

Participation by all member schools vital to Educational Models project

AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN GRAHAM

Funded by Lilly Endowment, the Educational Models and Practices project is the largest and most significant project ever undertaken by ATS. With work now underway, Stephen Graham talks about why this project will be a game changer and shares a project time line.



Q: This project has been described as “game changing.” Could you elaborate?

SG: There is a lot of innovative work going on in the schools, but it is usually being done in isolation. Many schools are doing similar projects but usually not collaborating with one another. This project could “change the game” in at least three important ways, gathering information about (1) what is going on in the schools, (2) what is happening in other graduate professional education, and (3) where and how graduates are serving, so that everyone’s work and decision making are better informed.

The Educational Models and Practices project will enable the schools, through ATS, to collaborate, learn together, and implement effective models and practices that fulfill their distinctive missions *and* are financially sustainable. Ultimately, the project will inform redevelopment of the Standards of Accreditation to incorporate effective new models and practices.

Q: How does this work relate to other ATS projects completed over the years?

SG: In many ways the Educational Models and Practices project is a culmination of the other projects. Previous ATS projects have dealt with economic models, issues

of student debt, the relationship between theological schools and the church, and changing demographics such as the growth of racial/ethnic and women populations and increasingly multifaith societies. The results of those projects often led to questions about educational models and practices. Economic models and student debt, for example, have to be addressed structurally, and at the heart of those structures are educational models and practices related to the costs of theological education. Effective fulfillment of schools’ missions to serve the needs of constituencies such as the church and to educate changing student populations for a wide variety of ministries in a wide range of contexts demands educational models and practices beyond the ones used in the past.

Q: Will all ATS member schools be engaged in this project?

SG: All schools will be strongly urged to engage aspects of the project, such as the mapping survey. Many will be invited to be part of peer groups working on particular educational models and/or practices. All would benefit from attending to what will be learned through the project: about what schools across the Association are doing and learning, what other graduate professional programs are

doing and learning, where theological school graduates are finding employment, what schools are learning through outcomes-based initiatives, and what the schools will learn through their innovation and faculty development projects. And, of course, all of the schools will be urged to be involved in the postproject redevelopment of the Standards of Accreditation.

Q: How and when can schools apply for the small grants associated with the project? How large will they be?

SG: Requests for proposals will be distributed to all member schools in 2016 with grants awarded in 2016 and 2017. The project will award between 30 and 50 innovation grants between \$25,000 and \$50,000 to inaugurate or improve educational models and/or practices. The project will also provide faculty development grants of up to \$15,000 for as many as 30 schools to assist faculty as they adapt to working with new educational models and practices. Schools will engage in yearlong projects and report their findings at the end of the year. Grant recipients will be gathered together to discuss their projects, and what they learned will be disseminated to the membership and broader audiences through a variety of means. Selection committees representing the wide range of ATS member schools will make the awards.

Q: A lot is being invested in this project. How will you ensure the maximum benefit to the membership from that investment?

SG: We will do everything we can to ensure that the membership is kept fully informed about the project, its opportunities for involvement, and what is being learned. Ultimately, the success of the project depends on the involvement and investment of the schools and their personnel as we all learn together. We'll work hard to communicate with the widest possible range of schools and to assess and share what is being learned. The project includes funding for persons with expertise in a variety of educational, financial, and institutional areas who will contribute to the analyses of effectiveness and sustainability.

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As implemented, each area of work will be evaluated for effectiveness, and the project includes hiring a program evaluator who will collaborate with ATS staff to evaluate the program as a whole and its impact.

Q: What sort of deliverables do you anticipate?

SG: ATS will publish survey information and interpretation, peer group reports, project reports, analysis by educational and financial experts, information about where and how graduates are serving, and analysis and interpretation of big-picture trends. ATS Leadership Education events will include presentations on the findings. In addition, we will use a variety of media and events to publicize project findings, from publications in the Association's journal, *Theological Education*, and its digital newsletter *Colloquy Online*, to listservs and social media.

