

The ATS Educational Models and Practices Project: Wide-ranging Research to Address Challenges and Embrace Opportunities for Theological Schools in North America

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ABSTRACT: The Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education project is the most comprehensive such effort ever undertaken by the Association. In its initial work, the multifaceted project has involved more than 80 percent of member schools generating a significant amount of data about the work of the schools. This article is an initial report of the project's research, presenting and analyzing data from surveys of academic deans and program directors, who reported on their schools' work to engage a range of challenges and opportunities.

In 2007, as I was pondering the call to join the ATS staff, Executive Director Daniel Aleshire spoke to me about some of the changes underway in theological education. I remember clearly his statement that for decades the unifying center of theological education had been an *educational* center. The schools were different in so many ways, but they shared certain assumptions about theological education that had united them in common purpose.

Dan said that the educational center was shifting and that the work of ATS in the coming years would be to collaborate with the schools to understand the changes, to adapt to new realities, and to embrace new educational ways appropriate to changing times and conditions. I had experienced a version of those changes during my service as chief academic officer at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago. I was intrigued and excited about the possibility of assisting in that challenging

and potentially fruitful work with the broad range of schools within the Association, and I decided to come to ATS.

The Educational Models and Practices project is part of the Association's response to those challenges and hopefully fruitful opportunities for theological schools. Schools have experienced significant changes in recent decades, to the church, in higher education, in the larger society, and in the students they educate and form for religious leadership.

In some ways, the Educational Models and Practices project can be viewed as a large and varied research project driven by broad questions about the work of graduate theological schools in North America. Some of these questions shaped the initial work of the project. The first led to the surveys reported in this article. An appendix gives the additional questions and the forthcoming work to address them.

The Association gathers information about what the schools are doing in developing degree programs, online programs, and extension

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sites, for example, through annual reporting, but what are the schools doing in addition to these efforts? What are some of the schools' educational efforts that do not show up in the annual reports? Why did the schools engage in this work? How effective has it been?

To find out, the project launched a comprehensive “mapping” study to gather information about educational activities in the schools, to convene peer groups to analyze

particular educational models and practices, and to share all that is learned across the membership.

The mapping survey included two phases: a survey of academic deans to gather information about educational activities not included in the annual reports and a survey of program officers to gather more detailed information about particular educational models and practices.

Mapping survey—academic deans

Association staff knew that the schools were busy and working hard to fulfill their missions. We knew that professional MA degrees had increased in recent years to the point that the 273 ATS member schools now offer more than 250 different professional MA degrees.¹ But what were the schools doing in addition to those degree programs?

The initial survey, sent to chief academic officers of all ATS schools, received responses from more than 80 percent of the deans.² The survey asked the deans to report on a wide range of possible activities and gave them an opportunity to add other curricular innovations as well.

It included question sets in six categories: course delivery methods, class schedule or academic calendar modifications, educational partners, alternative tuition/fee structures, programs serving particular constituencies, and curricular innovation. Possible responses included “currently doing,” “about to implement,” “seriously considering,” and “formerly, not now.” The deans responded that collectively their schools were involved in hundreds of such activities and programs beyond their degree offerings.

Obviously, these activities range from relatively minor adjustments to major initiatives. Each, however, requires development, implementation, and administration at some level. Each of these modifications requires considerable energy and time: from faculty (revising courses and developing new rhythms of work), from student services (providing registration, support services, and worship), and from other institutional resources. Most of these activities are good, and many are relatively low cost in themselves, but they may absorb resources that *might* be better utilized elsewhere, perhaps collectively exhausting resources that could be used to make the larger *adaptive* changes the schools need.³

1. Of course, many of those programs are very similar in content, but their differences in name reveal differences of emphasis or language that reflect different approaches and values.

2. Except for some over-representation of larger schools and under-representation of small schools, responding schools provided a strongly representative sample of the full ATS membership. See Appendix 1.

3. The language of “adaptive” change comes from Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

The categories with selected results

Course-delivery methods. The survey suggested a range of course delivery examples, including fully or partially online courses, fully online degree programs, extension sites, forms of contextual education, and other methods.

Sixty-four percent of the respondents said their school currently offered fully or partially online courses. Twenty percent noted that they offered fully online degree programs, with an additional 28 percent seriously considering or about to implement such programs. If all of those schools follow through, almost half of the membership would offer fully online degrees.⁴ Of the 20 percent currently offering fully online degrees, evangelical Protestant schools are a significant majority (70 percent), and two-thirds of all the schools offering fully online degrees are freestanding.

One third of the responding schools have extension sites, with another 11 percent seriously considering or about to open sites. More than half of the responding schools are involved with “contextual education.”⁵

Class schedule or academic calendar modifications. Schools are also developing a range of class scheduling options, with many schools offering a broad variety in order to serve the needs of students. Most include the new options along with existing patterns, but some schools have moved to offer the new patterns as their only model. The deans were asked to describe their innovations in this area, and the following examples were provided: intensive course scheduling, year-round study, weekend classes, evening classes, block scheduling, and other methods.

More than half of the responding schools currently offer block scheduling, and more than 80 percent of the schools with a majority of “local commuter” students accommodate those students by offering block scheduling. Almost one-fourth of the responding schools said they were offering their courses *exclusively* through block scheduling. Of those schools for whom a majority of students are “non-local commuters,” 85 percent offer

4. Schools that have an approved comprehensive distance education program are allowed to offer the academic Master of Arts degree without additional action. Approval by the Board of Commissioners is required for those wishing to offer the professional master’s or the Master of Divinity degrees fully online.

