

Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education

Summary Reflections on Final Peer Group Reports

In October 2018, the eighteen peer groups studying particular educational models and practices as part of the ATS Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education project submitted final reports of their work. The report template asked for responses to the following questions.

1. *Why did the schools in the group engage this educational model or practice?*
2. *What are the **most crucial issues and questions** engaged by the group?*
3. *What are the most significant potential **opportunities/benefits** for this model or practice? For the school, for students, for faculty, for the church and/or other stakeholders?*
4. *What are the most significant **challenges/obstacles** that could keep this model or practice from flourishing?*
5. *How is the **educational effectiveness** of the model or practice demonstrated?*
6. *How is the **financial viability** of the educational model or practice demonstrated?*
7. *Are there unexpected **insights, innovative ideas, or possibilities** that have emerged through the group's work?*
8. *List (briefly) key **recommended practices** for this educational model or practice.*
9. *As you work on this particular educational model or practice, what are the **educational principles** that are served by the model or practice?*
10. *Are there implications from your group's work for the possible process of redevelopment of the **Standards of Accreditation**?*
11. *What are possible implications of your group's work for the **broader work of theological education**?*

These reflections offer a summary of the key themes in the reports under eleven headings. The headings represent not only areas frequently mentioned, but also some of the more important emphases that emerged during the work of the peer groups.

Executive Summary

The eleven themes.

1. Schools are working to provide greater **access** to students, through developing “on-ramps” for students bringing non-traditional credentials to graduate theological study, distributed learning programs, scheduling and academic calendar adjustments, programs for particular student constituencies, and work to address costs and student debt loads.
2. There exist a broad range of efforts to reduce the **costs to students** for theological studies, including scholarships, reduced-credit degree programs, and online programs that allow students to remain in current employment and living circumstances.
3. Schools are being remarkably innovative, and doing so to serve the institutions’ **missions**.
4. All of the groups stressed the importance of **educational quality**, with schools accountable to each other and expressing their understandings of educational quality in relation to their constituencies and their needs. The peer groups emphasized the necessity of assessment of quality and asked for more effective ways to measure quality across diversities of theological emphasis, cultures, school missions, and educational models.
5. **Formation** of students *and* faculty has become a central part of the conversations across the Association. Generally corresponding to the fourfold dimensions of formation in the Roman Catholic *Program for Priestly Formation*, (intellectual, pastoral, human, and spiritual), but utilizing

different language and concepts drawn from the particular theological traditions of the schools, there is widespread agreement on the necessity of the four dimensions and the need for better balance between them.

6. There is a growing need for **faculty development** which is crucial to prepare faculty to serve new educational models, new constituents, multiple cultural realities, and changing faculty roles.
7. Students as well as institutions must develop **cultural competence** to serve increasingly culturally diverse communities, both in North America and around the globe.
8. The peer groups asked that there be clearer definition of the different **degrees** accredited by ATS and the distinctions between them, as well as the particular character of *graduate* theological education within the larger context of theological studies both before seminary and throughout the life of the religious leader.
9. Many schools are engaging in **collaborations** with a broad range of institutions, including other theological schools, denominational bodies, institutes, centers, and colleges and universities, both in North America and around the world.
10. A number of innovations have spurred broader reflection on an institutions **educational philosophy**, and explorations of online learning, for example, have encouraged thinking about **pedagogy** that has enhanced on-campus programs as well.
11. Discussion of educational models and practices leads naturally to assessment of institutional **resources** and the frequent challenge of insufficient human, financial, and technological capital to fulfill the school's mission. Many of the educational models explored by the peer groups help facilitate education for students, but often by adding strain to institutional resources.
12. **Technologies** are ever present and can be powerful educational tools, so long as they are utilized to serve the school's mission and do not become an end in themselves.

Access

One of the key issues for theological education in the 21st century is student access to the theological training they need. Schools have engaged a wide range of programs and processes to provide access to an increasingly diverse student constituency. The peer groups revealed a range of these activities and recommended a number of best practices and possible modifications of the Standards of Accreditation to accommodate students. In many cases, schools noted that these changes were essential to enable them to fulfill their mission to provide quality theological education for audiences beyond those they served in the past.