The project's sixth area of work is a comprehensive gathering and analysis of all that has been learned through the project with an eye toward redevelopment of the Standards. The final and most influential deliverable will be the redeveloped Standards of Accreditation.

Q: If the findings of this project are to be integrated into the next generation of accrediting standards, how will that happen?

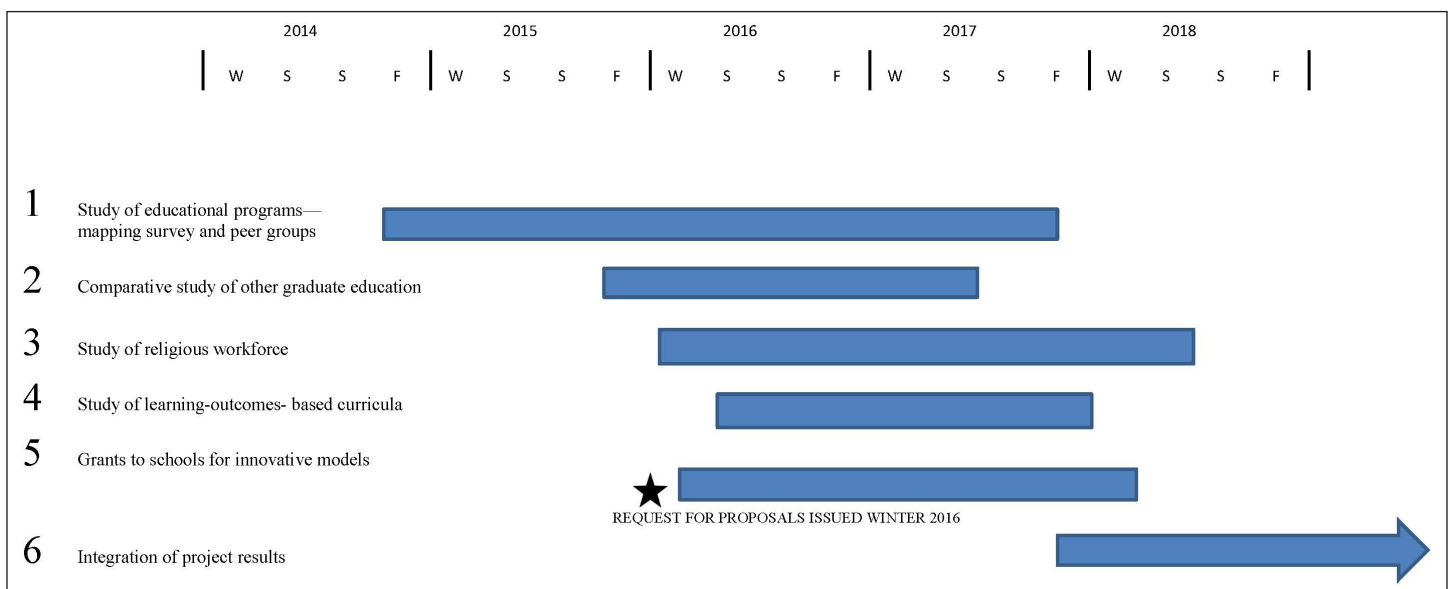
SG: Accrediting standards are statements about best practices in theological education. A great deal of the work of this project will involve the identification of emerging educational practices and characteristics of excellence associated with those practices. This knowledge will provide the basis for redeveloping the Standards of Accreditation so that they address both long-standing patterns of educational quality and those that have developed more recently. ATS accrediting staff will be involved in the project from the beginning, and members of the Board of Commissioners will serve on the project's advisory committee. This will ensure that

the Standards of Accreditation and the possible impact of the project on them are being considered throughout the project.

The Educational Models and Practices project could not have been launched at a better time. According to Daniel Aleshire, ATS executive director, “Religious practices have been changing and are continuing to change at a rapid pace. These changes have taken place more quickly than the schools have been able to respond. This project will provide an informed basis for better aligning

the work of the schools and the realities of religious practices.”

Stephen Graham is Senior Director of Programs and Services for The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



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