5. “Contextual education” was not defined by the survey, but two examples were listed: educational programming “offered in a congregational setting,” and education through “immersion courses.”

intensive course scheduling.⁶ Schools have used scheduling options both to accommodate the requests and needs of existing students and to attract additional students.

Educational partners. Schools are also involved in a wide variety of “collaborations for educational purposes.” Examples provided for the deans included partnerships with church or denomination, institutions from other religious traditions, colleges or universities, other theological school(s), institutes or centers, international partners, or other educational partners. Table 1 lists the types of institutions with whom schools are “currently doing” collaborations, as well as those with whom they are “seriously considering” and “about to implement” collaborations. While it is not surprising that such a large number of schools work educationally with church or denominational partners, nor that nearly half of those responding have arrangements with colleges and universities, it is striking how many schools currently have international partners and the additional numbers that are seriously considering or about to implement such partnerships. The survey revealed remarkable consistency of church or denominational partnerships across the three ecclesial families within ATS, with three-fourths of schools from each family having such partnerships.

Table 1 Partnerships

Partnership with:	Currently Doing	Seriously Considering	About to Implement
Church/denomination	76%	7%	4%
College/university	47%	10%	4%
Other theological school	35%	11%	2%
Institute/center	31%	10%	4%
International partner	28%	20%	2%
Other religious tradition	19%	8%	1%

Mainline Protestant schools are much more likely (52 percent) to have partnerships with other theological schools than are either Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools (39 percent) or evangelical Protestant schools (18 percent). Schools in Canada are significantly more likely to have

6. “Local commuter” and “non-local commuter,” along with “live on or adjacent to campus,” were categories in a question about the residential character of the student body.

partnerships with a college or university (72 percent) than are schools in the United States (42 percent).

Alternative tuition/fee structures. The costs of pursuing a theological education have significant impact on the ability of schools to provide and the ability of students to access educational programming, even though those costs are not exclusively attributable to education. The survey asked deans to identify “alternative tuition/fee structures” being used in their schools, including these examples: fully funded degree programs, loan forgiveness, local church subsidy, tuition charge by program (rather than by credit hour), tuition cap/reduction for each subsequent year, and other structures. Interestingly, in addition to the approaches being tried by the schools, many responses identified approaches that they had tried but discontinued. By far the most common funding practice of those listed was “local church subsidy,” being used by more than 40 percent of respondents. Nineteen percent said they had implemented “tuition charge by program” rather than charges per term or per course. Ten percent provided fully funded degree programs (tuition funded for all students in the specific program), but 11 percent said that they formerly offered full funding but had discontinued the practice. Another 12 percent responded that they were seriously considering or about to implement full funding. If they all follow through, about one in five ATS schools would offer full tuition funding for students in certain degree programs. Similarly, nearly equal numbers of schools reported that they had implemented a tuition cap (18) as those reporting that had abandoned that practice (16). Three percent offered some form of loan forgiveness, but three times that many responded that they once offered loan forgiveness, but no longer do so.

Programs serving particular constituencies. The survey asked whether the schools had developed programs to serve particular constituencies, giving as examples ethnic-specific cohorts, women students, age-specific cohorts, students with distinctive vocational goals, alumni/ae, laity, students without baccalaureate degrees, or underserved populations. The responding deans listed 20 different groups for whom their schools had developed programs, 86 of them to serve particular racial/ethnic constituencies. Nearly 40 percent of those 86 programs were created to serve Latino/a constituencies, about one-fourth of the programs were to serve Asian/Asian North American populations, and just under 20 percent were to serve African American constituencies.

Additionally, 30 programs are in place or being developed to serve laity and 29 for those with distinctive vocations.

Curricular innovation. The survey asked the deans to list “other curricular developments” and gave a somewhat lengthy list of examples: change in total degree program hours, bachelor’s-to-master’s combination, dual/joint degree, non-degree programs, competency-based education, contextual education, continuing education/non-credit courses, expanded internships, post-MDiv internships, synchronous video teaching, team teaching, integrative courses, and other curricular innovations.

Responses reflected the wide variety of activities underway and the busyness of most schools. Seventy-three schools (nearly one-third of those responding) offer, are seriously considering, or are about to implement dual/joint degree programs in collaboration with other institutions or departments. Ten percent of the responding schools offer accelerated bachelor’s-to-master’s degree programs, with another 11 percent seriously considering or about to implement such programs. Roughly 20 percent of the respondents were involved with at least one of the following: reduction of program hours, certificate programs, contextual education, continuing education, or technologically-enhanced innovations. Ten percent of the schools noted team teaching in this context of curricular innovation.

Deans also identified their schools’ “most effective” innovative efforts. The responses were spread across a large number of developments from particular partnerships to programs for particular constituencies to non-degree programs. The most commonly named programs clustered around the uses of educational technology. Eleven percent named fully online courses, with another 2 percent naming partly online courses and 4 percent citing fully online programs. Nine percent described technologically-enhanced programming, normally using synchronous video. Somewhat smaller numbers of respondents named intensive courses, partnerships with churches or denominations, programs for racial/ethnic students, contextual education, team teaching, and dual or joint degree programs as their most successful innovative ventures.