Some qualified students come to graduate theological study without having earned a baccalaureate degree, and the necessity of pursuing an undergraduate degree would create an insurmountable barrier to their preparation for ministry, in terms of both cost and time. Schools have developed effective and sophisticated ways to assess the potential of these students successfully to engage graduate theological studies and there are scores of success stories of students who have completed master's degrees and moved into or continued in fruitful service. It is also the case that some bachelor's degrees provide much better preparation for graduate theological study than others. Assessment of potential is time-consuming and complex work, however, and schools are working to find more efficient and effective ways to do it, including already developed patterns of the assessment of prior learning. Greater accuracy in measuring and affirming what students bring to their theological study is a matter of both service and of equity. Underserved populations typically have lower percentages of people with bachelor's degrees. Both the university divinity school peer group and the residential schools peer group noted that this and other factors might make their programs inaccessible to some underserved communities. A number of peer groups recommended that a more robust understanding of prior learning assessment be included in the Standards. (Assessment of prior learning may also be utilized for those applying for the doctor of

ministry degree.) Schools must also be ready to provide student services and academic support for these non-traditional students.

The peer group focusing on programs for students without a bachelor's degree also noted particular strengths of students in these programs, such as strong motivation to pursue and complete their studies, life experience that can contribute to learning, and, for many, ongoing service in a variety of ministries that can give immediacy to their studies. Schools may benefit from increased enrollment, of course, through admission of qualified non-bachelor's degree holding students.

When combined with digital tools, such as online learning and archives of materials, programs for those without baccalaureate degrees can provide both broader reach and more effective learning. Digital archives, for example, allow students to review material and adapt their pace of study more to life circumstances. Qualified students, both local and global, are able to access graduate theological study that was simply unavailable to them previously. Given changes in population demographics in the United States and Canada, some schools have begun offering programming in languages other than English to give students for whom English is a second language greater access to graduate theological study. The possibility to admit otherwise qualified students without the bachelor's degree is an important "on ramp" for those in some communities for whom undergraduate education has not always been readily accessible.

Schools have explored a range of curricula and scheduling featuring greater flexibility to provide access to non-traditional students. In addition to evening, weekend, block, and intensive scheduling, some schools are experimenting with "stackable credentials" that allow students multiple entry and exit points in their theological study and allow them to build upon previous work without duplication of effort or lost time. For example, a year of study might lead to a certificate, an additional year to a master of arts degree, and a third year to a master of divinity.

A number of peer groups questioned the origin and rationale behind the so-called "15% rule" that limits the percentage of students without bachelor's degrees in each professional master's degree program. They wondered whether there was actual evidence of the impact of having non-bachelor's students in classes, either on that group of students or their peers.

These are just a few examples of the extensive work underway in ATS schools to provide improved access to theological education.

Cost to Students

As costs of doing business continue to rise and many traditional sources of support have declined, schools have passed on some costs to students. There has been considerable attention given to the problem of high student debt for theological study, especially since the compensation of many theological school graduates is modest at best. Unfortunately, without assistance the considerable costs of graduate theological study make it virtually inaccessible for some students, particularly those coming from less affluent communities. Even the most financially strong theological schools find that some students accumulate debt for living expenses even if tuition and fees are fully covered by scholarships.

At the same time, though, schools are working with great energy and, in many cases, real effectiveness to make theological study more affordable for students. Inevitably, perhaps, some of the efforts are driven by competition and the need to keep pace with peer schools. On the other hand, theological schools traditionally have been sensitive to the financial burdens they place on students and continue long-standing efforts to provide scholarship support and keep tuition, fees, and living expenses as low as

possible. One focus of the Educational Models and Practices project was to identify ways schools were shaping educational programming to be both more accessible and more affordable.

The peer groups studying online programs agreed that while institutional costs were normally *not* lowered through online programs, costs for students could be substantially decreased, such as the costs of re-location and the potentially higher living expenses at the school's location. At the same time online students can continue in the work of ministry or other occupations without interruption.

A number of schools have reduced credit requirements for both master of divinity and master of arts degrees, in part at least to reduce the cost of those programs for students. Of course, fewer tuition dollars creates a revenue gap for the school. In fact, nearly all of the educational models and practices studied in the educational models and practices project place additional resource burdens on institutions, while at the same time providing greater access, lower cost, and more effective education for students. It is simply unfair to generalize that schools are uncaring or inattentive to the financial burdens theological education places on students. It is more accurate to say that the schools face daunting institutional financial challenges and that they are extending themselves in extraordinary ways to provide affordable access to students.

Mission

Across the peer groups, as participants discussed their educational models and practices they emphasized their work as a means to fulfill their institutional mission. Also striking were both the common educational missions of the schools *and* the remarkable diversity of particular emphases.

