p><b>Q3. To what extent did the student’s community characteristics influence the decision to enroll?</b></p>	<p>Religious Tradition          - Upbringing          - Current          Worshipping Community          Role in the Church          Support of Mentors          Participation in youth programs during childhood          Desire to remain to minister in this community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Association of Theological Schools – Entering Student Questionnaire (2020-2021 Profile of participants)</li> <li>• Survey of non-enrolled students</li> <li>• Follow-up semi-structured interviews</li> </ul>
<p><b>Q4. What factors influenced the decision not to attend RTS for those applicants who ultimately chose not to enroll?</b></p>	<p>Modified personal, institutional, and community-related questions focused on which of the factors contributed to making the choice not to enroll.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-enrolled Applicant Questionnaire</li> <li>• Follow-up semi-structured interviews</li> </ul>

**ATS Data Set.** I accessed a dataset from the Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the North-American accrediting organization for theological schools in the U.S. and Canada, which collected the 2018-2021 enrollment data in their Entering Student Questionnaire (ESQ). All ATS member schools provide this data every year, and it is available both from ATS for research purposes and directly from the schools. RTS provided the 2020-2021 data set for students who enrolled during that academic year. This data set provided quantitative information regarding personal characteristics of students for the purpose of conducting a qualitative analysis in comparison to the survey that I provided to applicants who did not enroll at RTS-ATL. The data set included all 11 of the students who enrolled in that application cycle. Demographics from the data set showed that enrolled students were primarily male (n = 10, 90.9%), aged 20-25 years (n = 8, 72.7%), White (n = 7, 63.6%), and married (n=7, 63.6%) with no dependents (n = 8, 72.7%).

**Survey.** The ATS data set only captures information from enrolled students, who are mandated to take the survey during their first semester in school. Since this project aims to clarify enrollment decision among both enrolled and non-enrolled students, and identify differences among these two distinct groups of people, I took the original ATS survey and modified it to capture answers from non-enrolled students, in a data format that closely aligns with data provided through the ATS survey. I eliminated questions that assumed that students were already in school, and added questions that allowed prospective students to provide answers about their choices after not selecting RTS as their school of choice. The modified survey was sent to 205 prospective students who initiated a student application at RTS in the past three calendar years, but did not enroll at RTS. Survey participants were offered a \$10 gift card to compensate for the time required to complete the short survey. 12 non-enrolled applicants completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 5.9%. The purpose of the survey was to provide a modified set of questions that could allow for collection of personal factors that could be compared to the ATS data set. I used Qualtrics.com to create a survey that relied on questions asked in the ATS data set. Appendix C lists questions from the ATS data set and the survey on non-enrolled students. Where the data set asked enrolled students which factors influenced their desire to enroll, the survey for non-enrolled students asked which factors influenced their desire to apply, and which factors influenced their decision not to enroll. In this way, the survey solicited answers equivalent to those in the data set.

The 12 non-enrolled students who completed the survey are shown in comparison with the 11 enrolled students whose information was obtained through the ATS data set in Table 2. Enrolled students were primarily male (n = 10, 90.9%), aged 20-25 years (n = 8, 72.7%), White (n = 7, 63.6%), and married (n=7, 63.6%) with no dependents (n = 8, 72.7%). Non-enrolled

students were also primarily male (n = 8, 66.7%), White (n = 8, 66.7%), and had no dependents (n = 10, 83.3%). However, non-enrolled students had a wider dispersion in age and were primarily single (n = 8, 66.7%).

**Table 2**

*Demographic Characteristics of Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students*

Category	Enrolled (n=11)	Non-Enrolled (n=12)	Total (n=23)	P value
<i>Gender</i>				.32
Male	10 (90.9%)	8 (66.7%)	18 (78.3%)	
Female	1 (9.1%)	4 (33.3%)	5 (21.7%)	
<i>Age Category (years)</i>				.19
≤19	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	
20-25	8 (72.7%)	3 (25.0%)	11 (47.8%)	
26-30	0 (0.0%)	2 (16.7%)	2 (8.7%)	
31-35	1 (9.1%)	2 (16.7%)	3 (13.0%)	
36-40	1 (9.1%)	1 (8.3%)	2 (8.7%)	
41-45	0 (0.0%)	2 (16.7%)	2 (8.7%)	
46-50	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	
51-55	0 (0.0%)	1 (8.3%)	1 (4.3%)	
≥56	0 (0.0%)	1 (8.3%)	1 (4.3%)	
<i>Race</i>				.55
White or Caucasian	7 (63.6%)	8 (66.7%)	15 (65.2%)	
Black or African American	1 (9.1%)	3 (25.0%)	4 (17.4%)	
Asian or Pacific Islander	1 (9.1%)	1 (8.3%)	2 (8.7%)	
Multiracial	1 (9.1%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (4.3%)	
<i>Marital Status</i>				.22
Single	4 (36.4%)	8 (66.7%)	12 (52.2%)	
Married	7 (63.6%)	4 (33.3%)	11 (47.8%)	
<i>Number of Dependents</i>				.68
None	8 (72.7%)	10 (83.3%)	18 (78.3%)	
One	2 (18.2%)	1 (8.3%)	3 (13.0%)	
Two	1 (9.1%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (4.3%)	
Three	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	
Four or more	0 (0.0%)	1 (8.3%)	1 (4.3%)	

**Semi-structured interviews with students.** I contacted 48 enrolled students through email (Appendix A) to request volunteers for semi-structured interviews (Appendix B); and the

survey of non-enrolled applicants also included an invitation to participate in interviews. The interview protocol focused on the four research questions, seeking to identify personal, insitutional and community factors that contributed to the person’s decision to attend RTS-ATL, starting with a “grand tour” question about their journey to serminary. Interviews were intended to elucidate additional background on decision-making that may not have been captured within the ATS data set or survey, specifically, factors related to community and institution. Questions to be included in the interviews were written based on conversations with RTS-ATL administration and Board members, designed to elicit information the school considered important as it aims to increase the number of graduates in coming years. Interview questions were also included to allow interviewees freedom to expound on personal, institutional, and community factors that influenced their enrollment decision. To encourage participation in 30-60 minute phone interviews, enrolled participants were offered a \$10 gift card and were entered in a drawing in which one student would win one semester of full tuition scholarship, provided by a donor who requested to remain anonymous. Students who did not enroll were not offered compensation aside from the \$10 gift card they received for taking the survey. Of the individuals invited, 14 enrolled students participated, and 4 non-enrolled applicants participated.

### **Data Analysis**

Because of the small sample size, there was not adequate information to detect statistically significant differences between enrolled and non-enrolled students. However,  $p$  values are presented with quantitative results where I performed Fisher’s exact test to compare categorical responses between the enrolled and non-enrolled student groups. I performed all quantitative data analysis using StataIC 15.1.

I coded semi-structured interviews according to three categories (personal, institutional, and community) and the results were coded in thematic conclusions and recommendations. Encoding in this manner streamlined the semi-structured interview data with the quantitative survey and ATS data set. I conducted and recorded all the interviews with participants' consent, and had transcriptions auto-generated through Zoom's use of Otter.ai transcription and recording software. Challenges of coding the interview data included the time required to re-listen and re-read transcripts, as well as some overlap of categories. For instance, when a participant mentioned that childcare was a challenge because her church's childcare center had recently closed, personal and community factors overlapped. In this instance, it would be coded as a personal characteristic since the closing of the childcare facility did not represent a lack of personally-directed community support.

## **Findings**

The following sections are separated by category of factors influencing prospective students' decision about enrolling in seminary. For each category of findings, quantitative findings are presented based on the data set and surveys; this is followed by qualitative findings discovered through interviewing enrolled students and non-enrolled applicants. Each section finishes with a summary of findings that combines the quantitative and qualitative findings. This first section reviews personal characteristics of applicants, to include demographics, family, education, employment, and background.

### **Personal Characteristics: PQ1**

Within personal characteristics, one of the key factors that came forth as influencing enrollment decision was finances. Nearly all study participants mentioned finances as being important in their decision, and higher debt at the time of application coincided with lower rate

of enrollment. In terms of demographics, the majority of participants (both enrolled and non-enrolled) were both white and male. Enrolled students had a younger age range than study participants who did not enroll. And enrolled students had more clarity about their direction in life than did participants who did not enroll. Along similar lines, a professional Master of Arts degree plan was more popular among students who enrolled, while certificate and non-degree programs were more popular among applicants who did not enroll.

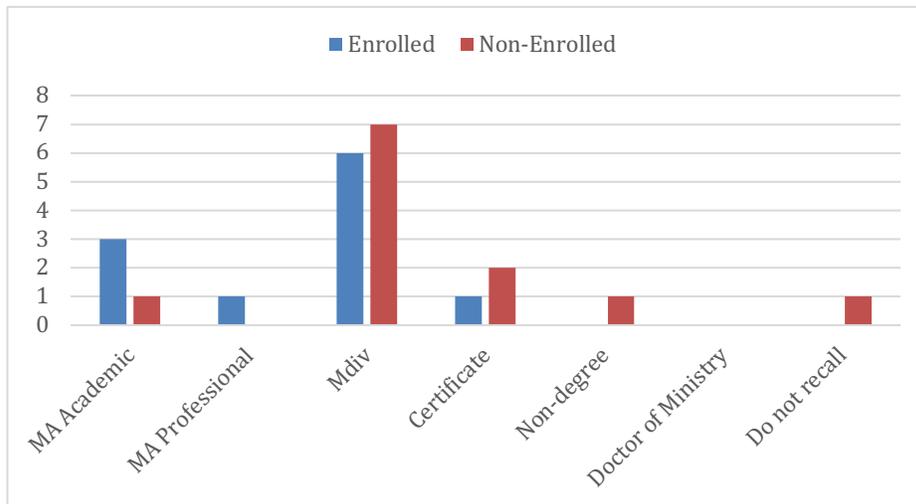
**Survey Data.** Demographic data for enrolled and non-enrolled participants is identified above in Table 2, showing that the majority of applicants (enrolled and non-enrolled) were males, and were white. Non-enrolled participants covered a wider age range than enrolled students. Regarding family status, only two non-enrolled students indicated that they had a dependent. These two non-enrolled students who care for dependents estimated that their time required for dependent care would be between 16-20 hours per week, and 40 hours per week, while they were seeking, respectively, a part-time degree program, and a shorter-duration certificate program. Unfortunately, this question was not included in the data set of enrolled students and therefore data for enrolled students on this topic could not be included for comparison. However, both enrolled and non-enrolled students rated ‘family reasons’ as only slightly important in their decision to enroll ( $M = 1.3$  v.  $1.7$  where  $1 = \textit{of no importance}$  and  $2 = \textit{slightly important}$ ).

The MDiv program was the most popular choice among enrolled and non-enrolled students ( $n = 13, 56.5\%$ ). More students who applied to an MA Professional degree program were enrolled, whereas more students who applied to certificate or non-degree programs were not enrolled (Figure 2). Most enrolled students had completed an undergraduate degree before their application ( $n = 10, 90.9\%$ ) (Table 3). Of these students,  $60\%$  ( $n = 6$ ) attended a private,

religiously affiliated college or university. None of them had received a graduate or post-graduate degree. Among non-enrolled students, slightly less, but still most students had completed an undergraduate degree before application (n = 9, 75.0%). These students attended public, private, religiously affiliated, and private, non-religious colleges and universities in almost equal numbers. Two of the nine (22.2%) students with an undergraduate degree had received a graduate or doctoral level degree, one of which was from a theological school or program.