Demographics, educational character, and process of innovation. A final set of questions probed general questions about the school’s demographic profile, educational character, and process of innovation.

While understanding that definitions of “formation” can be remarkably fluid and varied, the survey asked the deans to rank their schools’ emphases on four areas of formation, drawn from the 2005 version of the

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops *Program for Priestly Formation* and described as follows:

Human formation

(e.g., character, integrity, sense of justice, personal relationships)

Intellectual formation

(e.g., scholarship, research, knowledge)

Pastoral/professional formation

(e.g., preaching, pastoral care)

Spiritual formation

(e.g., personal devotion, spiritual disciplines)

The question assumed “the importance and interrelated nature of all four,” but deans were asked to rank them from “most emphasized” to “least emphasized” in their institutions. Nearly equal numbers of deans identified “intellectual formation” (37 percent) and “pastoral formation” (34 percent) as the school’s most emphasized areas of formation. Smaller but significant numbers of schools said their “most emphasized” were “spiritual” (15 percent) and “human” (14 percent) formation. While these responses are not necessarily surprising, the spread highlights the differences of self-understanding and purpose among ATS schools.

Since much of the attention of this survey was on assessing the creativity of schools, the survey asked the deans to indicate, from the following list of groups, both the group primarily responsible to *initiate* innovation in the school and the group primarily responsible to *develop and implement* innovations:

- Administration-academic/educational
- Administration-institutional
- Board/trustees
- Church or denomination
- Existing committee (e.g., finance committee)
- Faculty
- Larger university
- Students and/or alumni/ae

Nearly 60 percent of the deans responded that academic administration initiated innovative ideas, while almost 30 percent said faculty put forward innovative ideas. Eleven percent cited institutional administration

as the source of innovative ideas. It is significant that academic administrators and faculty are directly responsible for the creative ideas schools are pursuing. Certainly there are outside pressures urging the creation of the ideas, but the ideas themselves are coming from within the academic and educational heart of institutions.

Development of the ideas for educational programs is necessarily collaborative work; three-fourths of the deans responded that academic administrators “often” lead the way, and 60 percent cited faculty as “often” charged with developing the programs. Almost 30 percent said the institutional administration was involved in the development, and another 14 percent utilized task forces that included representatives from multiple constituent groups.⁷

From widespread reports, it was clear that for many schools the pattern of residential theological education had changed, with more students commuting to campus, many students utilizing online programs, and fewer living on campus. Data from the survey confirmed that belief. Deans responded to two questions about the residential character of their students and how students access the school’s educational offerings. The survey asked for percentages of students who are “local commuter,” who are “non-local commuter,” and “who live on/adjacent to campus.” It also asked for proportions of students who take courses, “on campus,” “off campus (at extension sites),” and “online (through distance education).”

Respondents categorized more than half of the students as “local commuters,” with about a quarter “living on or adjacent to campus” and another quarter being “non-local commuters.” These numbers reflect an

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7. This question allowed multiple answers, repeating the list of groups above and adding “Existing committee” and “Task force.” Possible responses about a group’s involvement were “Never,” “Seldom,” “Sometimes,” and “Often.”

array of significant changes in student demographics, academic programming, uses of educational technologies, the character of faculty work, adaptations to student services, and use of facilities, as schools adapt to the needs of those they serve and find the best ways to serve them.

Despite the dramatically changed location of students in relation to the school's campus, the great majority of students continue to take at least some of their classes on campus. Eighty-five percent of deans responded that their students take "most" or "all" of their courses on the school's main campus. Nearly five percent take "all" of their classes online, and 13 percent take "most" of their classes via the online format. Twenty percent take "none" of their classes online, and another 45 percent take "a few" online classes. Only 2 percent take "most" or "all" of their classes through extension sites, while more than half take no classes through those sites.

Finally, the survey asked the deans about the location of their school. Fifty-two percent said that their school is in an urban location, 35 percent are suburban, and 12 percent are rural.

Mapping survey—program directors

The second phase of the mapping survey asked program directors the following questions:

- For what main purpose(s) did your school engage in this development?
- What particular student audience or constituency was this development meant to target?
- How effective has the development been?
- Which of the following challenges has the school encountered?
- Was a program implemented and discontinued? Why?
- What unexpected positive outcomes emerged from the development?

The survey also asked program directors to give a narrative description of their program, describing seven particular characteristics.⁸

Because of the extremely broad scope of the survey and the number of programs about which the directors reported, this summary will be restricted to five types of programs: contextual education, fully online

8. Overall, the sample of respondents was satisfactory and strongly representative of the ATS community of schools. See Appendix 3.

degree programs, partnerships with churches and denominations, partnerships with international partners, and programs for those with distinctive vocations. Across those five types of programs, this report will analyze five areas of response: purposes, effectiveness, challenges, discontinued programs, and unexpected positive outcomes.

Purposes

The survey asked *why* the schools are doing what they are doing with particular developments of educational models and practices. Across all programs, schools' responses emphasized the need to increase enrollment and attend to the needs of constituencies current and new. Across the program types, "to recruit students" and "reach a new constituency" consistently appeared as the most frequent responses. "Responding to student requests" was particularly important for those schools modifying course-delivery methods and course schedules. Schools with partnerships and programs for particular constituencies highlighted their responsiveness to requests from church/denomination/community as well as their attempts to increase diversity within their schools. As some traditional programs and constituent numbers decline, schools are hard at work to fulfill their missions by reaching new audiences.