Inherent in all were the desire to serve constituents with effective theological education for the vocations chosen by graduates. In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, in response to the call of the Second Vatican Council through documents such as *Lumen Gentium* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, many schools are re-tooling to serve the growing numbers of candidates for the permanent diaconate and lay ecclesial ministers. Central to that mission is the formation of all students by integration of the four dimensions of formation: intellectual, pastoral, human, and spiritual. The challenge to do so is particularly great for schools whose orientation has been to prepare students for the priesthood, but who are now serving a much broader range of students.

Other schools are developing programming to serve global constituencies to fulfill the *missio Dei* that, for them, is a central goal of theological education. The peer groups studying global partnerships noted the fundamental principle that any such partnerships must be grounded on the school's heritage, tradition, and mission.

Finding new "on ramps" for students without traditional forms of preparation is a common pursuit of a number of schools seeking to fulfill their mission to serve under-represented constituencies through certificates as well as master's and doctoral degrees. Serving constituencies of students who historically have not been served has required schools to think more intentionally and strategically about whom their mission calls them to serve. Some schools, for example those developed to serve particular Asian descent communities, are having to adapt their approaches to fulfilling their mission as constituencies change and they seek to serve both the immigrant community *and* succeeding generations. Others have implemented programs for students without bachelor's degrees or programs that connect earning bachelor's and master's degrees, in order to serve constituents by facilitating the timely preparation of graduates for service.

The schools implementing programs of competency-based theological education are a particularly illustrative example of how a school's mission to serve particular constituencies can remain constant while at the same time the school, in close consultation with its constituents, embraces an innovative educational model to fulfill the mission. Some have adopted online education as an effective means to fulfill their mission to serve geographically dispersed constituents. Other schools are fully committed to traditional residential models of theological education because of denominational mandates, while at the same time responding to changing circumstances by making important adaptations to that model to ensure that it is as effective as possible.

Schools embedded or affiliated with colleges or universities work to fulfill their mission to serve constituencies, including the "host" institution. For example, many divinity schools serve the mission of the university and their other constituencies through scholarship, guidance and leadership on ethical and social issues, and the interaction of theological disciplines with the range of other disciplines within the university. Their doctoral programs produce leaders for schools, as well as for congregations, dioceses, and judicatories.

Quality

One of the most striking themes to emerge from the peer groups, without exception, was a commitment of the schools to quality theological education. In sharp contrast to concerns that innovations would compromise quality, the schools and their personnel are committed to providing theological education of consistently high quality in order to serve their students and their constituencies. Often the innovations themselves are attempts to ensure quality in the midst of dramatic changes in students, society, higher education, and communities of faith and other areas of service.

Given the wide diversity of the schools, their missions, and their constituencies, definitions of "quality" were by no means identical, but in every peer group there was a common emphasis on providing excellent theological education that would best serve the needs of the various communities through preparation of leaders with knowledge, skill, character, and spiritual depth. The peer groups made the convincing case that providing their particular educational models and practices enhanced the quality of theological education. Here are a few examples.

- The groups studying Global partnerships maintained that "global theological education is better education," by facilitating culturally enriched educational practices and nurturing cultural competence. If crafted appropriately, both partners benefit from global connections. Transformation takes place, not only of faculty and students, but entire institutions gain expanded awareness, appreciation for the faith and practice of global partners, and engagement outside normal patterns of education and religious life. Moving into global partnerships often requires schools to re-examine assumptions and develop better ways to teach, learn, and assess effectiveness.
- The historically black theological schools asserted that providing theological education from the unique perspective of the African-American context and community is a superior way to prepare graduates to serve that community. Not only do those schools have a distinctive commitment to serve the community and to provide personalized theological education particularly suited for African-American students, but they are positioned to be able both to affirm and to critique the Black Church. In some historically black theological schools, faculty both teach and serve as active ministry practitioners, enabling them to remain current and able to integrate their academic and practical expertise for the benefit of students.