**Figure 2**

*Degree Program Applied to by Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students*



**Table 3**

*Educational Characteristics of Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students*

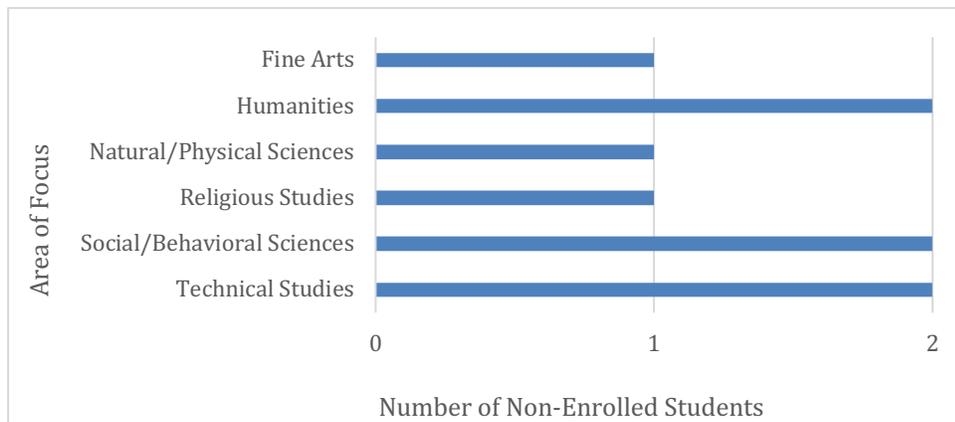
Category	Enrolled (n=11)	Non-Enrolled (n=12)	Total (n=23)	<i>P</i> value
<i>Completed undergraduate degree</i>				.59
Yes	10 (90.9%)	9 (75.0%)	19 (82.6%)	
No	1 (9.1%)	3 (25.0%)	4 (17.4%)	
<i>Type of undergraduate institution</i>				.31
Public	4 (40.0%)	4 (44.4%)	8 (42.1%)	
Private, religious	6 (60.0%)	3 (33.3%)	9 (47.4%)	

Private, not religious	0 (0.0%)	2 (22.2%)	2 (10.5%)	.21
<i>Highest degree beyond a bachelor</i>				
None	10 (100.0%)	7 (77.8%)	17 (89.5%)	
Master	0 (0.0%)	1 (11.1%)	1 (5.3%)	
PhD	0 (0.0%)	1 (11.1%)	1 (5.3%)	

Non-enrolled students reported studying various fields during their undergraduate studies, most often the humanities, social/behavioral sciences, and technical studies (Figure 3). The majority of all students did not have any educational (n = 13, 56.5%) or other debt (n = 15, 65.2%), although non-enrolled students did appear to report higher debt more frequently than

**Figure 3**

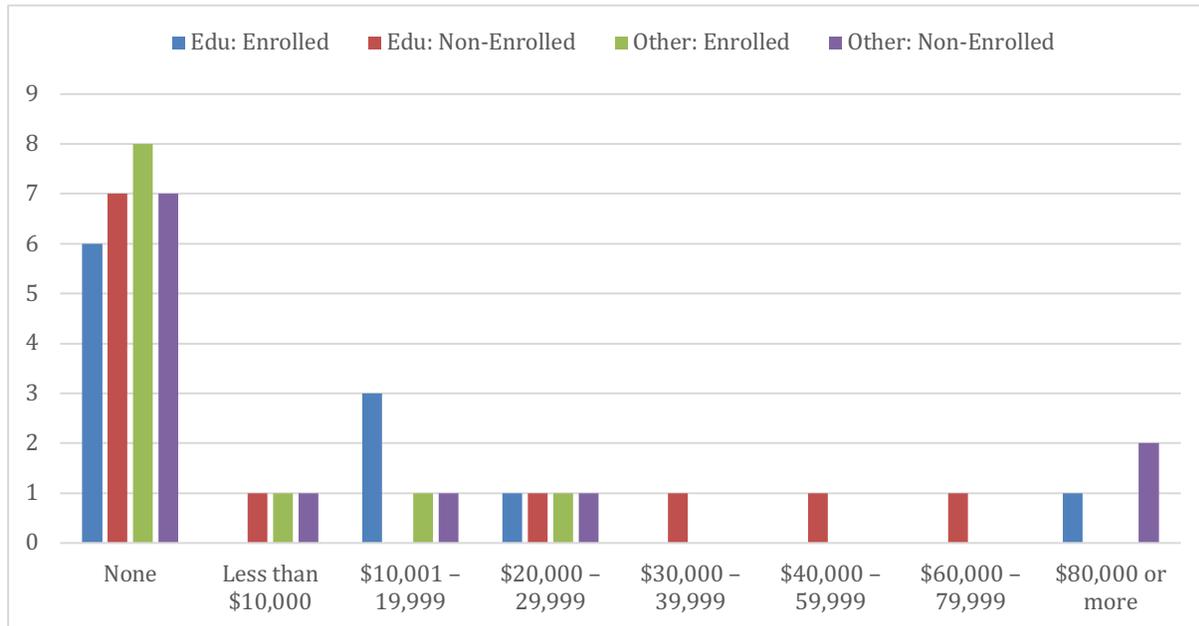
*Area of Focus of Undergraduate Degree among Non-Enrolled Students (n=9)*



enrolled students (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Educational and Other Debts of Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students*

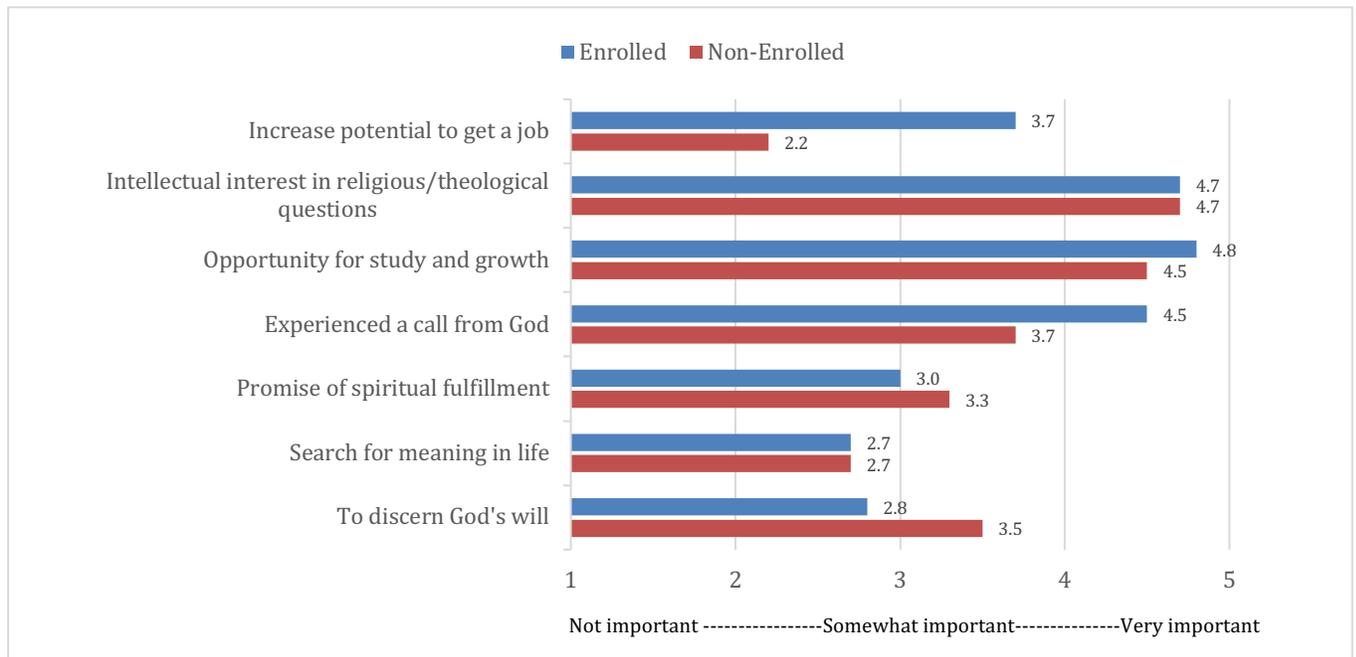


The majority of students were currently engaged with ministerial work at the time of application, with 63.6% (n = 7) of enrolled students and 50.5% (n = 6) of non-enrolled students reporting such work. Of the six non-enrolled students currently working in ministry, three (50.5%) had a full-time paid position, one (16.7%) had a part-time paid position, and three (33.3%) worked part-time as a volunteer. It is important to note that current working status was not asked of enrolled students and so could not be reported. Furthermore, of the 12 non-enrolled students, nine (75.0%) were not enrolled in another seminary. Only two (16.7%) were enrolled elsewhere as full-time students and one (8.3%) as a part-time student. This is consistent with their plans for attendance at RTS-ATL. Nine (75.0%) indicated they would have enrolled as a full-time student, while three (25.0%) indicated they planned on attending on a part-time basis.

When asked to rate the importance of various personal attributes on the decision to pursue theological studies in general (i.e., not specifically at RTS-ATL), intellectual interest and the opportunity for study and growth were shown to be the most important characteristics for both enrolled and non-enrolled students (Figure 5). Enrolled students rated the increased potential to get a job much higher than non-enrolled students. Similar trends were observed with experiencing a call from God. Non-enrolled students, in contrast, rated the promise of spiritual fulfillment and the goal of discerning God’s will as more important than enrolled students did.

**Figure 5**

*Mean Importance of Personal Characteristics in Decision to Pursue Theological Studies among Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students*



**Interview Data**

A total of 18 individuals were interviewed regarding their perceptions regarding RTS-ATL enrollment. Table 4 provides a description of the known gender. For those enrolled and not enrolled at the RTS-ATL area campus, the majority were male (n = 10, 71.4%; n = 3, 75.0% respectively). Marital status, age, and employment status were not obtained from participants in

the interviews. Regarding personal characteristics associated with prospective or current students' decision to pursue graduate studies in seminary, several personal characteristics were found.

**Table 4**

*Interview Participants Pseudonym and Gender*

Participant Number	Pseudonym	Gender
<b>Enrolled</b>		
1	Participant Enrolled 1	Male
2	Participant Enrolled 2	Male
3	Participant Enrolled 3	Male
4	Participant Enrolled 4	Male
5	Participant Enrolled 5	Male
6	Participant Enrolled 6	Male
7	Participant Enrolled 7	Female
8	Participant Enrolled 8	Female
9	Participant Enrolled 9	Female
10	Participant Enrolled 10	Male
11	Participant Enrolled 11	Male
12	Participant Enrolled 12	Female
13	Participant Enrolled 13	Male
14	Participant Enrolled 14	Male
<b>Not Enrolled</b>		
1	Participant Not Enrolled 1	Female
2	Participant Not Enrolled 2	Male
3	Participant Not Enrolled 3	Male
4	Participant Not Enrolled 4	Male

Namely, students seeking enrollment predominantly had religious backgrounds or grew up in the church, felt a call from God, had a faith based mentor, were seeking intellectual and spiritual growth, had high academic self-efficacy, and a personal connection to RTS-ATL. The following section provides an overview of the identified themes for this project question.

***Religious Background and Call from God.*** Regarding personal characteristics of those students that enrolled (n = 14), most (n = 11, 78.5%) stated they grew up in the church or came from a family with a religious affiliation. Many of the background stories from the semi-

structured interviews consisted of a religious upbringing, followed by a search for purpose and feeling “called” into ministry (n = 10, 71.4%). Therefore, consistent with the quantitative portion, interview participants suggested they received a call from God into the ministry. For example, Enrolled Participant 12 stated, “when I started at RTS, it was like this window of opportunity that the Lord provided that really fit with everything that I was just praying about and didn't realize it.”

Similarly, Participant Enrolled 8 stated, “just kind of like honestly prayed a lot about it and came across this field, I felt like God led me to this field I'm in now.” Further, participants suggested that the call from God guided them toward RTS-ATL as a result of meeting their needs and current circumstances. For example, Participant Enrolled 2 stated, “RTS just seemed it seemed a perfect fit it was it was within driving distance, and so the Lord just opened these doors.”

***Faith-Based Mentor.*** Most enrolled participants also stated that they had a faith-based mentor (n = 11, 78.5%) who encouraged them to pursue not only God but seminary schooling. This individual was often cited as a pastor or congregation member that was very influential in their lives. For example, Participant Enrolled 7 stated:

I shared this and one of them actually is an RTS student... We're really, really have been aligned in terms of our values and our challenges and struggles, with the church and, in particular, related to this degree and they just heard my heart over the years and, so they were they were very big proponents and supporters.

Similarly, Participant Enrolled 4 stated:

after talking with some leaders in my church had some advice and ended up trying my hand at seminary, they recommended that I try it and see if it sticks and how well it goes, and I really, really enjoyed it and got a lot out of it, and so that's why I'm here today.

This element of having a faith-based mentor was also a commonality in those participants that decided not to enroll in RTS-ATL. For example, Participant Not Enrolled 2 stated, “I was 16,

[when I had] a call to ministry and my pastors they helped guide me through that call, and still are helping me through that call as well.” While applicants who did not enroll were also likely to have a relationship with a faith-based mentor, there was less likely to be a push to attend seminary from that mentor in students who did not enroll.