Table 2 Purposes of new programs

Purposes	Percentage of respondents
To reach a new constituency	20.1
To recruit students	18.7
To respond to student requests	14.4
To respond to requests from church/denomination/community	12.2

Effectiveness

The survey asked program directors to assess the effectiveness of their programs with respect to eight possible areas of impact:

1. Improved school's financial picture
2. Lowered costs to students
3. Enrollment growth
4. Greater access for prospective students
5. Strengthened school's reputation or increased awareness of school

6. Clarification of school's mission/identity/charism
7. Enhanced student learning (educational effectiveness)
8. Facilitated faculty's teaching

Program directors provided effectiveness ratings on these eight measures as "very ineffective," "ineffective," "effective," or "very effective." Because of the very large number and categories of responses, this report will note four measures that emerged as particularly significant related to overall program effectiveness: enhanced student learning, improved the school's financial picture, clarified the school's mission/identity/charism, and enrollment growth.

Two educational practices stood out as most effectively enhancing student learning: contextual education and team teaching. Respondents believed that their school's reputation was enhanced and its mission and identity were strengthened through partnerships with institutes and international partners, through the development of integrative courses, and through continuing education programming. The program directors attributed enrollment growth to a range of program types, including fully online degree programs, fully funded degree programs, programs for particular constituencies, and competency-based education. These programs also were effective in providing students greater access to theological studies.

The survey revealed no "standout" program for improving the schools' financial picture. Effective approaches included curriculum development (specialized degrees and integrative courses), fully online degree programs, fully funded degree programs, contextual education, an academic calendar enabling year-round study, programs designed for particular constituencies (chaplains and permanent deacons), and subsidies from local congregations. This finding reinforces the assumption that there is not a "silver bullet" solution to the financial challenges of theological schools. Schools have implemented a broad range of educational models and practices that attend to financial concerns, but to date no single approach has emerged that fully addresses the challenge.

When segregated according to ecclesial family, the responses reveal that evangelical Protestant schools have found international partnerships and curricular innovations that utilize educational technologies to be effective, while mainline Protestant schools have implemented effective programs for racial/ethnic constituencies, and Roman Catholic and

Orthodox schools have developed effective programs for the training of permanent deacons. While these examples reveal some variations in assessments of effectiveness when the data are divided according to the schools' ecclesial families, perhaps the most important finding is that across *all* the ecclesial families the program directors said that contextual education was educationally effective, it strengthened the school's reputation and clarified its mission, and it helped improve the school's financial picture.

While it is important to think about understandings of "effectiveness" that strike a balance between missional values and institutional finances, in general there appears to be a heavier emphasis among the schools on fulfilling their missions than on the financial implications of educational activities and programs. That is, effectiveness was regularly rated more highly for missional aspects of programming than for the impact of the activity or program on the school's financial situation, the effect of cost to students, or, more particularly, the impact on levels of student educational debt. Certainly schools must be about mission, including strengthening their reputation and public perception, but schools must also attend to the financial bottom line.

According to the respondents, three programs that attend to *both* mission and finance most effectively are competency-based education, contextual education, and curricular innovation using integrative courses. Interestingly, each of these educational forms implies closer relations between schools and communities of faith as well as perhaps a blurring of disciplinary boundaries within schools. These three also have high ratings on effective student learning.

Challenges

The survey of program directors asked about the challenges their schools faced as they developed and implemented the particular programs in question. The survey listed nine potential challenges:

1. Insufficient financial resources to make needed changes
2. Insufficient staff/human resources to invest in this program
3. Lack of technological or physical resources
4. Lack of clear understanding of what is needed among target constituency(ies)
5. Lack of adequate enrollment
6. Lack of adequate student preparation prior to admission

7. Lack of sufficient planning
8. Inability/unwillingness of faculty to be agile/adaptive
9. Restrictions in the standards of accreditation

An “other” category allowed respondents to name challenges not included on the list.

Program directors consistently named insufficient human and financial resources (24 and 16 percent respectively) as the most significant challenges faced by their programs. Another 10 percent named lack of adequate technical resources as a challenge. These are obviously related to one another and confirm the financial and resource challenges faced by schools across the Association. Twelve percent noted “lack of clear understanding of what is needed among target constituency(ies)” as a significant challenge, and another 9 percent named “lack of enrollment.” These are particularly notable when related to the most common purposes of innovative programming, to increase enrollment and meet the needs of students and educational partners. Activity is widespread, but objectives may not always be clear.⁹

Somewhat surprisingly, given widespread understandings and anecdote-based assumptions, in most program areas respondents did *not* regard faculty nor the ATS Standards of Accreditation as significant impediments to their work of innovation, with both being named by fewer than 5 percent of the respondents. “Inability/unwillingness of faculty to be agile/adaptive” and “restrictions in the standards of accreditation,” *did* appear as a challenge (named by 13 percent of respondents) when discussing course delivery, particularly in online programs. Since the responses came from program directors about programs already underway, they may not have viewed the standards as much as a hindrance as would those seeking to implement new programs. Generally, though, the leaders of ATS schools view revising the standards as a high priority.¹⁰

9. An important next part of the Educational Models and Practices project will gather more data about graduates from ATS schools and will help schools understand better their “target constituencies.”

