Midpoint reflections on Educational Models project—peer groups share 10 themes

By Stephen Graham

The 18 peer groups assembled for the Educational Models and Practices (EMP) project began their work at a forum in February 2016. Their work has continued through engagement via conference calls and face-to-face meetings this fall. Midway through their work, a few general themes have emerged through the peer group conversations that reflect shared values and realities:

Educational Models and Practices peer group participants visually brainstorm during a gathering.

1 A strong sense of the "formational" character of theological education

Nearly all of the groups have identified the necessarily "formational" character of theological education. More than other forms of education, theological education must attend to the development of the person. In addition to intellectual and academic formation and the development of practical ministry skills, theological students must be formed as persons of integrity and spiritually to give leadership to communities of faith and other contexts. The Program of Priestly Formation of the United States Council of Catholic Bishops has identified four "pillars" of formation: intellectual, ministry, human, and spiritual. While not all schools use these categories, nearly all would see formation in those areas or similar areas as fundamental to theological education.

2 A need for faculty (and others) who are themselves formed and able to mentor students beyond intellectual formation

A corollary to the emphasis on theological education as formational education is the need for faculty who are themselves formed and able to mentor the formation of theological students. Findings from recent ATS studies about the areas of faculty work in member schools and the effectiveness of their PhD training to prepare them for that work have been reinforced by conversations within the peer groups. Faculty are very effective in providing intellectual formation and the development of ministry skills, but they are much less equipped to guide students in human and spiritual formation.

3 A broadening understanding of the community needed for theological education and formation

There is a growing understanding of the broader communities that together form and sustain students for religious leadership (faculty and staff, theological school and communities of faith, alumni, denominational personnel, families, other students). The groups

have emphasized the importance of the "core" faculty to sustain and oversee the educational programs of schools, but they are also recognizing the need for a range of other "educators" as well. The schools pursuing online education, for example, often use "local" people to assist in educational processes.

4 Increasingly effective connections with communities of faith and other ministry locations

The educational processes of many schools are becoming more deeply rooted in communities of faith and other ministry locations. It may be that perceptions of a growing divide between theological schools and the communities they serve is being addressed through development of these new educational models that prepare graduates to be better attuned to the particular needs of the communities that they will serve.

5 A broad interest in competency-based education and how its principles and approaches may be applicable to other models

One of the groups that has caught the fascination of many is the one working on competency-based education (CBE). Many of the peer groups believe that some facets of CBE might fit within their models or practices and provide additional quality and support. A significant part of many CBE programs is the assessment of prior learning (APL), which many groups believe might also positively impact their work.

6 The influence of the larger systems within which the schools do their work

Many schools serve single or multiple denominations and are guided by the expectations of those bodies. In addition, student expectations, abilities, experience, culture, etc., have changed in ways that require adaptations by the schools. Today's students may be "wired" differently than those of previous generations when it comes to understandings of community, modes of acquiring and processing information, and

levels of loyalty to institutions. Schools are also emphasizing more the lifelong learning continuum that includes Christian education prior to graduate theological study and continuing education after graduate theological study, recognizing that what happens at theological school cannot be enough to prepare leaders for communities of faith and other areas of service.

7 Concerns about the readiness of many students for theological education

Those in the peer groups remain concerned about the lack of preparedness of some students as they begin graduate theological education. The group studying Master of Divinity degrees with reduced credits named this as a particular challenge. Given less time dedicated to graduate theological education, it is even more important that students bring high levels of ability to those programs.

8 Pervasive new technologies, both in the educational processes and in the cultures in which graduates will serve

An obvious characteristic of theological education in the 21st century is that it will be digitally enhanced in a wide range of ways. Participants in the groups recognize the dramatic changes that already have taken place and desire conversations about future technologies and how to develop the agility to evaluate and to use them appropriately, both in school and in the communities where graduates will serve.

9 The importance of financial viability, whatever the educational model

While few of the groups have yet addressed the financial implications of the particular educational model or practice under study, each group will address these implications as they continue their work. Obviously, the most elegant educational model is unworkable if it cannot be sustained economically.

10

The need for leaders to clarify the character of the process as informing but not revising the accrediting standards

While the findings of the groups will contribute to the process of revising the ATS Standards of Accreditation, there are also many things in the findings that will not have implications for the standards but are nonetheless important.

One question that has emerged within the conversations of the peer groups is the relationship between the work of the groups and the larger Educational Models and Practices project, coupled with the expectation that the Association will engage a process of revising the standards in the next few years. The findings of the Educational Models and Practices project will be gathered and analyzed at the conclusion of the project (and disseminated regularly throughout its duration). As part of the findings, the peer groups, along with others working in different areas of the project, will identify key questions and make suggestions to inform the work of the standards revision committee(s). But the work of revision will be a separate project.

Work will continue throughout the coming year. Each peer group will attend the second peer group forum in April 2017 and submit a report in late 2017.

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Peer Groups

- Accelerated Bachelor's/MDiv Programs

- Asian Schools

- Competency-based Education

- DMin Admission

- DMin Identity

- Formation in Online Contexts

- Global Partnerships

- Historically Black Schools

- MDiv Degree Duration

- Permanent Diaconate Program

- Programs for Latino/a Students

- Programs in Prison

- RC Schools Formation of Laity

- Residential Theological Education

- Students without Bachelor's Degrees

- University Divinity Schools

- Values of Online Education