***Intellectual and Spiritual Growth.*** Interview participants that enrolled (n = 14) also stated they had a love for learning (n = 10, 71.4%) and were seeking spiritual growth (n = 11, 78.5%). For example, Participant Enrolled 9 stated, “I think just the way that the Lord has wired my brain I'm very inquisitive and I love to learn I love to read.” Similarly, Participant Enrolled 8 stated, “I like see myself actually studying and I'm like well, I really enjoy studying about the Bible like you know, and I was like Oh, maybe someday I'll take some seminary classes.” However, this was not limited to enrolled students; it was also seen in one of the non-enrolled applicants. Participant Not Enrolled 3 stated, “I just love, I love learning, I really do I just, you know I just have an incredible thirst for knowledge.”

***High Academic Self-Efficacy.*** Interview participants' statements also suggested a high academic self-efficacy for those participants that enrolled (n = 10, 71.4%), which is the “students' beliefs and attitudes toward their capabilities to achieve academic success, as well as belief in their ability to fulfill academic tasks and the successful learning of the materials” (Hayat et al., 2020, p. 2). For example, Participant Enrolled 9 stated, “well, I'm always I guess I've always kind of been good at school like always gotten good grades.” Similarly, Participant Enrolled 5 stated, “I am pretty good at school...I just know how to do school well and so as far as the academic side of stuff with writing papers or taking tests or those sorts of things.” Finally, Participant Enrolled 8 stated, “I know I'm capable, and now I'm like I could definitely do it, I'm like, I'm good at school.”

***Personal Connection to RTS-ATL.*** The final overarching theme identified regarding personal characteristics associated with prospective and current students who decided to enroll in RTS-ATL was that several participants suggested the program was either recommended to them directly, they knew of someone attending, or they had previous contact with the campus creating a personal experience and connection (n = 12, 85.7%). For example, Participant Enrolled 3 stated, “I saw at the national conference XXXXX that's the style that's what I wanted to learn, and they recommend RTS, so that's the place to go.” In addition, some participants suggested that because they knew people who had attended or were attending RTS-ATL, they were more comfortable attending themselves. For example, Participant Enrolled 2 stated, “the enrollment of seminary that process was made a lot easier because my associate pastor is leaving was a graduate of RTS Atlanta.” Finally, Participant Enrolled 8 stated she had a personal connection with RTS-ATL. Specifically, she stated:

I visited the campus, and yeah, before I guess it was almost like a year, even before I applied, I visited the campus just to see and I don't know it was just like a sense, you know, I just had a feeling of like this, this feels right and can't explain it, I just like everybody was very cordial very kind.

**Summary.** Based on surveys, data set, and interviews, there were several personal factors that were influential in applicants’ decision to enroll or not to enroll. Based on the quantitative and qualitative findings, personal characteristics associated with students enrolled in RTS-ATL suggested that those who enroll are predominantly male (n = 10, 90.9%), White (n = 7, 63.6%), married (n = 7, 63.6%), between the ages of 20-25 (n = 8, 72.7%), with no dependents (n = 8, 72.7%), minimal debt, and were seeking the MA professional degree. Further, these individuals reported interest in intellectual and spiritual growth, a call from God to obtain advanced education in theology, were affiliated with a religious background often from childhood, had a

faith-based mentor, reported high academic self-efficacy, and a personal connection to RTS-ATL.

Characteristics associated with students not enrolled in the RTS-ATL program suggested that those who did not enroll were also predominately male (n = 8, 66.7%), White (n = 8, 66.7%), single (n = 8, 66.7%), had a wider age range of 20-45 (n = 10, 83.3%), with no dependents (n = 10, 83.3%), had higher debt, and were seeking certificate and non-degree-granting programs.

Significant differences between enrolled and non-enrolled participants are that the debt tended to be higher among students who did not enroll, which may be important because most interviewees (enrolled and not enrolled) stated that financial considerations factored into their decision. Another interesting finding related to personal factors is that enrolled students were far more likely to be responding to a clearly determined goal (potential to get a job, or had experienced a call from God), whereas non-enrolled students were more likely to be seeking clarity (promise of spiritual fulfillment, or to discern God's will). In this sense, applicants with a clearly defined sense of direction were more likely to enroll. Also, enrolled students were more likely to have a mentor who specifically encouraged them to attend seminary. The following section provides an overview of the research findings regarding the institutional characteristics that influence enrollment at RTS-ATL.

### **Institutional Characteristics: PQ2**

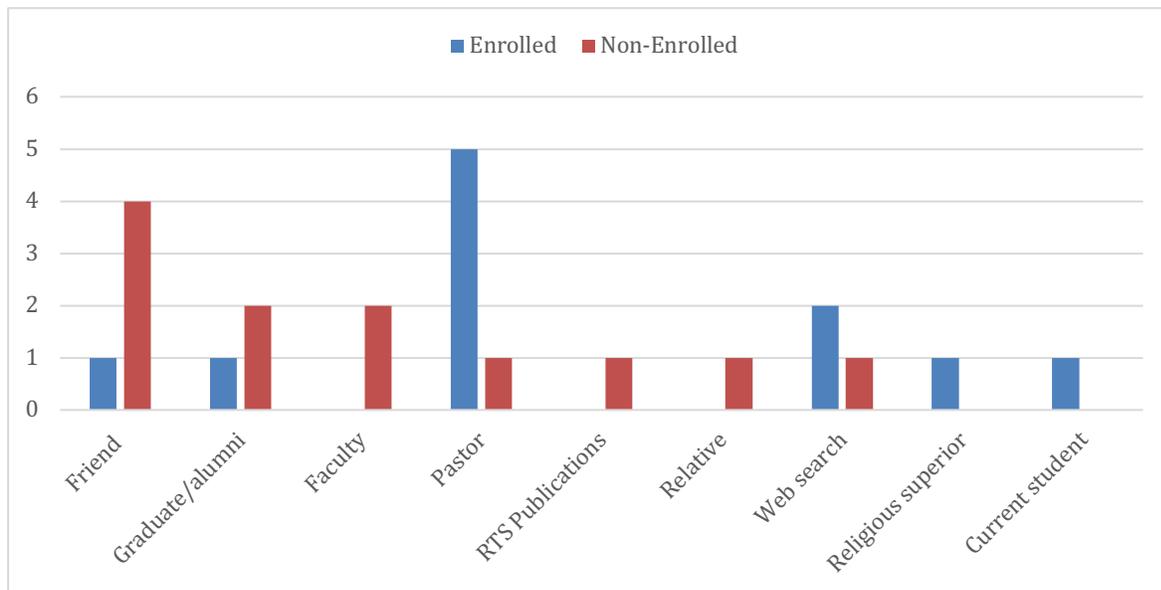
Institutional characteristics include factors such as personal and community perception of the school, academic rigor, theological or faith background, flexibility of degree programs, and availability of student services. Themes that arose as decision factors prompting or preventing enrollment include the accessibility and convenience of classes (including location, timing of

classes, and provision of remote learning), curriculum and theological doctrine, supportive interactions with faculty and staff, amount of financial support, sense of community at the campus, and the presence of the Edmiston Center for the Study of the Bible and Ethnicity.

**Survey Data.** In addition to applicants’ personal characteristics, attributes of RTS-ATL were evaluated for their importance for enrolled and non-enrolled students. Half of the enrolled students (n = 6, 54.5%) heard about RTS-ATL through a pastor or other religious leader (Figure 6), and two (18.2%) heard about the school through current or former students. In contrast, only one (8.3%) of non-enrolled students heard about RTS-ATL from a pastor or religious superior. Most of these students heard about the institution through friends (n = 4, 33.3%), graduates/alumni (n = 2, 16.7%), and faculty (n = 2, 16.7%).

**Figure 6**

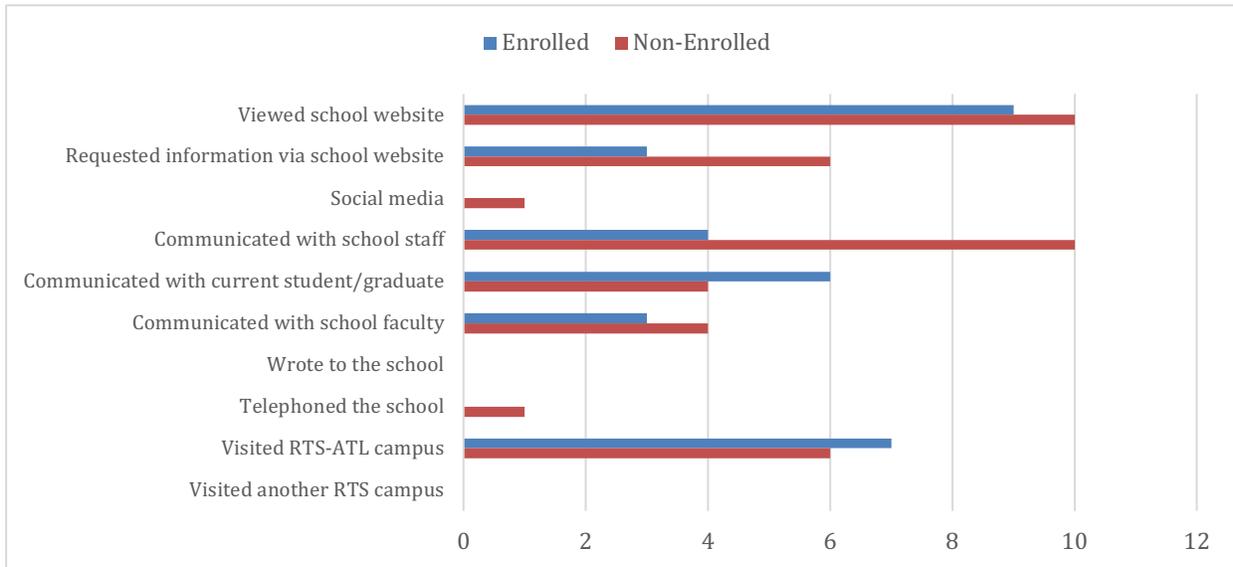
*Method of First Learning about RTS-ATL among Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students*



Most students obtained additional information about RTS-ATL through the school’s website (Figure 7). More enrolled students had communication with a current student or graduate of the program, whereas more non-enrolled students reported communicating with school staff

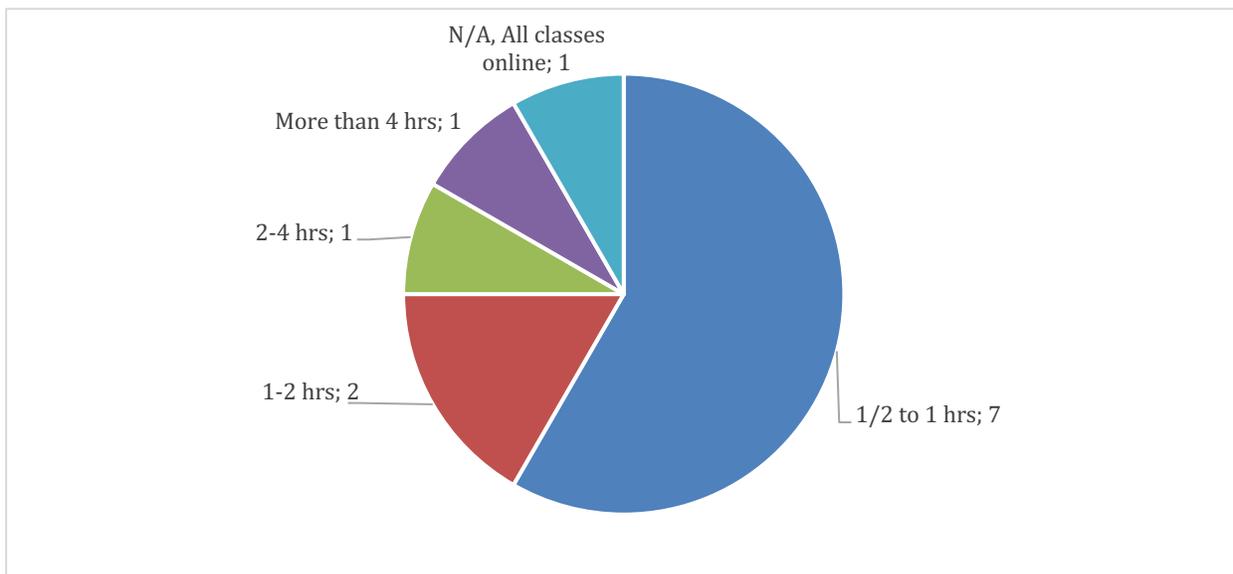
**Figure 7**

*Methods of Obtaining Further Information about RTS-ATL*



**Figure 8**

*Commuting Distance among Non-Enrolled Students*



for more information. Approximately half of all students ( $n = 13$ , 56.5%) visited the RTS-ATL campus. None of the enrolled students and only one (8.3%) of the non-enrolled students