10. In a recent survey of the membership about priorities for new executive leadership at ATS, respondents named “revision of the ATS Standards of Accreditation” as one of the highest priorities for the new leader.

The challenges faced varied somewhat by the nature of the particular program. For example, while in many schools faculty are remarkably engaged in developing new educational models and practices, faculty resistance appears greatest in those programs that require new ways of teaching and unfamiliar technologies, such as online courses and those programs using synchronous video.

Also, while “restrictions in standards of accrediting” was lowest rated overall in the list of challenges, the standards were named as a challenge for educational models that push against a number of traditional paradigms, such as educational programming based on credit-hours, assumptions about the values of residential theological education, faculty qualifications and roles, or other educational structures. Low enrollment was a significant challenge for a number of programs, and as might be expected, lack of student preparation was a particular challenge for those programs serving students without bachelor’s degrees.

Table 3 Challenges by ecclesial family

Evangelical	Mainline	Roman Catholic
Human Resources	Human Resources	Human Resources
Financial Resources	Understanding Target	Technological Resources
Understanding Target	Financial Resources	Financial Resources
Enrollment	Enrollment	Enrollment
Faculty Resistance	Technological Resources	Understanding Target
Accrediting Standards	Faculty Resistance	Faculty Resistance
Technological Resources	Sufficient Planning	Student Preparation
Student Preparation	Student Preparation	Sufficient Planning
Sufficient Planning	Accrediting Standards	Accrediting Standards

When categorized according to *ecclesial family* of the school, the top challenges are remarkably consistent. Given their more entrepreneurial character, evangelical Protestant schools found the Standards of Accreditation somewhat more restrictive than did either mainline Protestant or Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools. Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools were less challenged by understanding their target audience but more challenged by lack of sufficient technological resources. Table 3 lists challenges from most- to least-named by the three ecclesial families of ATS schools (with significant differences in bold type).

The survey also revealed some variation in challenges faced according to *school size*. Lack of sufficient human resources was named as the

top challenge for schools of all sizes, but the challenge of low enrollment increased in significance as the size of the school decreased. Conversely, smaller schools experienced less faculty resistance than schools of other sizes.

The largest schools experienced greater faculty resistance and slightly less confidence about clearly understanding their target audiences. Table 4 records challenges by school size in the order in which they were ranked, from most- to least-named, by the respondents from those schools.

Table 4 Challenges by school size

Small	Mid	Large	Largest
Human Resources	Human Resources	Human Resources	Human Resources
Enrollment	Financial Resources	Financial Resources	Understanding Target
Understanding Target	Enrollment	Understanding Target	Faculty Resistance
Financial Resources	Understanding Target	Enrollment	Financial Resources
Technological Resources	Technological Resources	Technological Resources	Technological Resources
Sufficient Planning	Faculty Resistance	Faculty Resistance	Enrollment
Accrediting Standards	Sufficient Planning	Student Preparation	Student Preparation
Student Preparation	Student Preparation	Sufficient Planning	Accrediting Standards
Faculty Resistance	Accrediting Standards	Accrediting Standards	Sufficient Planning

Challenges also differ based on the *school structure*, whether freestanding or embedded/affiliated with a college or university. Again, while lack of sufficient human resources heads the list for both types of institutions, lack of adequate financial and technological resources are somewhat more significant problems for freestanding schools than for those embedded or affiliated with a larger college or university system. “Lack of adequate student preparation” emerges as a more significant issue in embedded/affiliated schools than in those that are freestanding.

Table 5 Challenges by school structure

Freestanding	Embedded
Human Resources	Human Resources
Financial Resources	Understanding Target
Understanding Target	Enrollment
Enrollment	Financial Resources
Technological Resources	Faculty Resistance
Faculty Resistance	Student Preparation
Accrediting Standards	Technological Resources
Sufficient Planning	Sufficient Planning
Student Preparation	Accrediting Standards

Discontinued programs

While programs in theological schools are notoriously hard to kill, schools reported ending a number of programs. Most commonly named were extension sites (32 schools) and weekend courses (22 schools). After experimenting with particular funding models, a number of schools ended fully funded degree programs (23 schools), loan forgiveness programs (21 schools), and plans that charge tuition by program rather than credit hour (21 schools). Interestingly, 22 schools currently have fully funded degree programs, and another 27 are “seriously considering” or “about to implement” such programs. If all of those schools follow through, almost a fifth of the schools in the Association would offer fully funded programs.

Schools also ended partnerships with international partners (17 schools), colleges and universities (16 schools), and other theological schools (15 schools).

Table 6 Top four reasons for discontinuing programs

Reason for discontinuing program	Percentage of respondents
Lack of adequate enrollment	28
Insufficient human/staff resources	19
Insufficient financial resources	17
Lack of clear understanding of target audience	15

Unexpected positive outcomes

Among the positive outcomes that program directors had not anticipated in pursuing new program developments, the most common was the way those innovations had required attention to pedagogical matters such as adaptation to adult-learning approaches that ended up benefitting on-campus students as well as those studying online. Other respondents noted the enhanced relationships with denominations and congregations that flowed from educational partnerships and extended to ordination processes and donor relationships. International partnerships both provided benefit to students and faculty from other countries and enhanced the global understanding and cultural sensitivity of students and faculty from the ATS schools.