- Programs in prisons are “transformational” for the incarcerated, and also for prison personnel, for non-incarcerated co-learners, for those who teach in the programs, and for visitors to the programs. This group emphasized that the theological disciplines must “hear, incorporate, and learn alongside the wisdoms of marginalized people.”
- Residential theological education provides distinctive opportunities for education and formation through community life, worship, relationship building, and a unique opportunity and ability to hand on tradition and ethos. Intentional engagement of the residential model can create what the group called an “intensive nurturing environment.” On the other hand, the group noted the need for better ways to assess the benefits and impacts of residential theological education, results that have been assumed but not necessarily proven. In the midst of change and innovation, the members of the group assert that the standards must continue to affirm this model, even as others are embraced.
- Graduate theological education in a university context gives a distinctive opportunity to provide professional training for religious leadership in the context of rigorous academics that maintain the “liberal arts” character of theological education as “broad humanistic education.” These schools are distinctively situated to continue the long tradition of theology as a “discipline of engagement” with others in the university. Other ATS schools may be freer to take creative approaches since some university structures create clear boundaries for innovations.
- Online theological education, not only has its own integrity, but explorations of online programs often provide the occasion to re-evaluate pedagogy and the use of technologies in other programs. Many technologies are increasingly familiar to and normal to constituencies, and online programs can nudge schools toward effective engagement with students through those means. Online programs must take up the challenge of incorporating “extracurricular and co-curricular” elements of theological education and formation in new formats, and also adapting new ways of developing and sustaining community for the benefit of people of faith and their leaders. Students who have studied online often continue engagement through the relationships that have formed and avoid some aspects of loneliness in ministry. The online peer groups acknowledge that some curricular areas are more difficult than others to address in online formats, for example, preaching and spiritual formation, but many have found creative and effective ways of addressing those challenges. Most online programs utilize a range of strategies to create face-to-face interaction, including covenant groups of students, onsite mentors, spiritual directors, and ministry reflection groups. Both peer groups insisted that quality theological education must be the goal of *all* models of theological education and recommended that revised Standards not differentiate in their requirements for residential, online, and other forms of theological education.
- Programs that link earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees are able to provide a seamless path toward ministry and allow schools to engage the full educational time, often four or five years, for formation of students and bi-vocational training from the beginning. Members of the peer group agreed that “speed is not an educational value,” but that linked programs could be of benefit in a number of ways. They noted the complexity of assessing the effectiveness of “accelerated” models, but argued that this challenge likely signals complexities in all models. They wondered whether the tools currently in use are truly effective and adequate measures of effectiveness, for example, GPA, placement rates, student-reported readiness, and faculty-reported readiness of students.

- Members of the group studying programs for applicants without bachelor's degrees agreed that they did *not* want to promote anything that devalues education. Schools that admit non-BA students must ensure that they do not compromise the school's reputations and maintain institutional integrity by serving admitted students well. They also maintain that there are many students who do not have a bachelor's degree who are equipped and able to accomplish graduate theological study. They note that students who come to theological study lacking a bachelor's degree normally bring ministry experience and are often highly motivated to pursue theological study. Attending to these constituents is also an issue of justice since many on this pathway are from underrepresented constituencies.
- The peer group studying the duration of the master of divinity degree insisted that in reducing the number of required credits, the quality of the degree must not be compromised. At the same time they argued that seminary degrees must be viewed in the larger context of lifelong learning. Seminaries have never been able to do all that is needed to prepare persons for lifelong religious leadership. A fundamental question raised by the group was whether "duration" is an appropriate proxy for effectiveness.
- Competency-based theological education is customized to individual students, but remains communal through extensive interaction with faculty, mentors, and peers. Programs also can be contextualized to particular ministry settings. The exploration of competency-based models provides the opportunity to re-envision theological education from the ground up. In large part, competency-based theological education can be considered a logical result of an emphasis on student learning outcomes. Assessment of student learning is at the heart of CBTE which requires student mastery of material. A range of the peer groups wondered if culturally attuned assessment of competencies related to prior learning could replace particular degrees as qualifications for admission to study.
- Programs to prepare permanent deacons are guided by the quality expectations of the *National Directory for the Formation, Ministry, and Life of Permanent Deacons in the United States*, while wrestling with a number of challenges to meet those expectations. Many programs train students with a wide range of backgrounds and abilities, and often include students seeking graduate credit as well as those pursuing non-credit certificates. The EMP program awarded an innovation grant to two of the peer group schools to convene constituents for conversations toward developing a model and recommendations about ways to fulfill the requirements of the *Directory*.
- The two peer groups studying Doctor of Ministry programs insisted on maintaining the quality of programs while also "considering how theological schools might respond to changing ministerial and educational needs to create new potential pathways to DMin admission." They noted, for example, the need to address a lack of preparation for some DMin students in doctoral-level research and writing, while at the same time finding more effective ways to measure appropriate competencies for admission to the degree.

In the midst of these affirmations of quality, a strong thread tied them together insisting on the need to develop ever better instruments and processes to assess the effectiveness of the wide range of educational models and practices.

Formation

It was somewhat surprising to those who facilitated the peer groups how frequently the topic of formation of students emerged. While the language of "formation" and its dimensions are more familiar

to Roman Catholic schools, many Protestant schools are also deeply invested in broad understandings of formation.