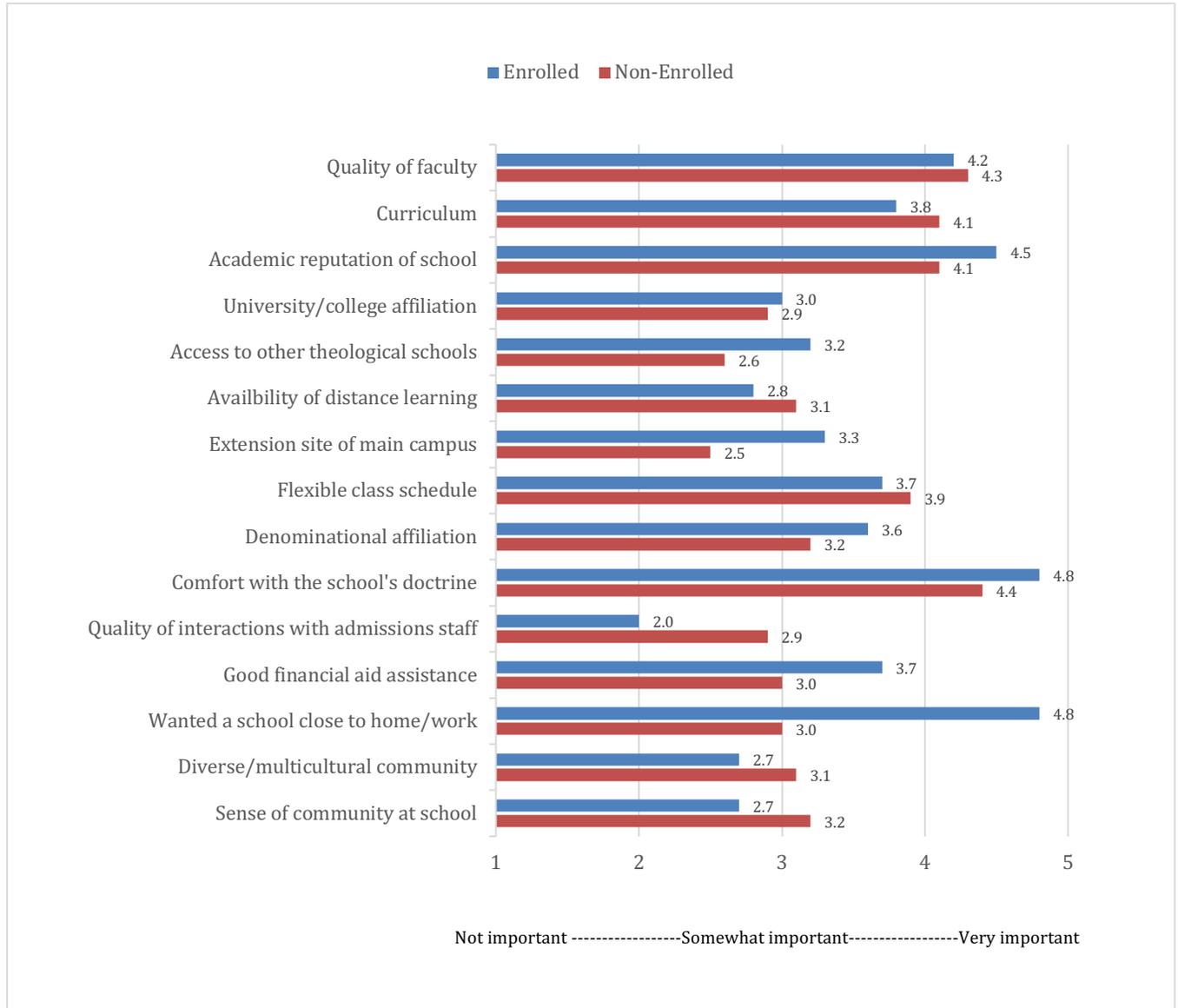
indicated that they needed to relocate to attend RTS-ATL. All enrolled students lived within two hours of campus. Although non-enrolled students lived more varied distances from campus (Figure 8), the majority (n = 10, 83.3%) reported that housing availability was of no importance to their decision to attend.

Students who enrolled at RTS-ATL and those who did not rate several institutional characteristics similarly in importance to their decision to attend (Figure 9), including the quality of faculty, university/college affiliation, and flexible class schedule. Students who enrolled rated the academic reputation of the school, access to other theological schools, having an extension site of the main campus, denominational affiliation, comfort with the school's doctrine, financial aid assistance, and the location of the school (e.g., close to home or work) as more important on average than did students who chose not to enroll. In contrast, students who did not enroll rated curriculum, availability of distance learning, quality of interactions with admissions staff, diverse/multicultural community, and a sense of community at the school as more important than students who enrolled. Five non-enrolled students (41.7%) indicated that they had planned to attend classes either partially or fully online, which may explain the importance placed on the availability of distance learning.

**Interview Data.** Qualitative findings supported some of the quantitative findings regarding participants that enrolled in a program at RTS-ATL. Specifically, and as previously discussed, most of the interview participants, both enrolled and non-enrolled, had a personal connection to the RTS-ATL campus either by knowing someone who attended or recommendation by a trusted colleague or superior (n = 12, 85.7%). Participant responses also supported the notion that enrolled students found financial assistance and the school's location very important in their decision to attend. Several other themes were identified in participant

**Figure 9**

*Mean Importance of Institutional Characteristics in Decision to Enroll among Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students*



interview responses regarding institutional characteristics that influenced students' enrollment decisions. Specifically, accessibility and convenience of the program (n = 12, 85.7%), course curriculum (n = 10, 71.4%), supportive administration and faculty (n = 8, 57.2%), and financial support (n = 7, 50%).

*Accessibility and Convenience.* Participants cited the accessibility and convenience of the program as it related to the availability of online and hybrid courses, location of the campus, and depth of course programming. Specifically, Participant Enrolled 7 stated:

in my situation, the offering of these six classes over zoom has made it extremely helpful. I mean, I have an infant right now and I was trying to figure out, you know, could I take a course this fall being a nursing mom?

Similarly, Participant Enrolled 3 stated, “I was working full time at the time and was able to get in, and they told me that there's virtual classes like okay it's perfect. So, having online classes was helpful.” Regarding students not enrolled in RTS-ATL programs, having a flexible class schedule was suggested to be important because of the need to work part-time to meet financial obligations. Specifically, Participant Not Enrolled 1 stated:

I will probably have to work part-time while going to school, you know, I'm not sure if I can like go to you know work full-time and then do part-time ministry or part-time seminary and even then, you know like class flexibility is a very important factor.

In addition to the availability of courses online, interview participants suggested that the school's location was very important in their decision to attend. Specifically, a few students stated that the campus was close to their church, allowing them to continue their church attendance while going to school. For example, Participant Enrolled 2 stated:

the reason I stayed more locally with RTS in part is, I was able to stay with my church and able to have or continue to have opportunities of ministry, such as teaching VBS and teaching Covenant Kids, and doing some Sunday school.

Other interview participants stated it was more convenient to stay local and that it was “God's will.” For example, Participant Enrolled 4 stated, “I didn't apply to others because RTS Atlanta campus is close to me, and my wife is working at the CDC now, so we needed to be here.”

**Course Curriculum.** A recurring theme among interviewees suggested that the RTS course curriculum and its reputation for academic rigor were important in their decision to enroll in RTS-ATL. Specifically, participants noted the Edmiston Center for the Study of the Bible and Ethnicity. Participant Enrolled 12 stated, “I would say genuinely, it is the Edmiston Center curriculum. I felt like that was unique, and it's not offered at the other places.” Participants also suggested that they were looking for an academic challenge and course work with depth and academic rigor that would advance their knowledge significantly.

**Supportive Administration and Faculty.** Having had interactions with faculty and staff, several participants suggested that a supportive and accessible administration and faculty were essential institutional characteristics that encouraged them to enroll and let them know they chose the right program/school once they began attending. Specifically, Participant Enrolled 12 stated, “the directors are just like, hey, email me if you have a question, call me if you have a question, I don't feel like I have to go through a secretary, you know.” Similarly, Participant Enrolled 9 stated the following regarding the professor's instance, asking if anyone had additional questions. She stated:

I genuinely didn't have any questions, I was just listening and listening to other people's questions, and he made a point to say. “XXXX, do you have any questions or a statement or anything?” and so even that intentionality from professors in giving voice and making space.

**Financial Aid.** The importance of financial aid for both enrolled and non-enrolled students was mentioned frequently. For example, Participant Not Enrolled 1 stated, “I wanted to pursue seminary, but the finances aren't there.” Similarly, Participant Enrolled 5 stated:

In order for me to go to seminary and to make a very long story short, with that at first, the money wasn't necessarily happening. RTS was giving me a scholarship, I think for about half, I can't remember, was 40% or 50% of a scholarship, and I was very thankful for that, but then after being in seminary for about two semesters, I just realized

financially we weren't going to be able to do it, I work for a small private Christian school, my wife works for a missions organization.

Similarly, Participant Enrolled 3 stated, “I think that having the financial aid was very helpful to [say] ok, so the option [of going to school] is available.” Finally, Participant Enrolled 4 stated, “I mean, I need to mention again, but the financial aid was a huge piece. They were able to offer a pretty substantial amount.” In this sense, financial aid packages are noted by enrolled students to be a substantial factor in their decision to attend, and for applicants who did not enroll, insufficient financial aid was a deterrent to enrolling.

*Perceived Drawbacks and Desired Campus Improvements.* Interview participants were also asked what they perceived to be drawbacks of the RTS-ATL programs and campus and desired campus improvements. Regarding campus drawbacks, participant responses were varied and included issues with (a) traffic in Atlanta, Georgia, (b) the lack of core classes on the weekend, (c) no availability of an online catalog for courses, (d) lack of dormitories, and (e) the perception that because the school is small, there is a lack of resources. However, there were no themes identified for the drawbacks identified by participants because the responses were too varied.

Regarding desired campus improvements, two major themes emerged and consisted of the desire for more opportunities for engagement and improving the campus community. Specifically, Participant Enrolled 12 stated that she would like “just different opportunities for students to get to know one another outside of class.” Similarly, Participant Enrolled 4 stated, “I know they're working on or they've talked about open up opening up some spaces and having a common area where students can sort of hang out and talk with one another.” Finally, Participant Enrolled 2 stated, “there's not much opportunity to mingle with other students outside of the

classroom and outside that lunch hour, so that would be something I would hope to see in the future.”

Improving campus community was another central theme identified by both enrolled and non-enrolled students. Specifically, Participant Enrolled 7 stated:

I just saw the difference that made between those who were full-time students and part-time and how much they were able to invest in, you know, the larger community of students and professors so, yeah, I think that's just a downside, maybe, of being essentially kind of a part-time student in my case.

Similarly, Participant Not Enrolled 2 suggested the importance of having on-campus dormitories in creating a campus community by stating:

I say that is because when you compare campuses like RTS Jackson, Covenant Seminary, and Westminster Seminary, RTS Atlanta is missing [community], that is because they don't have a place where students can actually live alongside each other.

These project findings are consistent with the quantitative portion of the project wherein non-enrolled students reported school community to be more than *somewhat important* (3.2) in their decision to enroll in a school program.

**Summary.** In summation, several elements of the institution’s characteristics were identified as influential in students' decision to enroll in RTS-ATL programs. Specifically, the accessibility and convenience associated with the availability of classes online and the school's location for enrolled students were important for participants of the quantitative and qualitative portion of this project. Further, enrolled students suggested that the course curriculum, supportive administration and faculty, and financial support were important in their decision to attend RTS-ATL. Another factor that enrolled students mentioned as important was RTS-ATL’s Edmiston Center for the Study of the Bible and Ethnicity; this center is unique to this campus and enrolled students recognize it as a differentiating factor that influenced their enrollment decision.