This report provides a snapshot of some of the things being learned through the Educational Models and Practices project. Over the coming months, the Association will continue to analyze the data and report what

is being learned through a variety of means, including meetings and a variety of print and digital publications.

Concluding reflections

There is a lot in the media about crises facing theological schools and their shortcomings. It would be foolish to underestimate the extent or depth of the challenges faced by theological schools. Those serving in the schools know them too well for anyone to risk credibility by downplaying them.

The staff at ATS, however, are *greatly* encouraged by our interactions with a large number of people in the schools. The challenges are real, but graduate theological schools in North America have been blessed with abundant resources. It is easy to forget those resources in times that reveal so starkly what is lacking.

The schools are led and staffed by a truly remarkable group of **people**:

- Faculty who bring outstanding training and intellectual power, dedication, passion for their work, and a deep love for students
- Administrators and staff who serve with commitment and skill
- Boards of dedicated, skilled people serving out of gratitude, not self-interest
- Donors who support the work generously
- Partners in education, including congregations and denominations, colleges and universities, churches and schools outside North America, volunteers who bring various gifts to the work, and a growing array of institutions created and dedicated to the support of theological schools

The schools are blessed by **diversities** that bring richness and strength:

- People from different backgrounds, cultures, theological perspectives, gifts, and passions, with a willingness to confront tough issues and speak honestly with one another
- Schools that range across ecclesial families, types and sizes, emphases, and gifts
- New member schools who bring vitality and new perspectives to the conversation
- A range of educational models and practices

The schools and their people give witness to a remarkably collaborative spirit and willingness to share with one another. As this report shows, they are already engaged in an amazing amount and array of work that will inform the common task. They are served by an accrediting agency whose *primary* attitude is aspirational. The heartbeat of ATS accreditation is to help *every* school become the best it can be, including by being open to innovative ideas, according to each school's distinctive mission. Philanthropic organizations that affirm the importance of theological education and the work done by theological educators have provided generous and faithful support for decades.

And finally, but certainly not least, the schools serve the mission of a God of grace and provision whose work this is and in whom the whole enterprise consists. This God has called people to service to engage the unique challenges and opportunities of this time.

At the conclusion of his book, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools*, Daniel Aleshire reflects on John 3 with the text from the King James Version of the Bible his parents had given him as a boy: "the wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth" ¹¹

Aleshire recalls that he struggled to understand the verse. Even after removing the "eths," its meaning remained a mystery. After decades of work in theological education, Aleshire reflected, "I have discovered that my not understanding was, in some ways, an accurate understanding. God's presence, like the wind, does not reveal its origin or destination; its movement can be felt, and its effect experienced, but the ways of God are, from beginning to end, mysterious. The God of ages past is the God of ages to come. The wind will blow." ¹²

God is at work and will continue to be at work among us, calling people into communities of faith and God's own delightful and surprising variety of ways of living and serving. God's people will need leaders, and many of those leaders need the education and formation that is best provided by ATS schools.

11. Daniel O. Aleshire, *Earthen Vessels: Hopeful Reflections on the Work and Future of Theological Schools* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 172.

12. *Ibid.*

As Aleshire concludes, “The Spirit of God moves, and we do not know ‘whence it cometh or whither it goeth,’ but we can be confident that God will be up to something, working out God’s purposes, calling into being what those purposes require for any age.”¹³

Much has been discovered, and much more remains to be explored. The schools are hard at work, and opportunities for new and effective work are there to be grasped.

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13. Ibid.

Appendix 1
Educational Models and Practices Mapping Survey
Part 1 – Participating Academic Deans

	<u>ATS Membership</u>
N = 226 (83% response rate)	271 (2015)
Size of school:	
• Small (1–75 head count) = 45 schools (20%)	40%
• Mid (76–150 head count) = 63 schools (28%)	30%
• Large (151–300 head count) = 67 schools (30%)	15%
• Largest (301+ head count) = 51 schools (23%)	15%
Ecclesial family of school:	
• Evangelical Protestant = 46%	45%
• Mainline Protestant = 35%	33%
• Roman Catholic/Orthodox = 19%	22%
Denominationally affiliated:	
• Denominational = 61%	55%
• Independent = 20%	23%
• Roman Catholic/Orthodox = 19%	22%
Country of school:	
• Canada = 14%	15%
• United States = 86%	85%
Embedded/affiliated and freestanding schools:	
• Embedded/Affiliated = 34%	35%
• Freestanding = 66%	65%

Appendix 2

Educational Models and Practices Mapping Survey, Part 1 – Academic Deans’ Responses

	Formerly, not now	Currently doing	Currently doing some	Currently doing exclusively	Seriously considering	About to do/ implement	Grand Total
Course Delivery							
Fully Online Courses	11	140			19	11	181
Partly Online Courses	7	147			25	8	187
Fully Online Programs	15	46			49	14	124
Extension Site	34	74			16	9	133
Contextual Education	11	118			34	4	167
Other Delivery	1	22			5	4	32
Partnerships							
Church, Denomination	5	172			15	8	200
Other Religious Body	11	42			19	3	75
College or University	15	107			22	9	153
Other Theological School	15	79			25	5	124
Institute	12	70			22	8	112
International	17	63			45	5	130
Other Partner	7			1	1	9	
Funding							
Fully Funded Degree	24	22			22	5	73
Loan Forgiveness	22	7			7	3	39
Local Church Subsidy	13	92			11	2	118
Tuition Per Program	22	43			16	4	85
Tuition Cap	16	18			14		48
Other Tuition	2	12				1	15
Schedule							
Intensive	5		154	22	11	4	196
Year Round	13		80	18	19	1	131
Weekend	22		96	10	21	3	152
Evening	9		154	31	5	2	201
Block	9		120	54	3	1	187
Other Schedule		7		2		9	