At the beginning of the educational models and practices project a survey of academic deans had raised the question by asking which of the four dimensions of formation (intellectual, pastoral, human, or spiritual) was most strongly emphasized in their school. As one might expect, “intellectual” formation was mentioned most frequently, followed closely by “pastoral” formation. Less frequently named but still significant were those institutions where “human” and “spiritual” formation were cited as most characteristic.

The current ATS Standards of Accreditation point to all four dimensions with varied language and emphasis, but the consensus of the groups was that there should be an effort to attain a greater balance across the four dimensions. They also argued that the accrediting standards would benefit from a stronger framework conceptualizing “formation.” Theological education should be integrative, both across disciplines and across dimensions of formation. Former ATS Executive Director, Daniel Aleshire, spoke of a shift underway in graduate theological education from an emphasis on a “professional” model to a more “formational” model. The move was toward theological study that emphasized the formation of persons as much as the development of knowledge and skills.

The peer groups seemed to agree. They argued that theological education is “inherently formational,” perhaps in ways that exceed the formational aspects of other forms of graduate professional education.¹ When thinking about student formation broadly, including the four dimensions in one form or another, many of the groups emphasized the importance of broad student formation, especially in a context of many students coming to graduate theological study without having experienced formation through the networks of local congregations, Sunday schools, youth groups, ministries to young adults, undergraduate study at Christian colleges or universities, and other institutions that prepared previous generations for seminary. As a generalization, it is probably fair to say that many students coming to seminary now are less formed than previous generations, for example, in knowledge of the Bible, understandings of congregational life, or skills in writing and speaking. Or it might be better to say that they are “differently” formed, bringing a range of experiences, such as international travel and experience in cultural diversities, that previous generations may have lacked.

The peer group that studied formation in online contexts stressed the centrality of formation and noted that while formation can and does happen through the online medium, it is important also to develop structures and persons to guide student formation face-to-face. The programs represented in the peer group have developed a broad range of patterns of formation that include all four dimensions and that utilize a variety of persons and groups local to the students in the processes. In fact, some argued that their formation of on-campus students had been strengthened by the questions and reflections raised when considering formation for those studying primarily online.

The groups named a number of effective practices for nurturing student formation. Many schools utilize formation groups that include students and faculty, in some cases having regular meetings in faculty homes. The group of “residential” schools noted the opportunities for student formation by virtue of students living on campus and studying full time. They also recognized the importance of being intentional about formation and lamented that some students, at least, were failing to take advantage of

¹ The educational models and practices project has convened a study group of leaders from a range of graduate professional schools including, medicine, law, social work, education, business, and medical humanities, to explore common challenges and opportunities. Interestingly, at its initial meeting the groups spent considerable time discussing “formation” and the different understandings, language, and processes each discipline employs.

the opportunities afforded by their presence on campus. While the schools with online programs emphasized the formation opportunities available for students remaining in their home contexts for study, the residential group noted that the process of moving to a school's campus and the dislocation involved can itself be formative if recognized as an opportunity for learning.

The groups also agreed that some dimensions of formation are more difficult to assess than others, and that more work is needed, especially in the areas of assessing human and spiritual formation. There was some concern as well that the schools, in fact, may not be as effective in assessing intellectual formation as has been assumed.

It is also important to note that the schools represent a range of traditions and practices, missions differ, and more emphasis on one or another dimension of formation and less on others is appropriate. The groups agreed that revised Standards should require all dimensions of formation essential to religious leadership, but that schools and programs within schools should define exactly what their understandings of formation entail and demonstrate that they are effective in providing and assessing that formation. An example might be the differences between some denominationally-related seminaries whose constituents have a clear understanding of the formation needed for service, in contrast to some university divinity schools whose student body is made up of a broad range of Christian believers, the religiously unaffiliated, and those of non-Christian faiths.

Many groups also noted the importance of developing faculty to be involved in the broad formation of students. While nearly all faculty are equipped to guide intellectual formation, and some specialize in pastoral formation, relatively few have been trained to engage human and spiritual formation. Some of the most interesting faculty development grants awarded through the educational models and practices project have been to assist schools in the formation of faculty and their preparation to engage student formation.

Faculty

It is a fairly universal assumption that faculty are the heartbeat of an educational institution. They are in closest regular contact with students and student feedback always lists faculty members as the most important influences on students' lives and formation at seminary.

At the same time, pressures on faculty and shifting educational landscapes have made this perhaps the most unsettled time in recent memory for faculty members. Some schools have reduced the size of their faculties, others have adopted new educational models and practices that require faculty dramatically to re-think how they teach. Technologies touted as labor saving have, in fact, increased workload, and broader emphases on "formation" have placed expectations on faculty for which they may not have been trained.

