



Partnership are on the rise

Stephen R. Graham | September 2017

It's fall, the time of year when ATS member schools are laboring hard to complete the Annual Report Forms. Not long ago, academic deans were called upon to do *additional* duty by responding to a survey as part of the Educational Models and Practices project. The survey queried the deans about course delivery methods, class schedule and academic calendar modifications, alternative tuition and fee structures, programs developed to serve particular constituencies, curricular innovations, and demographic and institutional characteristics.

The survey also asked the deans to identify institutional partners with whom their schools collaborated to provide educational programming. Deans from 226 schools responded, a rate of 83%, and the responding schools are a remarkably representative sample of the membership. The results were instructive, both by giving a clearer picture of the broad array of partnerships underway or being developed and by identifying trends in the types of partnerships that schools are finding attractive. The survey asked the deans what partnerships the schools are “currently doing” as well as those they are “seriously considering” and “about to implement.”

Not surprisingly, schools from all three ecclesial families (mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Roman Catholic/Orthodox) have relationships with church or denominational partners. Three-fourths of schools in each family have such partnerships. An additional 11% of the responding schools are seriously considering or about to implement partnerships with ecclesial bodies.

Nearly half (47%) of theological schools currently have a partnership with a college or university, with 14% seriously considering or about to implement a partnership. A significant number of those respondents are structurally connected with colleges or universities. Across the Association the number of theological schools affiliated with or embedded in a college or university has been steadily increasing over the past two decades to almost 40%. The survey reveals that along with those with structural connections, additional schools are finding missional, and perhaps financial, benefit of having partnerships with other institutions of higher

learning. Interestingly, Canadian schools are much more likely to have these partnerships (72%) than are their counterparts in the United States (42%).

More than a third of the responding schools have partnerships with other theological schools. These arrangements take various forms from highly structured consortia (e.g., Graduate Theological Union, Boston Theological Initiative, Association of Chicago Theological Schools, Toronto School of Theology, Associated Canadian Theological Schools), to collaborations between schools serving particular denominations, to partnerships whereby schools share faculty, library, or administrative services. An additional 13% are seriously considering or about to implement such collaborations. Once again, Canadian schools are more likely to have partnerships with other theological schools (53%) than are schools in the United States (31%). Mainline Protestant schools are more likely to have partnerships with other theological schools (53% of the mainline Protestant schools responding) than are evangelical Protestant (25%) or Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools (22%).

Somewhat less than a third of ATS schools have educational partnerships with a variety of institutes or centers, with another 14% seriously considering or about to implement such an arrangement.

Perhaps most striking from the survey is what appears to be a growing interest in international partnerships. While 28% of the responding schools said that they are currently in partnerships with international bodies, an additional 20% are seriously considering the development of such partnerships, and 2% said they were about to implement an arrangement. If the explorations are fruitful, half of ATS member schools soon could have international partnerships.

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The educational models and practices project has included the work of 18 peer groups studying particular educational models and practices. Two of the groups have studied global partnerships. Their findings will be reported in October 2017.

Also indicative of an emerging trend among the ATS membership and reflecting the growing multifaith character of North American societies, 19% of the responding schools have educational partnerships with people or institutions of “other religious traditions” as educational partners, with an additional 9% seriously considering or about to implement this arrangement.

Developing successful partnerships takes creativity, energy, and persistence. Clearly many schools are finding partnerships an effective means to fulfill their missions and, in some cases, using partnerships to be more cost effective.

Thanks to my colleague Debbie Gin, Director, Research and Faculty Development for her work to develop, implement, and assist with analysis of the Educational Models and Practices project surveys. A more detailed analysis of the Educational Models and Practices project surveys of academic deans and program directors is available in Theological Education, 50:2.