Programs for Particular Constituencies

Responses

	Formerly, not now	Currently doing	Seriously considering	About to do/ implement	Grand Total
Constituency					
Alumni/ae		9	1	5	15
Chaplains		7	1		8
Denomination	1	9		1	11
Diaconate		15			15
Distinctive vocation		24	3	2	29
Gender		19	2	2	23
Global	2	13	3	1	19
Intentional Community		1	1	1	3
Interreligious	1	9		2	12
Laity		25	4	1	30
LGBTQ		1		1	2
Missionaries		1			1
Students without BA	1	11	2		14
Public Theology		4		1	5
Racial/Ethnic	3	65	7	11	86
Religious Orders		1			1
Rural		2		1	3
Seminarian Couples		1			1
Underserved (Prison, Disability)		5	2		7
Urban	1	13	2	1	17
Youth	1	4	2		7

Curricular Innovations

Responses

	Formerly, not now	Currently doing	Seriously considering	About to do/ implement	Grand Total
Curricular Innovations					
Accelerated	2	22	14	10	48
Certificate Program	2	32	3	5	42
Change in hours	3	22	8	8	41
Competency-based		6	5	1	12
Contextual Ed		34	6	4	44
Continuing Ed	3	33	4	2	42
Dual/Joint Degree		56	13	4	73
Expanded internship		3		2	5
Integrative		14		6	20
Non-degree	1	27	1	1	30
Post-MDiv internship		1		1	2
Reduced Core		1		1	2
Specialized degree		12		2	14
Team teaching		24	2	1	27
Technology	3	31	2	6	42
Unique, Core Course Model		1			1
Unique, All MA's				1	1
Unique, Dual-Track Academic MA				1	1
Unique, Required Courses in Contextual Factors				1	1

Appendix 3
Educational Models and Practices Mapping Survey
Part 2—Program Directors’ Responses

	<u>ATS Membership</u>
N = 440 participants (200 different schools)	271 (2015)
Size of school:	
• Small (1–75 head count) = 24 schools (12%)	40%
• Mid (76–150 head count) = 56 schools (28%)	30%
• Large (151–300 head count) = 52 schools (26%)	15%
• Largest (301+ head count) = 70 schools (35%)	15%
Ecclesial family of school:	
• Evangelical Protestant = 43%	45%
• Mainline Protestant = 41%	33%
• Roman Catholic/Orthodox = 16%	22%
Country of school:	
• Canada = 13%	15%
• United States = 87%	85%
Embedded/affiliated and freestanding schools:	
• Embedded/Affiliated = 27%	35%
• Freestanding = 73%	65%

Appendix 4

Next Phases of the Project's Work

Looking ahead, the next phases of the project will include studies of peer groups of schools on particular educational models and practices, research into what is being learned in other graduate professional education, the work of graduates of member schools, and grant support for innovative projects and faculty development.

Peer groups

As an additional step in information gathering and analysis, the project has convened groups of schools to study particular educational models and practices.

The work of the peer groups is based on some foundational assumptions:

- Much of the wisdom about the work of theological education resides in the schools.
- A *lot* of good work is underway.
- Much of that work is being done in relative isolation.
- Collaboration can make the work more creative and fruitful and give an opportunity to share what is learned with the membership.

The project has formed 18 different groups involving more than 110 schools to study a range of educational models and practices. Their completed work will provide a comprehensive review of some of the most important educational models and practices underway within the Association, as well as generating a number of new ideas to explore.¹

Questions guiding future work will include the following:

Are the challenges being faced by theological schools unique to them, or are other graduate professional educational programs facing similar challenges, and what are they learning?

1. The peer groups are listed in Appendix 5.

A comprehensive study of legal education completed about a year ago, for example, identified many challenges very similar to those facing theological schools. Other professions are wrestling with similar issues, and theological schools may learn much from their efforts. The project will convene a study group to explore other graduate professional education to learn what their studies are finding and how those findings might inform theological schools.

Where are theological graduates finding employment, and what are they doing? How suitable is their training for their work?

In order to get a snapshot view of where graduates are serving and what they are doing, the project will survey two classes of graduates, ask them about the work they are doing, and also ask them about the educational expectations for others working in those organizations. This knowledge will help schools in their strategic planning to meet the needs of constituents and provide training for the positions available to students.

How might financial support assist the schools in their development and implementation of innovative models and practices as well as in the development of faculty to support those models and practices?

In 2017, the project will distribute a request for proposals to all ATS member schools for “innovation” grants. The program will award as many as 40 grants of up to \$50,000 each to help schools explore innovative possibilities. The project will seek proposals that are truly innovative in concept and/or application and not simply additional examples of things that have already been tried. The project will favor proposals that include interaction with constituencies (for example, enhanced communication and collaboration with partners in program design and execution) or that include voices from a range of stakeholders such as boards, educational partners, host colleges or universities, students, and student services personnel.