Students not enrolled in RTS-ATL reported a need to feel comfortable with the school doctrine (4.4), wanting high-quality faculty (4.3), were concerned with the schools' academic reputation and curriculum (4.1), required additional financial aid, preference for a flexible course schedule (3.9), and sense of community at school (3.2) was also rated more highly by those that did not enroll in RTS-ATL. The following section provides an overview of the project findings regarding student community characteristics that influence student enrollment.

### **Community Characteristics: PQ3**

Community characteristics include the applicants' faith tradition, church involvement, and characteristics of applicants' key influencers (family, friends, mentors, etc.). Given that RTS-ATL follows Reformed theology, it is not surprising that most enrolled students, as well as a significant number of applicants who did not enroll, align themselves with churches in the Reformed tradition (Presbyterian denominations, Reformed churches, and some Baptist traditions). Statistically, there was no appreciable difference between enrolled and non-enrolled study participants regarding denomination. Non-enrolled students were less likely than enrolled students to hold a leadership position within their church. While most participants discussed being mentored by a leader in their church, enrolled students were more likely to have received encouragement from their mentor to study at seminary. Interestingly, while evidence in survey data related to personal characteristics (above) pointed to family having only a minor influence in the decision about enrolling in seminary, interview questions during this section revealed that parents' and spouses' input were highly influential in the enrollment decision. Discrepancies here may be related to phrasing of questions in the survey data versus the interview format. Also, non-enrolled applicants were more likely to have a vague vision of their future, either seeking direction or wanting to make a non-specific difference in the world,

whereas applicants who enrolled tended to be seeking a specific role in ministry, seeking to preserve church traditions, or make a difference in the life of the church.

**Survey Data.** Enrolled and non-enrolled students reported former or current participation in various denominations or religious traditions (Table 4). Enrolled students were generally quite active in their worshiping community, with seven (63.6%) indicating they were ‘very active’ and 4 (36.4%) indicating ‘active’ involvement. No data were available for non-

**Table 5**

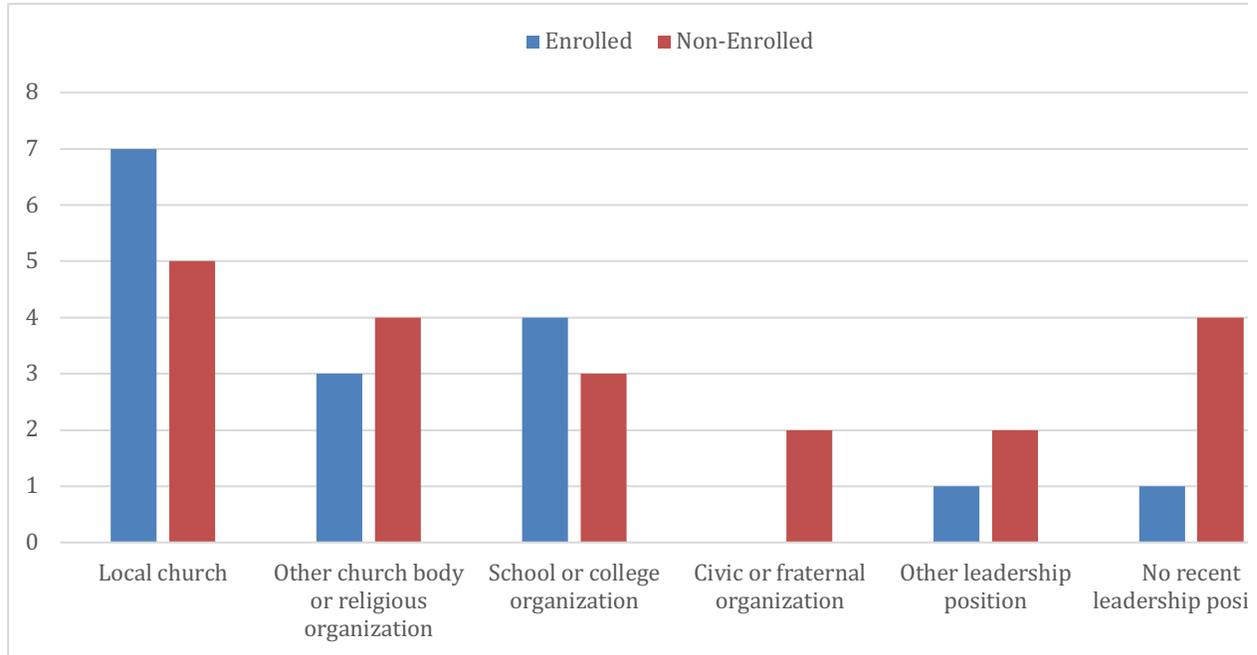
*Former and Current Denominations and Religious Traditions among Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students*

Enrolled Students		Non-Enrolled Students	
Formed/Raised in	Current	Formed / Raised in	Current
• Baptist (3)	• Baptist (1)	• Canadian Reformed Church (1)	• Baptist (1)
• Baptist, other (1)	• Evangelical Presbyterian Church (3)	• Catholic, other (1)	• Episcopal Church (1)
• Christian Brethren (1)	• Nondenominational (2)	• Korean Presbyterian Church in America (1)	• Nondenominational (1)
• Church of God (Cleveland, TN) (1)	• Presbyterian Church in America (3)	• Other (1)	• Presbyterian Church (USA) (1)
• Churches of God, General Conference (1)	• Reformed, other (1)	• Pentecostal, other (2)	• Presbyterian Church in American (6)
• National Baptist Convention (1)	• Southern Baptist Convention (1)	• Presbyterian Church (USA) (1)	• Reformed, other (1)
• Pentecostal, other (1)		• Presbyterian Church in America (2)	• United Methodist Church (1)
• Reformed, other (1)		• Reformed, other (1)	
• Southern Baptist Convention (1)		• Roman Catholic (1)	

enrolled students. However, when asked about their recent leadership positions, non-enrolled students more often reported *not* holding any positions than enrolled students and less often reported holding a leadership position in their local church (Figure 10).

**Figure 10**

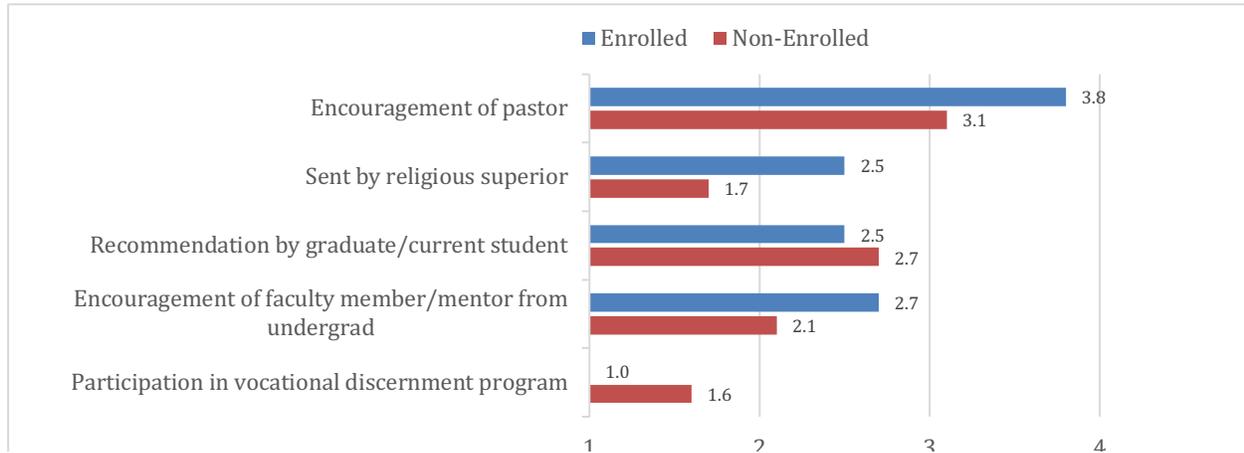
*Elected or Appointed Leadership Positions Held by Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students*



Encouragement of one's pastor was the most important community characteristic in all students' decision to enroll, although it was slightly more important among students who enrolled than those who did not (Figure 11). Enrolled students also reported higher importance of

**Figure 11**

*Mean Importance of Community Characteristics in Decision to Enroll among Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students*

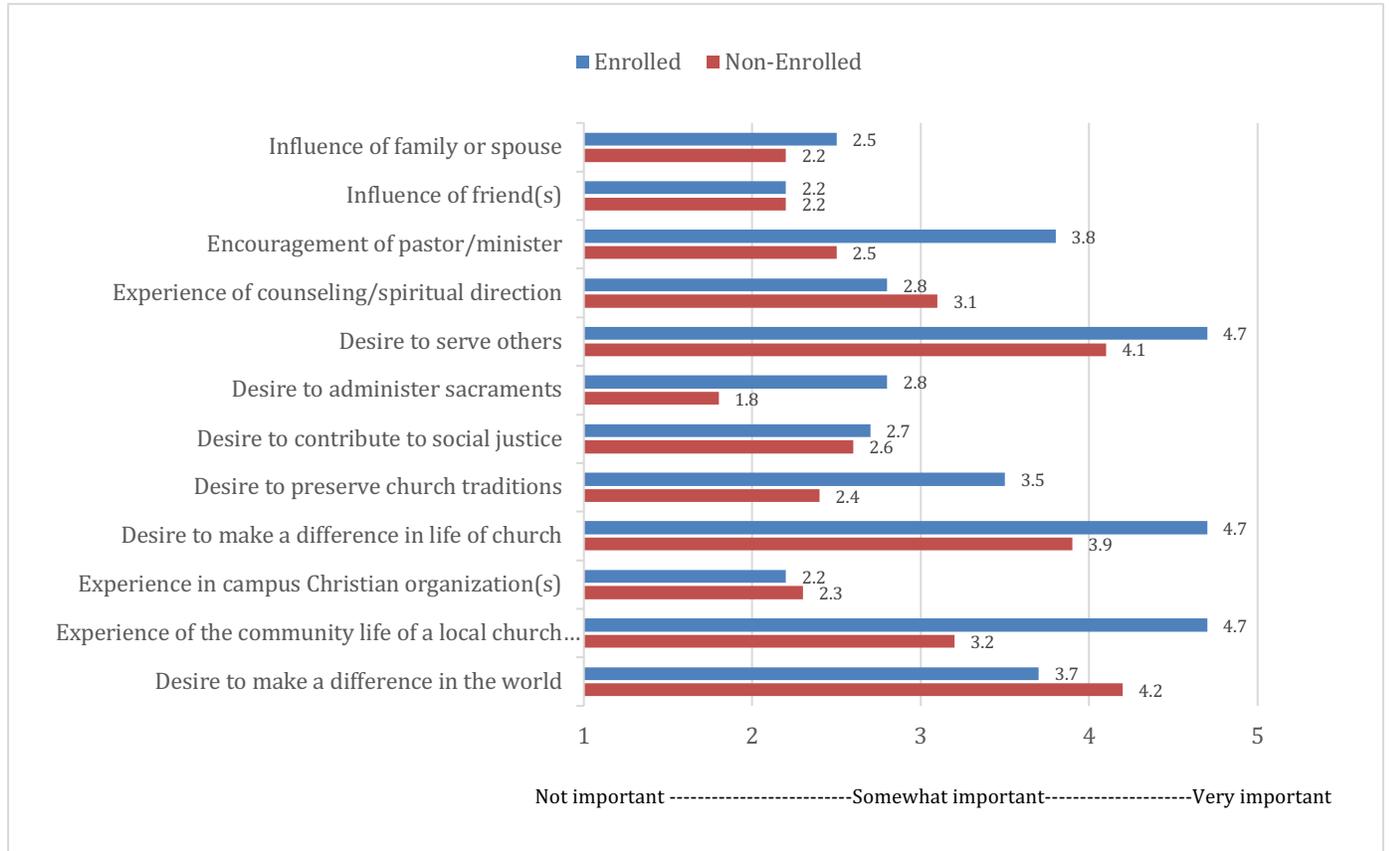


encouragement from religious superiors and faculty members/mentors from their undergraduate institutions, where non-enrolled students reported higher importance of prior participation in a vocational discernment program for their enrollment decision.