The theme of the necessity of faculty development, broadly conceived, emerged from many of the peer group conversations. As schools develop new programming, systems of faculty development must support those programs by equipping faculty. In our surveys of faculty, opposition to innovative programs frequently were related to the faculty's sense that they are not adequately equipped to serve the new models. There can also be faculty resistance to losing control of their own courses through the work of instructional designers and the course templates that are sometimes utilized in online programs. It is also important that adjunct faculty be given opportunities for similar development. Online programming is the most obvious and perhaps the most common example of the need for faculty adaptation, but participants also named global partnerships, collaborative programs of various kinds, using student

contexts for learning, team teaching across disciplines, competency-based education, programs in prisons, and programs requiring intercultural competencies as necessitating faculty development.

In some schools, faculty are active ministry practitioners as well as full time faculty. The benefit is the freshness of their ministry experience interacting with their discipline expertise. One obvious challenge of this arrangement is the heavy workload and its impact on the potential for scholarship and full engagement in the life of the school.

Similar to diversity in programming, schools should adopt faculty development processes that fit their mission. The role and expectation of faculty in university divinity schools, for example, is often quite different from expectations in many seminaries. The university divinity school peer group emphasized their essential role to support theological scholarship by faculty and maintained that theological research provides an important foundation for theological education.

The groups studying the Doctor of Ministry degree noted the need for faculty development since those programs often require competencies which many faculty lack the resources to teach. Likewise, because the DMin is a formational degree, it requires program directors with pastoral gifts.

Regardless of the educational model, standards require “regular and substantive interaction” between faculty and students. That interaction can embrace four broad dimensions of student formation. The changes underway in theological schools affect entire institutions, of course, but faculty are crucial both to discerning needed adaptations and implementing them through multifaceted work.

Cultural Competence

The necessity of equipping graduates with cultural (or cross-cultural) competence was named by many groups, with some calling for more extensive requirements for cultural competence in the accrediting standards. Programs of different types can help facilitate cross-cultural exposure and learning. For example, students in online programs frequently interact with peers from a wide variety of cultures. At the same time, a residential campus can serve as a learning laboratory, bringing together diverse populations in a context that fosters close interaction.

Cultural competence takes multiple forms, including navigating diversity *within* groups. The group studying programs for the Latino/a population, for example, noted cultural, country of origin, *and* generational issues. That group described the danger of focusing too narrowly, given the increasing diversity in North America, and insisted on the need for competence to serve effectively across multiple cultures. They also noted the need for cultural competence throughout institutions, including faculty, staff, administration, and Board members, and encouraged institutional self-assessment as an important starting point for developing robust cultural competence. All parts of the school should help educate students to understand different contexts and to apply their learning in those contexts.

The peer group of Asian-serving schools noted a “leadership gap” within many Asian communities. That is, English-speaking Asian graduates of mainstream North American seminaries, they argued, are rarely well-prepared to understand and serve the distinctive religious and cultural practices of many ethnic churches. The group also wondered whether their own curricula are appropriate for their students, given students’ differences in age, gender, country of origin, and vocational goals.

In most institutions, those coming to theological study represent a broadening range of diversities pushing schools to become better equipped to serve them. In addition, as schools reach out to global constituencies, cultural competence is a necessary skill for everyone involved. Many groups pointed

toward some form(s) of assessing prior learning as a more institutionally effective and fair process toward evaluating the competencies needed for graduate theological study, both for applicants from North America whose training does not include the normally required traditional bachelor's degree *and* those from outside North America whose preparation takes a multitude of forms.

The diversities being experienced in theological schools present an array of challenges, but they also enrich theological study. The schools themselves are learning laboratories for cross-cultural training as the students share their knowledge, experiences, and persons.

Degrees, students

Conversations in a number of peer groups addressed the definitions and purposes of different degree programs. The group that explored reductions in the credits required for the Master of Divinity degree, for example, addressed the ongoing question of the difference between the MDiv and the professional Master of Arts degree. Enrollment statistics across the Association signal a crucial change underway in recent years with MDiv enrollment declining and professional MA enrollment increasing. In addition, it appears that many graduates are using the academic MA as preparation for service in a variety of ministry roles. It is not always clear to students or broader constituencies what the differences are, except that MDiv takes longer and costs more. Further, are the current categories of "academic" and "professional" appropriate and adequate?