Many of the models and practices that are being studied create challenges for faculty, requiring them to do their work in ways not always anticipated in their training. The project will distribute a request for proposals to all member schools for faculty development grants. As many as 30 schools will receive faculty development grants of up to \$15,000 to help faculty retool to serve new educational models and practices. In this area

as well, the project will prioritize proposals that give evidence of collaborative work between faculty members and other personnel within the institution.

Schools receiving innovation and faculty development grants will report what they have learned for the benefit of the Association's membership.

Redevelopment of the Standards of Accreditation

Ultimately, the Educational Models and Practices project is directed toward a possible comprehensive redevelopment of the Standards of Accreditation. Based on what has been learned through the project, how should the Standards of Accreditation be redeveloped to maintain rigor and flexibility while recognizing educational models not imagined or implemented in previous versions?

Some of the findings of the project will be of immediate benefit for the Association's schools and have little impact on the standards. Other information will be crucial for the redevelopment process and will inform those engaged in that important work.

Appendix 5

Educational Models and Practices Project Peer Groups

- 1 Formation in Online Contexts**
 - Catholic Theological Union
 - Gateway Seminary
 - Lexington Theological Seminary
 - Moody Theological Seminary
 - Shaw University Divinity School
 - Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University
- 2 Educational Values of Online Education**
 - Anderson University School of Theology
 - Carey Theological College
 - Chicago Theological Seminary
 - Erskine Theological Seminary
 - Fuller Theological Seminary
 - Northwest Nazarene University School of Theology and Christian Ministries (Graduate)
 - Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
- 3 Duration (Reduced Credit MDiv)**
 - Azusa Pacific Seminary
 - Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School
 - Franciscan School of Theology
 - North Park Theological Seminary
 - Perkins School of Theology Southern Methodist University
 - United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities
- 4 Accelerated Bachelor's/MDiv**
 - Columbia Biblical Seminary of Columbia International University
 - Denver Seminary
 - Saint Paul School of Theology
 - St. Andrew's College
 - University of Dubuque Theological Seminary
- 5 DMin Admission**
 - Aquinas Institute of Theology
 - Drew University Theological School
 - Fuller Theological Seminary
 - New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary
 - St. Mary's Seminary and University
 - Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry
 - Trinity Evangelical Divinity School of Trinity International University
- 6 DMin Identity**
 - Knox College
 - Lincoln Christian Seminary
 - Tyndale University College & Seminary
 - United Theological Seminary

7 Permanent Diaconate Program

- Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology
- Immaculate Conception Seminary of Seton Hall University
- Pontifical College Josephinum
- Saint Meinrad School of Theology
- St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry
- St. Mark's College
- University of St. Thomas School of Theology

8 RC Schools Formation of Laity

- Augustine Institute
- Seattle University School of Theology and Ministry
- St. Augustine's Seminary of Toronto
- St. John's Seminary (CA)
- University of St. Mary of the Lake Mundelein Seminary

9 Programs for Latino/a Students

- Barry University Department of Theology and Philosophy
- Calvin Theological Seminary
- Denver Seminary
- Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
- Oblate School of Theology
- Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University
- Western Seminary (OR)
- Western Theological Seminary

10 Global Partnerships

- Ambrose Seminary of Ambrose University
- Asbury Theological Seminary
- B.H. Carroll Theological Institute
- Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond
- International Theological Seminary

11 Global Partnerships

- Assemblies of God Theological Seminary
- Carey Theological College
- Nazarene Theological Seminary
- Oblate School of Theology
- Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary of Andrews University
- Trinity Evangelical Divinity School of Trinity International University

12 Asian Schools

- China Evangelical Seminary North America
- Georgia Christian University School of Divinity
- Grace Mission University Graduate School
- International Theological Seminary
- Logos Evangelical Seminary
- Presbyterian Theological Seminary in America
- Shepherd University School of Theology
- World Mission University School of Theology

13 Historically Black Schools

- Hood Theological Seminary
- Howard University School of Divinity
- Interdenominational Theological Center
- Payne Theological Seminary
- Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology of Virginia Union University
- Shaw University Divinity School

14 Competency-Based Education

- Grace Theological Seminary
- Hazelip School of Theology of Lipscomb University
- Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg
- Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia
- Northwest Baptist Seminary
- Regent University School of Divinity
- Sioux Falls Seminary
- Talbot School of Theology of Biola University
- Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University
- Western Seminary

15 Programs in Prison

- Calvin Theological Seminary
- Candler School of Theology of Emory University
- Chapman Seminary of Oakland City University
- Drew University Theological School
- Duke University Divinity School
- New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary
- New York Theological Seminary

16 Students w/o Bachelor's

- American Baptist Seminary of the West
- Briercrest College and Seminary
- Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology
- St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary
- Taylor College and Seminary

17 Residential Theological Education

- Concordia Seminary (MO)
- Concordia Theological Seminary (IN)
- Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary
- Princeton Theological Seminary
- Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary
- Virginia Theological Seminary

18 University Divinity Schools

- Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
- Boston University School of Theology
- Catholic University of America School of Theology and Religious Studies
- Candler School of Theology of Emory University
- Duke University Divinity School
- George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University
- University of Chicago Divinity School
- Vanderbilt University Divinity School
- Wake Forest University Divinity School
- Yale University Divinity School