In terms of influences on the pursuit of theological studies in general (e.g., not specific to RTS-ATL), enrolled students generally rated items as more important than non-enrolled students did (Figure 12). This is most notable on the items related to the encouragement of a pastor or minister, the desire to serve others, administer the sacraments, preserve church traditions, make a

**Figure 12**

*Mean Importance of Community Characteristics in Decision to Pursue Theological Studies among Enrolled and Non-Enrolled Students*



difference in the life of the church, and prior experiences of the community life of a local church or worshiping community. Conversely, non-enrolled students placed higher importance on counseling experiences or spiritual direction and a desire to make a difference in the world than did enrolled students.

**Interview Data.** Qualitative findings regarding the extent to which a students' community influenced their decision to enroll revealed one major community interest to students attending RTS-ATL, an open and welcoming community (n = 8, 57.1%). Regarding those individuals that supported participants' decision to enroll and provided continual support, most enrolled participants stated that either a leader or member of their church congregation provided

the encouragement and ongoing support for attending seminary (n = 11, 78.5%). In addition, immediate family members such as spouse, parents, and children (n = 8, 57.1%) were also cited as important community members that provided encouragement and support regarding attending school.

These project findings are both congruent and incongruent with the quantitative portion of the project. Namely, the project's quantitative portion suggested that the influence of family or a spouse in enrolling in school did not weigh heavily in the decision-making process. However, of the participants interviewed, the family influence was reported to be significant.

**Summary.** Project findings regarding those elements that are influential in a students' community suggest that participants in this study that were enrolled in the RTS-ATL program were (a) highly active in leadership positions within their church, (b) valued their pastors support in pursuing seminary education, (c) are interested in providing service to others, (d) administer the sacraments, (e) preserve church traditions, (f) make a difference in the life of the church, and (g) prior experiences of the community life of a local church or worshiping community. Further, enrolled students highly valued an open and welcoming community. Conversely, non-enrolled students placed higher importance on counseling experiences or spiritual direction and a desire to make a difference in the world than did enrolled students. Some of these factors are similar to those found in personal characteristics above, such as enrolled students having a pre-determined goal for their studies, while non-enrolled applicants were more likely to be seeking clarity about future opportunities.

#### **Factors Influencing Reasons for Not Attending: PQ4**

While several of the factors related to not attending have been mentioned in sections above (such as finances, flexibility of coursework, location of school), this section refers

specifically to qualitative interviews that provided the opportunity to ask applicants who did not enroll for greater detail related to their decision. Unfortunately, there were only four participants in the interviews who were not enrolled in the RTS-ATL program. Therefore, findings for this project question are limited, and responses are varied. Suggested factors associated with potential students choice not to attend included (a) unsure about what degree to obtain, (b) financial issues, (c) desired a more flexible schedule, (d) a general lack of community, (e) no dormitories, (f) lack of agreement with academic focus (pastoral or academic), and desired more racial and gender diversity in administrators.

Specifically, two of the four non-enrolled students commented that they were unsure about the direction they wanted to go with their academic careers and hinted at financial concerns. For example, Participant Not Enrolled 1 stated, “I can also like audit classes, and that's like that will be much cheaper than like actually like going into school and like you know earning those like class credits towards a degree.” Similarly, Participant Not Enrolled 3 stated, “if I want to get ordained, I can audit classes, and I wouldn't have to necessarily, you know, like put that money into like earning a degree.”

Participant Not Enrolled 1 also stated her need for a more flexible schedule by stating:

I will probably have to work part-time while going to school, you know, and I'm not sure if I can like go to you know work full time and then do part-time ministry or part-time seminary and even then, you know, like class flexibility is a very important factor.

Regarding a general lack of community, Participant Not Enrolled 2 stated:

one really great way of community is being able to worship together, as the body of Christ... think that's one of the reasons why, when I look at RTS Atlanta that I do see some drawbacks to their concept of community.

Further, non-enrolled participants suggested the importance of dormitories in creating a sense of community, a general lack of agreement with RTS-ATL's academic focus as not being

more pastoral, and one non-enrolled participant suggested that they prefer to see a more racially and gender diverse administration.

**Summary.** Several variations in the preferences of enrolled and non-enrolled potential students were identified between the quantitative and qualitative portions of the project. Namely, non-enrolled potential students emphasized life experiences, a sense of community, giving back to the community, and the financial practicality of attending school. The following section will review recommendations regarding recruiting and enrolling potential students into the RLS-ATL campus programs.

## Recommendations

Based on the project findings, there are several recommendations or practice changes that could result in a higher enrollment yield. These address the issues mentioned above in terms of mentorship, prospective student tours, student housing, remote digital learning, financial aid, and focused admission attention.

**Build a network of influencers.** Enrolled and non-enrolled participants of the project reported the strong influence a pastor or other religiously affiliated individual had on their decision to enroll in a school program. Therefore, reaching potential students through a community of faith leaders and religiously affiliated mentors could significantly increase student enrollment at RTS-ATL. Specifically, most students who enrolled stated they had a personal connection with the school either because the school was recommended by a trusted religious figure in their lives or had friends or family that had previously attended. Further, quantitative findings regarding the importance of the community characteristics of encouragement to enroll in a seminary by a pastor were high for both enrolled and non-enrolled individuals. One way to address this is through alumni engagement, specifically asking the RTS-ATL alumni to encourage potential church leaders to consider applying. Another way for the university to accomplish this is to establish more of a presence and partnership within the community and nationwide churches in the United States. More involvement with churches across the country would require a multi-faceted approach wherein the administration and outreach programs led by student groups could facilitate this interaction. Referred to as *Cooperative Programs* by some seminary schools (Asbury Theological Seminary, 2021), an outreach program would allow RTS-ATL stakeholders to facilitate a lasting relationship with congregations across the U.S. that

would provide the campus more exposure to potential students. Implementing a cooperative program could potentially strengthen the current curriculum while attracting potential recruits.

**Bring more prospective students on campus.** Further, enrolled participants suggested the importance and positive effect of touring the campus before making an enrollment decision. Since this practice is already in place, the objective of this recommendation would be to increase the number of potential students that are invited to tour the campus. Prior research suggests that potential students who tour a campus are more likely to enroll (Jaschik, 2017). Therefore, getting potential applicants physically on the campus could significantly bolster enrollment at RTS-ATL campus. In addition, and in light of the current state of the nation and the COVID-19 pandemic, the availability of virtual tours is suggested to increase the likelihood that lower-income candidates that may not have the monetary funding to visit physically could take a virtual tour of the campus thereby bolstering engagement and potential recruitment (Rohizan et al., 2019). Implementing this recommendation would be at a minimal cost since the Information Technology (IT) department at RTS-ATL campus could most likely record and add a virtual tour plug-in to the University website.

**Build a sense of community.** Research findings regarding the sense of community suggest the importance of this element for both enrolled and non-enrolled students in this sample. The findings of this capstone project suggest importance and potential importance of a sense of community in recruiting and enrolling potential students. Enrolled students wished their campus had more opportunities for community building and relationship formation. Project findings suggest that those who did not enroll in RTS-ATL are not as active in their communities as leaders in worship. In addition, non-enrolled students reported valuing counseling experiences or spiritual direction more than enrolled students. These project findings suggest that potential candidates for the RTS-ATL campus programs are not only residing in churches but are dispersed into service-related professions such as counseling and other professions wherein counsel is given regarding spiritual direction. Potential places to seek out students include drug addiction facilities, foster and children detention centers, community development corporations, settlement houses, and child welfare and human services agencies. Therefore, a recommendation for connecting with these potential students consists of additional outreach and partnerships with local community organizations that serve the general public. Providing students with opportunities to engage with each other outside the classroom would also be a welcome addition to campus life, and is important to both enrolled students and applicants who did not enroll.

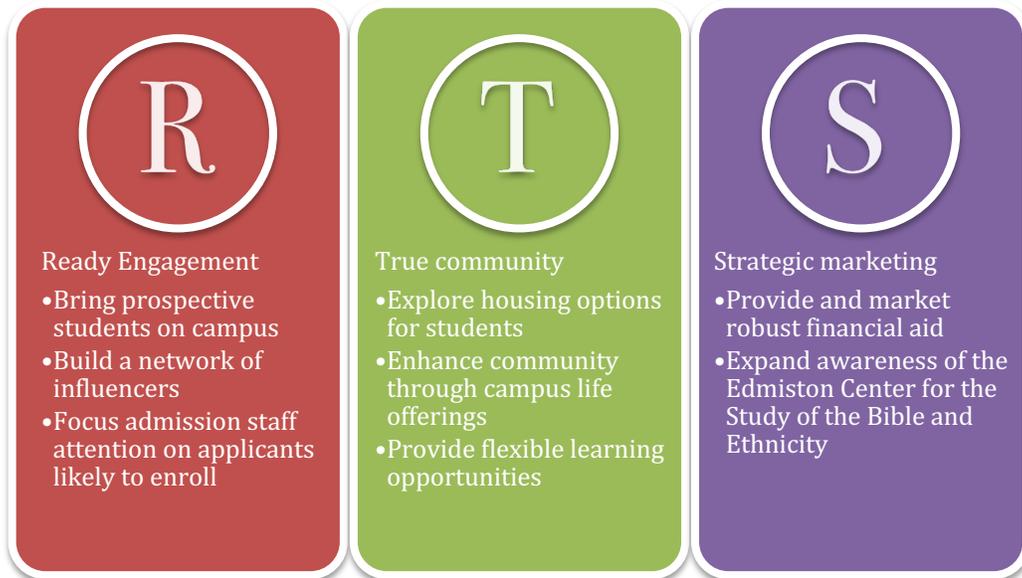
**Explore student housing options.** One way that enrolled students mentioned as bolstering campus life at other graduate schools is the implementation of campus housing. This serves the dual purpose of enhancing on-campus opportunities for community, as well as easing relocation for students who are outside of the immediate geographic area. While enrolled students did not name student housing as a factor in their enrollment decision, several of the students who did not enroll noted that a lack of student housing was a deterrent for enrollment. This could be accomplished by either building dormitories to house those students seeking a more immersed community-like experience, or partnering with local developers to build an off-campus community. Literature suggests that providing student housing significantly increases enrollment rates. Specifically, a research study exploring the enrollment rates at Ohio State University at Marion after building a student housing facility created a 10% increase in enrollment after two years (National Apartment Association, 2021; Ohio State University, 2016). Although an expensive endeavor and based on the availability of property, introducing this new complex could significantly increase the attractiveness of the RTL-ATL campus to potential students.

**Expand distributed classroom options.** Whether or not student housing is part of the plan, another theme that was important to both enrolled students and applicants who did not enroll was flexibility and accessibility of courses. Remote digital learning platforms are in use among RTS campuses, and expansion of digital learning opportunities could extend the applicant pool geographically and reduce the importance of location. Asynchronous learning would appeal to those enrolled students who would like to see more courses offered on weekends, as well as the applicants who did not enroll and worried about things like fitting in classes around a challenging work schedule, or how to attend class with a nursing infant.

**Enhance financial aid.** Another important factor for all participants (enrolled and non-enrolled) was financial aid. Debt was significantly higher among applicants who did not enroll, and participants across the board rated financial considerations as crucial in their decision-making process. Understandably, RTS-ATL does not have an unlimited supply of financial resources to provide what each applicant might consider to be sufficient financial aid. However, collaboration with local churches and organizations might be a resource to supply work-study opportunities to help address financial need. Continuing to build the campus' donor engagement may provide financial aid growth opportunities as well. Along these lines, RTS provides scholarship assistance to 78% of students, and 85% of students graduate without incurring seminary-related debt, according to the website (Financial Aid at RTS, n.d.). To locate this information, a prospective student has to navigate to Admissions, then click the button for Financial Aid, and then scroll halfway down the page. Given the importance of financial aid to prospective students, data about robust financial aid should be easier to find on the front page of the campus website.

**Focus admission staff on likely enrollees.** Focusing admission staff attention and marketing on factors identified as priorities could help target the resource utilization toward applicants who are more likely to enroll. It is clear that applicants with vocational direction and/or a call from God are more likely to enroll than applicants who are seeking vocational direction or seeking role clarity. Students who live within commuting distance are more likely to enroll, as well as students with a personal connection to the school, and students whose mentor encouraged them to attend seminary. These are qualifying factors that represent the target student, or at least the applicant who is more likely to become a student.