The MDiv duration peer group pondered deeper questions about the fundamental nature and purpose of the MDiv degree. It is at the same time "generalist and comprehensive, professional and academic, foundational and terminal." The group was not sure that any single program could adequately fulfill all of those purposes! Many schools have been redeveloping MDiv curricula and greater clarity about those issues and purposes would be welcomed across the Association.

Some groups raised the question of the distinction between undergraduate and graduate theological education, especially in circumstances when students apply for graduate theological studies without a baccalaureate degree, schools connect and blend undergraduate study with graduate study, or seminaries offer certificates, undergraduate degrees, and graduate degrees on the same campus and with faculty simultaneously serving all three programs. Some lamented the difficulty of offering truly "graduate" level theological education when many students, even those with bachelor's degrees, need remedial help in basic skills of reading, writing, and research.

Participants from a range of groups noted the need for effective ways to assess the abilities of potential students. As baccalaureate degree majors have multiplied and students are coming to theological studies from a remarkable variety of undergraduate programs, sometimes lacking preparation in basic elements of graduate study; liberal arts, history and culture of the Church, and philosophy, it has become necessary for schools to assess student ability beyond simply having earned a bachelor's degree. Some students need remedial support whether they have a bachelor's degree or not. A number of groups noted the need for enhanced student support in academics, assistance for online students who are frequently very busy with jobs and families, and help for students to address a range of psychological and sociological issues.

Collaborations

A significant theme that has been present throughout the educational models and practices project has been the work of schools to collaborate with a host of institutions to fulfill their educational missions. The survey of academic deans identified a wide range of collaborations with ecclesial bodies, colleges and

universities, other theological schools, institutes, global partners, and partners from other religious traditions.

The formation in online programs peer group spoke of a “matrix of learning” that includes faculty, pastoral mentors, spiritual directors, support and evaluation groups, and student services personnel. Along with cooperating in student education and formation, the schools reported that the collaboration had more closely connected the schools with communities of faith and other institutions, bearing fruit in other ways, such as ongoing feedback and fund development. Likewise, competency-based theological education requires and accentuates partnerships with the institutions to be served by graduates.

For those schools with programs in prisons, collaborations are essential with prison administrators, and faculty need support to adapt their work in ways that collaborate with the particular environment and circumstances of incarcerated students.

Obviously, those schools with “accelerated” programs linking undergraduate study with seminary degree programs, and schools with global partnerships, rely on collaborative relationships that must be regularly reviewed, updated, and renewed. The highly relational character of theological education means that it is often facilitated by a host of relationships with partners.

In addition to exploring and describing partnerships and collaborations that are currently underway, some groups dreamed about collaborations that might be possible in the future, especially as digital technologies create new possibilities. For example,

- transnational connections for accrediting, coordination of programs, sharing faculty,
- collaboration among North American schools and international partners to create a “Global Theological Degree,”
- greater collaboration within Roman Catholic schools between education for priests, permanent deacons, and laity,
- greater collaboration between Roman Catholic dioceses in the work of education and formation,
- partnerships between university divinity schools and historically Black theological schools,
- greater utilization of digital educational technologies for collaborations of various kinds, and
- collaborations for student services, registration and records, IT, business office, and other institutional services.

In a growing number of schools, collaborations are taking place through affiliations and mergers with other theological schools, colleges, and universities. Whether formal and highly structured like these, or more provisional and limited to particular purposes, schools are searching for and finding fruitful collaborations of many kinds.

Educational philosophy, pedagogy

An interesting theme that emerged from the peer groups’ conversations is how the creative thinking necessary for developing new programs impacts other programs within the school. Many, for example, have noted how implementing online programs has focused greater institutional attention on pedagogy leading to improved face-to-face teaching. Online programs normally require examination of an institution’s educational philosophy, potentially leading to renewed understanding of institutional mission and faculty roles.

Likewise, when parts of the educational system require adaptation, such as the modifications required when students are incarcerated, every other part of the system must also adapt. Frequently the broader changes create the opportunity to re-think basic questions. Creative thinking also breeds additional

creative thinking and many noted that creation of programs has often led to additional spin-off initiatives. Global partnerships, for instance, require clarity about educational philosophy and provide the occasion for re-examination of institutional systems and processes. In addition, the non-traditional patterns employed in Doctor of Ministry programs have often informed the re-shaping of master's level programs utilizing intensive courses, immersive projects, and student cohorts.

Perhaps more than any other recent development in theological education, the emergence of competency-based theological education has facilitated review of many of the basic assumptions of higher education in North America. If achieving certain student learning outcomes is the primary goal of theological education and the guiding principle for institutional mission, then it follows that every part of educational and institutional life can and should be evaluated based on its contribution to that end.