**Market the Edmiston Center.** Finally, several enrolled students named the unique Edmiston Center for the Study of the Bible and Ethnicity as a differentiator that informed their decision to attend RTS-ATL. The Edmiston Center is a new addition to this campus (as of 2020) and enhanced marketing of this unique resource has the potential to bring enrollment gains, considering the importance of academic rigor among study participants. RTS-ATL Leadership has expressed a desire to increase the diversity of the student body (Richard, 2021). Given the importance of location to study participants, and the unique position of the Greater Atlanta Area as a historical center for civil rights and race relations, greater visibility of the Edmiston Center in this geographic location could yield a more diverse applicant pool, as well as enrollment gains.



## **Conclusion**

I conducted a mixed-methods project to explore the key factors influencing students' choice to enroll in graduate theological education. RTS-ATL launched a campaign to have 750 graduates in the next 20 years. No specific plan has been implemented to reach that number of graduates. Currently, RTS-ATL is graduating roughly 20 students per year, which means the school needs to increase annual graduation rates by 85%. Competition is fierce, and student enrollment has been declining for the last two years, which parallels a decade-long nationwide trend at 55% of theological schools (Meinzer, 2020). As a result, a better understanding of the enrollment behaviors of current and prospective students was warranted.

I conducted semi-structured interviews, and collected secondary data from the ATS, the North-American accrediting organization for theological schools in the U.S. and Canada. The ESQ data was statistically analyzed along with a thematic analysis of the qualitative data. Project findings suggest several personal, institutional, and community characteristics attributed to students that enrolled and students that did not enroll at RTS-ATL. I provided practice recommendations based on these project findings.

As with any study project, there are inherent limitations. For example, the population sampled in this study consisted of predominantly enrolled students located in the Southern region of the United States. Therefore, these research findings are not generalizable to seminary schools outside the Southern region. Further, the sample size for both the quantitative and qualitative portions of this project was small. Specifically, the number of students that completed the survey was 23, and those students interviewed that did not attend RTS-ATL were also limited ( $n = 4$ ). Therefore, it cannot be suggested that data saturation was reached with this student population. Therefore, recommendations for future research include the sampling of a larger population of

enrolled and non-enrolled seminary participants to define this population's behaviors and needs better as it pertains to enrollment. The current project provides new insights into the enrollment behaviors of potential seminary students. Further, this project provides specific insights for the RTS-ATL campus. Minimal research exists regarding the enrollment behaviors of this student population.

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## Appendix A: Invitational E-Mail Messages

### 1) Message to students who applied but did not enroll at RTS:

Subject: Theological Education Study Invitation

Good morning,

My name is Eugene Cozonac and I am a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University. I am also a graduate of Reformed Theological Seminary. I am reaching out to you because in the past, you applied to study at Reformed Theological Seminary's Atlanta campus.

I invite you to participate in a research project that will help me understand the factors that influence a prospective student's decision to enroll in graduate theological education. I have your contact information from the Reformed Theological Seminary (Atlanta campus), and your participation in this study will contribute to improving admissions and organizational practices at RTS. Your responses will be confidential.

Completion of the survey entitles you to a \$10 gift card, and the time anticipated for completion is between 10 and 20 minutes. If you have any questions about the research study, please contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or xxx.xxx@vanderbilt.edu.

**Follow this link to the Survey:**

[\\${1://SurveyLink?d=Take the Survey}](#)

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:

[\\${1://SurveyURL}](#)

Thank you for your participation and support of this research project.

Sincerely,  
Eugene Cozonac  
Doctoral Candidate  
Vanderbilt University  
Peabody College

C: xxx-xxx-xxxx  
xxx.xxx@vanderbilt.edu

Follow the link to opt out of future emails:  
[\\${1://OptOutLink?d=Click here to unsubscribe}](#)

## **2) Message to students who are currently enrolled at RTS**

Subject: Get a free semester of seminary!

Research Participation

Greetings!

My name is Eugene Cozonac and I am a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University. I am also a graduate of Reformed Theological Seminary in Atlanta. I'd like to have the opportunity to interview seminary students as part of my research on factors that contribute to enrollment in graduate theological education.

Please let me know your availability for a 30 min call or meeting. Participants will receive a \$10 gift certificate (Amazon or Venmo) and will be entered into a raffle for a chance to receive paid tuition for your next semester at RTS Atlanta (I will make the semester tuition payment to RTS on the winner's behalf). Your responses in the interview will be confidential.

Please contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxx.xxx@vanderbilt.edu to schedule the interview.

Thank you for your participation and support of this study.

Sincerely,

Eugene Cozonac

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

### Semi-structured Interview Questions

- *Ask the participant if they are comfortable being recorded*

#### Personal Factors:

- Tell me about yourself. (Personal characteristics)
- [Grand tour question] Describe your journey to seminary.
- What can you see in your background that made you feel that you should pursue graduate studies at a seminary?
  - [enrolled only] What gave you confidence that you are in the right place?
  - What worried you about starting seminary?
- What else was important in your decision to apply/enroll?

#### Institutional Factors

- How did you find out about this seminary?
- What made you choose to apply to study at RTS-Atlanta?
- Describe your interactions with the enrollment office.
- What was important for you regarding a future school?
- [enrolled only] How did your perception of RTS change once you started classes?
- Did you apply to other seminaries?
  - How was RTS different from other schools?
- What are the drawbacks of RTS? What is missing at this school?
- What do you wish the ATL campus had or did?
- [enrolled only] Is there something that hinders your experience? Something that will make you quit?
- [enrolled only] What are the barriers that make it difficult for you to study?

#### Community Factors

- What kind of community do you need to thrive?
- How would you describe the community that you found at RTS?
  - Does this community expand beyond the faculty/staff and students on campus?
- Who were the people who supported you in making this decision to attend a seminary?
- [enrolled only] Who is supporting you now that you are enrolled?
- Who would you want to support you to ensure you are able to persevere in your studies in graduate school?

## Appendix C: RTS Prospective Student Survey

---

### Start of Block: Disclaimer and Start Survey

This study is conducted by Eugene Cozonac, a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University. You are invited to participate in this research project because you previously applied to study at Reformed Theological Seminary - Atlanta Campus. Your participation in this survey will help us understand the factors that influence a prospective student's decision to enroll in graduate theological education. Your responses will be confidential. The result of this survey will contribute to improving admissions and organizational practices at RTS.

This online survey should take about 18 minutes to complete.

Participants who complete the survey will have the option to receive a \$10 gift card (PayPal, Venmo, or Zelle) by providing a username on a payment platform.

Submission of the survey will be interpreted as your informed consent to participate and that you affirm that you are at least 18 years of age.

If you have any questions about the research study, please contact Eugene Cozonac at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxx.xxxx@vanderbilt.edu.

ELECTRONIC CONSENT: Please select your choice below.

Agree (and continue) (6)

Disagree (end survey) (7)

*Skip To: Q52 If This study is conducted by Eugene Cozonac, a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University. You are... = Disagree (end survey)*

*Skip To: End of Block If This study is conducted by Eugene Cozonac, a doctoral student at Vanderbilt University. You are... = Agree (and continue)*

---

Q52 Although you chose not to conduct this survey, I would like to know if you'd be available for a one hour interview about your journey towards graduate theological education. The interview will provide valuable information for this study, and help theological seminaries ensure their programs meet the needs of prospective students.

I would be happy to buy you lunch somewhere in the Metro Atlanta area, or schedule a call on the phone, Zoom, Skype or Microsoft Teams. Please fill out the contact information below. With questions or concerns, you can contact me directly at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxx.xxxx@vanderbilt.edu.

Please let me know if you'd be available for this interview:

- Yes, I am available for an interview. Here's my contact information to schedule the call or meeting: (5)  
\_\_\_\_\_
- No, I do not want to participate in an interview. (6)

*Skip To: End of Survey If Although you chose not to conduct this survey, I would like to know if you'd be available for a o... = Yes, I am available for an interview. Here's my contact information to schedule the call or meeting:*

*Skip To: End of Survey If Although you chose not to conduct this survey, I would like to know if you'd be available for a o... = No, I do not want to participate in an interview.*

**End of Block: Disclaimer and Start Survey**

---

**Start of Block: Default Question Block**

Q1 To which degree program did you apply at RTS Atlanta?

- MA Academic (MAR/MA/MTS) (5)
- MDiv (6)
- Certificate (7)
- Non-degree (8)
- Doctor of Ministry (10)
- Do not recall (9)

---

Q2 Were you planning to attend

- Full-time (1)
  - Part-time (2)
- 

Q3 Were you planning on taking the majority of courses

- On campus (1)
  - Online (2)
  - About half online, half on campus (3)
  - Unsure (4)
- 

Q4 How important was the availability of student housing?

- Of no importance (1)
  - Slightly important (2)
  - Somewhat important (3)
  - Important (4)
  - Very important (5)
-

Q5 Would you need to relocate in order to attend this program?

- Yes (1)
  - No (2)
  - Maybe (3)
- 

Q6 Gender

- Male (1)
  - Female (2)
  - Other (3) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Prefer not to say (4)
- 

Q7 In what year were you born?

Year (1)	▼ 1900 (1) ... 2049 (150)
----------	---------------------------

---

Q8 How would RTS classify your status?

- A domestic student (1)
  - An international student (2)
- 

Q9 With which of the following do you identify? (Check all that apply)

- Black, African American (1)
  - Native North American, First Nation, Indigenous (2)
  - Asian-descent or Pacific Islander (3)
  - Hispanic, Latino(a), Latin(a) (4)
  - White, Caucasian (5)
  - Other: (Please specify) (6) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Prefer not to disclose (7)
- 

Q10 At the time of applying to RTS, were you:

- Single (includes widowed/divorced) (1)
- Married (2)
- Other (3)

---

Q11 How many dependents did you have at the time of applying to RTS?

- None (1)
- One (2)
- Two (3)
- Three (4)
- Four or more (5)

*Skip To: Q12 If How many dependents did you have at the time of applying to RTS? = None*

---

Q11a How many hours a week did you plan to devote to primarily providing care for your dependents?

- Fewer than 10 hours (1)
  - 10-15 hours (2)
  - 16-20 hours (3)
  - 21-30 hours (4)
  - 31-40 hours (5)
  - More than 40 hours (6)
-

Q11b How would dependent care impact your choice of school or program?

- I was looking for a shorter degree program (1)
  - I wanted to enroll part-time (2)
  - I was looking for a school with more online courses (3)
  - I wanted a school closer to home or a network of support (4)
  - I require a specific schedule to coincide with dependent care (7)
  - It would not have made an impact on my choice of school or program (6)
  - Other: (Please specify) (5) \_\_\_\_\_
- 

Q12 How many hours a week were you planning to work at a paying job this year if you enrolled in seminary?

- No plans for paying job (1)
  - Fewer than 10 hours (2)
  - 10-15 hours (3)
  - 16-20 hours (4)
  - 21-30 hours (5)
  - 31-40 hours (6)
  - More than 40 hours (7)
-

Q13 How long would your commute be to the RTS campus in Marietta, GA?

- I live within walking distance of campus (1)
  - ½ to 1 hour (2)
  - 1 to 2 hours (3)
  - 2 to 4 hours (4)
  - More than 4 hours (5)
  - I take all of my classes online (6)
  - Commute unknown – would have required relocation (7)
- 

Q14 Did you complete an undergraduate degree prior to application?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

*Skip To: Q17a If Did you complete an undergraduate degree prior to application? = No*

---

Q15 From what type of undergraduate institution did you graduate?

- A public university, state college, or community college (1)
  - A private university or college (not religiously affiliated) (2)
  - A private, religiously affiliated university or college (3)
-

Q15a What type of undergraduate degree did you earn?

- Two-year Associate's Degree (1)
  - Degree from Technical School (2)
  - Bachelor's Degree (3)
- 

Q15b What was the area of your undergraduate major? (Check all that apply)

- Education (1)
  - Fine Arts (2)
  - Humanities (e.g., classics, English, history, languages) (3)
  - Natural/physical sciences (e.g., chemistry, mathematics, engineering) (4)
  - Philosophy (5)
  - Religious Studies (6)
  - Theology (7)
  - Social/behavioral sciences (e.g., economics, political science, psychology, sociology) (8)
  - Technical studies (e.g., business, communications, computers) (9)
-

Q16 What is your highest degree beyond the bachelor's?

- None (1)
  - EdD (2)
  - JD/LLB (3)
  - Master's (4)
  - MBA (5)
  - MD (6)
  - MDiv (7)
  - MSW (8)
  - PhD (9)
  - Other Degree (10)
  - Other Doctorate (11)
  - Other Professional (12)
- 

Q16a Was your graduate degree from a theological school or program?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

---

Q17a How much educational debt did you have at the time of application to RTS?

- None (1)
  - Less than \$10,000 (2)
  - \$10,000 to \$19,999 (3)
  - \$20,000 to \$29,999 (4)
  - \$30,000 to \$39,999 (5)
  - \$40,000 to \$59,999 (6)
  - \$60,000 to \$79,999 (7)
  - \$80,000 or more (8)
-

Q17b How much other debt did you have at the time of application (non-educational debt, excluding home mortgage, e.g., credit card, car loan)?

- None (1)
  - Less than \$10,000 (2)
  - \$10,000 to \$19,999 (3)
  - \$20,000 to \$29,999 (4)
  - \$30,000 to \$39,999 (5)
  - \$40,000 to \$59,999 (6)
  - \$60,000 to \$79,999 (7)
  - \$80,000 or more (8)
- 

Q17c At the time of application, were you responsible for payments on the student loans or tuition of a family member other than yourself?

- Yes (1)
  - No (2)
-

18 In the past five years, have you held, been elected to, or been appointed to a leadership position in: (Check all that apply)

- Your local church (1)
- Other church body or religious organization (2)
- School or college organization (3)
- Civic or fraternal organization (4)
- Other leadership position (5)
- No recent leadership position (6)

---

19a Current denomination or religious tradition

▼ African Methodist Episcopal (1) ... Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (123)

---

20 In what denomination or religious tradition were you primarily raised and/or formed?

▼ African Methodist Episcopal (1) ... Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (123)

21 How important were the following in your decision to pursue theological education? (Select answer most closely approximating the importance of each factor.)

	Of no importance (1)	Of little importance (2)	Somewhat important (3)	Important (4)	Very important (5)
To increase my potential to get a job (19)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Intellectual interest in religious / theological questions (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Opportunity for study and growth (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Influence of family or spouse (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Influence of friend(s) (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Encouragement of pastor / minister (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Experience of counseling/spiritual direction (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Experienced a call from God (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Promise of spiritual fulfillment (8)	<input type="radio"/>				
Search for meaning in life (9)	<input type="radio"/>				
To discern God's will (10)	<input type="radio"/>				
Desire to serve others (11)	<input type="radio"/>				
Desire to administer the sacraments (12)	<input type="radio"/>				
Desire to contribute to the cause of social justice (13)	<input type="radio"/>				
Desire to preserve traditions of the church (14)	<input type="radio"/>				
Desire to make a difference in life of church (15)	<input type="radio"/>				
Experience in campus Christian organization (16)	<input type="radio"/>				

Experience of the  
community life of  
a local church or  
worshipping  
community (17)



Desire to make a  
difference in the  
world (18)



22 How important were the following when deciding whether to attend RTS?

	Of no importance (1)	Of little importance (2)	Somewhat important (3)	Important (4)	Very important (5)
Quality of the faculty (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Curriculum (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Academic reputation of the school (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
University / college affiliation (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Access to other theological schools / cross- registration (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Availability of distance learning (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Extension site of main campus (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Flexible class schedule (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Denominational affiliation (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Comfort with the school's doctrinal positions/theological perspective (10)	<input type="radio"/>				
Encouragement of my pastor (11)	<input type="radio"/>				
Sent by religious superior (12)	<input type="radio"/>				
Recommended by a graduate/current student (13)	<input type="radio"/>				
Encouragement of a faculty member/mentor from my college (14)	<input type="radio"/>				
Participation in a vocational discernment program (high school or college) (15)	<input type="radio"/>				
Family reasons (16)	<input type="radio"/>				

Quality of interactions with admissions staff (17)	<input type="radio"/>				
Good financial aid assistance (18)	<input type="radio"/>				
Wanted a school close to home / work (19)	<input type="radio"/>				
Diverse / multicultural community (20)	<input type="radio"/>				
Sense of community at the school (21)	<input type="radio"/>				

Page Break

23 How did you first learn about RTS Atlanta?

- Graduate/Alumni (1)
  - Relative (2)
  - Friend (3)
  - Pastor (4)
  - Religious superior (5)
  - Current student (6)
  - College chaplain, advisor, or other college contact (7)
  - RTS recruiter (8)
  - Know a particular faculty member(s) at RTS (9)
  - Online ad (10)
  - Print ad or mailing (11)
  - RTS publications (12)
  - Conference or church event (13)
  - School Website (14)
  - Web search (15)
  - Social media search (16)
  - RTS initiated contact with me (17)
-

24 After hearing about RTS, how did you gain more information about it? (Check all that apply)

- Viewed school Website (1)
- Requested information via the school Website (2)
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) (3)
- Communicated with school staff (4)
- Communicated with current student/graduate (5)
- Communicated with school faculty (6)
- Wrote to the school (7)
- Telephoned the school (8)
- Visited the RTS-Atlanta campus (9)
- Visited another RTS campus (10)

---

*Display This Question:*

*If After hearing about RTS, how did you gain more information about it? (Check all that apply) = Visited the RTS-Atlanta campus*

25 How important was that visit to your decision?

- Of no importance (1)
  - Slightly important (2)
  - Somewhat important (3)
  - Important (4)
  - Very important (5)
- 

26 How significant was financial aid assistance in your decision?

- Of no importance (1)
  - Slightly important (2)
  - Somewhat important (3)
  - Important (4)
  - Very important (5)
- 

27a Are you currently engaged in ministerial work?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

*Skip To: 28 If Are you currently engaged in ministerial work? = No*

---

27b Is that ministerial work ...

- Full-time paid (1)
  - Full-time volunteer (2)
  - Part-time paid (3)
  - Part-time volunteer (4)
- 

28 If attending another seminary, are you currently working full-time or part-time?

- Full-time (1)
- Part-time (2)
- I do not intend to work in a paid position. (3)
- I am not enrolled in another seminary (4)

*Skip To: 30 If attending another seminary, are you currently working full-time or part-time? = I do not intend to work in a paid position.*

*Skip To: Interview If attending another seminary, are you currently working full-time or part-time? = I am not enrolled in another seminary*

---

28a Do you anticipate holding multiple positions at the same time?

- Yes (1)
  - Yes, and one or more position will be ministerial work (bi-vocational ministry) (2)
  - Unsure, but at least one position will be ministerial work (3)
  - Unsure (4)
  - No (5)
- 

Q42 Upon graduating from graduate school, what types of paid positions do you anticipate having? (Check all that apply)

- Congregational/parish ministry (1)
  - Teaching or educational setting (2)
  - Healthcare chaplain or counselor (3)
  - Military chaplain (6)
  - Faith-based nonprofit (4)
  - Other: Please explain (5) \_\_\_\_\_
-

30 Do you anticipate holding a volunteer/unpaid ministerial position after graduation?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Unsure (3)

*Skip To: Interview If Do you anticipate holding a volunteer/unpaid ministerial position after graduation? = No*

---

30a What type of ministerial position?

- Pastor, priest, minister of a congregation/parish (1)
  - Associate or assistant pastor, priest, or minister (2)
  - Minister or director of Christian/religious education (3)
  - Youth work or ministry (4)
  - Musician or liturgist (5)
  - Spiritual director (6)
  - New church development/church planting/evangelism (7)
  - Other position within a congregation/parish context (8)
  - Unsure (9)
-

30b Will that position be:

Full-time (1)

Part-time (2)

Unsure (3)

Thank you so much for participating in this survey! On the next page you can enter your payment information so that I can transfer \$10.

I would love to learn more about your experience in your journey to seminary education. Would you be available for a one hour interview in person or via conference call?

Please let me know if you'd be available for this interview:

Yes, I am available for an interview. Here's my contact information to schedule the call or meeting: (5)

No, I do not want to participate in an interview. (6)

---

Page Break

Payment Thank you for completing this survey. Please select which type of gift certificate you'd like to receive, and provide your email address or username. A \$10 transfer will be made as appreciation for your time and support for this study.

- Amazon.com (email) (5) \_\_\_\_\_
- Paypal (email) (7) \_\_\_\_\_
- Venmo Cash (username) (8) \_\_\_\_\_
- Zelle Cash (username) (9) \_\_\_\_\_
- Western Union (Full legal name, country, email address) (6)  
\_\_\_\_\_

End of Block: Default Question Block

---

## Appendix D: NVivo Code Book

Name	Description
Community Characteristics	Those attributes assigned to the community
Characteristics of Students' Community that Influenced Enrolment	Factors that existed in the students' community that influenced their decision to enroll.
Desired Community	What students were seeking for.
Build Relationships with Professors	Building rapport with the professors was of importance.
Christian Community	Students were seeking a Christian community.
Community and Family Feel	Students were seeking a community feeling and feeling like they were part of an extended family in their worship of God.
Opportunity to Mingle with other Students	Having the opportunity to engage with other students inside and out of the classroom was important.
Suggestions for Fostering a Sense of Community	Ideas to promote the sense of community.
Realistic and Empathetic Community	Having a community that was realistic and cared about its members by showing empathy.
Stronger Relationship with Local Churches	Being connected to a local community of faith.
People Providing Continual Support	Those individuals that provided support long after enrolment.

Name	Description
Friends	People that the participant had an established interpersonal relationship with.
Immediate Family	Close relatives such as mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, uncle, grandparents, etc.
The Church Congregation	People that attended and ran the church that they were/are a member of.
Religiously Affiliated Mentor	A person that is associated with religion and also helped to guide the participant in some way during their life experiences.
Work Organization	Members of their place of employment.
People that Supported Enrolment	Individuals that encouraged participants to enroll in the school and program.
Immediate Family	Those individuals of direct relation such as mother, father, sister, brother, aunts, uncles, grandparents, etc.
Other Authoritative Figures	People that help authoritative positions in the participants life such as their boss at work, leaders of their congregation, etc.
The Lord	God, the Creator of the universe.
Perceptions of RTS-ATL Community	What participants thought about the RTS community.
Accepting of People of Color	The felt that they were welcome if they were a person of color.
Easy Application Process	The steps necessary to apply and the process was very simple to do.
Open and Welcoming	The community feeling was very open and made the students feel very welcome.
Factors Influencing Reason for Not Attending	Reasons the participants chose not to attend the school and program.

Name	Description
Did not Enroll Anywhere	The person did not enroll in any other seminary after applying at RTS-ATL.
Desires a Flexible schedule	Students wanted to have more time in their schedule to do other things outside of the academic setting.
Financial Issues	Due to a lack of money, it would have been challenging to attend.
Neither parent attended College	No interest or pressure to attend college because neither parent attended college.
Still Unsure about Degree and Direction	The participant was unsure if they really wanted to attend the school and program.
Wants more racial and gender diverse administration	The administration did not reflect the diversity of the student body and students wanted to see more minorities as administrators.
Was not Contacted Via Phone	Had a poor experience regarding their application to the school which included a lack of a telephone call to encourage them to complete their application and to apply.
Enrolled in Another Seminary	Enrolled in a different school other than RTS-ATL.
Doesn't have Dormitories	Participants did not enroll in RTS-ATL because they did not have a place to live on campus.
Lacks a Sense of Christian Community	Participants perceived that the school lacked a sense of Christian community and therefore they were not interested in attending,
Other school had an Emphasis on Preaching	Participant preferred a school that placed a bigger emphasis on teaching students how to preach. Therefore, they perceived that RTS-ATL did not place an emphasis on preaching and therefore chose another school/direction.
Institutional Characteristics	Attributes of the institution

Name	Description
Important Institutional Characteristics	Factors participants felt was important characteristics of the institution in making their decision regarding which school/program to seek.
Accepting of People of Color	Minority students feel welcome and accepted.
Accessibility and Convenience of the Program	Factors participants considered that related to the ease and convenience of the program
Depth of Programming	How much/deep the program teaches ministry.
Freedom to Pick Courses	Independence and freedom of choice in the courses participants are allowed to pick to meet the degree requirements.
In Person Classes	Classes that take place face-to-face as opposed to online or partially online and partially in class face-to-face.
Length of the Certificate Program	The amount of time it takes to complete the program.
Location	Geographical or physical location of the program.