For some schools, though, the mission is broader than exclusively the education and formation of students. For example, some also exist to contribute to theological research and scholarship. While that pursuit is closely related to achieving student learning outcomes and contributes to that effort, its scope extends beyond simply teaching and learning. Throughout their history, for example, many university divinity schools have emphasized both their "generative" and the "preparatory" roles. While there may be some tension between these roles, the divinity schools welcome both parts of that work and seek to thrive in both.

A number of groups noted the need for congruence between each school's educational philosophy and educational practices, including the use of technologies. Does the learning management system, for instance, reflect the school's fundamental educational philosophy? The same could also be asked of residential schools. How well does the relatively insulated form of some residential education fit the school's goal of missional engagement?

Finally, many of the groups recognize the impossibility of doing all that is necessary to form religious leadership for lifetimes of service in the two or three or four years required by master's degree programs. Schools need to equip and inspire students for lifelong learning, especially since schools and constituents identify an ever-increasing range of areas needing attention. As Justo González stresses in *The History of Theological Education*, Christian theological education is a lifelong process that begins with childhood and continues throughout life. The years in seminary are crucially important but insufficient for religious leadership in rapidly changing contexts.

Resources

Floating just below the surface of many of the peer group conversations were questions about resources. The educational models and practices project survey of program directors identified insufficient human, financial, and technological resources as the most significant impediments to program flourishing. The challenges theological schools are facing, many of them having to do with resources, are well known. Insufficient resources is not a new problem for theological schools, of course, but it is exacerbated by the forces of rapid change faced by most schools in the 21st century.

The resources needed cross all areas of the educational enterprise, libraries must adapt to new educational models and practices, technologies must be maintained and updated, personnel are needed to evaluate prior learning, student services must adapt to support "non-traditional" students, faculty need support to develop new skills, and ongoing resources are needed to sustain new programs.

Participants in the residential peer group noted the relatively high costs of the residential model of theological education and honestly asked whether it is worth the investment and sustainable into the

future. The group agreed that better assessment of the financial models of residential programs is needed. Likewise, online programs are of significant financial benefit for many students, but require substantial resources from schools to equip and train faculty, keep technology up-to-date, administer programs, support students, and coordinate the work of collaborative educators. In the survey of academic deans serving 141 schools with online programs, only 14% said that their programs “reduce costs for schools.”

Global partnerships have the potential to be educationally fruitful, both for North American institutions and their global partners, but the economic models most common in those partnerships put additional strain on schools. North American schools generally have greater economic resources than global partners, who contribute an array of non-economic resources, but partnerships often require ATS schools to contribute more financially than they receive back in tuition. The global partnerships groups noted the need to provide incentives for their faculty to participate in global programs, but that also requires resources of various kinds.

Other innovative educational models are also resource intensive. Competency-based theological education, in some forms at least, is very labor intensive and requires work from faculty for which they often need additional training. On the other hand, some competency-based programs are able to utilize partners in ways that allow the school to be more an orchestrator of resources than simply a provider of everything. Programs in prisons can be costly and must be based on funding models that do not have tuition as a revenue stream. Reducing credits for degree programs can provide a financial benefit for students, but schools are required to find ways to replace tuition revenue lost due to billing fewer hours.

Some Roman Catholic schools are having to work to find non-traditional revenue sources for programs to prepare permanent deacons and laity. Those programs are less fully supported (often much less so) than programs that prepare candidates for the priesthood, and schools need to adapt to those realities while at the same time providing a service to the church that is desperately needed.

Other programs may increase enrollment for schools, but at the same time may require additional services (PLA, student support, remedial support, etc.), that can use up some of the tuition revenue.

Overall, schools are being pushed to develop new funding models at the same time that they are adapting to new realities by transforming educational programming.

Technologies

Across the peer groups, participants assumed the growing influence and use of technologies of various kinds, from the sophisticated programs used by some competency-based programs, to video streams of worship services and social media used to enhance campus communications.

All agreed that the technologies are powerful educational tools but that they must serve the educational missions of schools rather than displace them. All also recognized the impact technologies are having on the way students learn, the ways they communicate, and the implications of how schools need to serve them and the communities they will lead.

Conclusion

Obviously, the eighteen peer groups did remarkable work and their findings provide an extraordinary panorama of work across the Association. As director of the project and facilitator of some of the groups, I am deeply grateful to the more than 260 participants from 110 schools who generously shared their time and expertise for the benefit of the Association. Together, we thank Lilly Endowment and its staff for their faithful support of this project and the Association of Theological Schools.

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