

ATS Research Advisory Committee begins to chart agenda

By ELIZA SMITH BROWN

If The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) had endless time, resources, and power, what should it study, and why? This question framed much of the discussion as the newly-elected ATS Research Advisory Committee held its first meeting on November 15, 2016, in Pittsburgh.

The committee comprises a strong cross-section of theological educators representing broad and deep expertise in institutional leadership and various areas of research, including church history; demographic and ethnographic studies of congregations, seminary students and faculty, young adults, and multicultural contexts; seminary governance; Canadian religious practices; congregational and religious practices in the United States; and more. In a full-day meeting with several ATS staff members, the committee discussed an agenda to guide the Association's research function over the next several years.

ATS has long engaged in research projects as part of its ongoing collection and management of institutional data gathered through the Annual Report Forms, its fee-for-service program of collecting data from entering and graduating students and alumni/ae, and its special targeted research related to special initiatives, such as the current Educational Models and Practices and Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers projects. One of the earliest empirical research projects undertaken by the Association was the Ministry in America project in the



Research advisory committee members and consultants interact with Zoom technology at the ATS office.

1970s. ATS has been collecting data from the schools in one way or the other since the 1940s.

ATS now maintains a wealth of information that could be mined with multivariate analytic strategies—coupled with qualitative research—to generate more understanding of the issues, trends, and factors influencing theological schools. As the committee deliberated about what research might best serve the needs of member schools, ATS Executive Director Daniel Aleshire offered a reminder.

“We take seriously the stewardship of ATS data. We are wanting to maximize the use of it through applied research in a way that supports our work and is not an abstraction.”

To that end, in 2013, the ATS Board of Directors set forth a mandate to include a research function as part of its core program work, focusing on accessible data, robust analyses, meaningful interpretations, and intentional education and dissemination of findings to a variety of audiences.

Debbie Gin joined the ATS staff in 2014 as director of research and faculty development, and she has built

upon the Association's earlier work with more in-depth empirical research and the creation of this advisory committee. The committee and ATS staff are being augmented by a cadre of research consultants who are given assignments on an as-needed basis.

Gin shared with the committee the two values that guide the work of the Association's new research function—humility and hospitality.

“Good data can inform good decisions,” she explained, “but data must be approached with a critical openness to learning and growth, an informational humility.”

She added, “while good data will provide institutions with the information they need to improve, institutions also need to know what kinds of data are available, which data will help them, and how to interpret the data. A sense of hospitality assures that we continue to make data usable by all institutions.”

ATS already extends such hospitality by posting the Annual Data Tables on its website and by providing the Strategic Information Report (SIR) and Institutional Peer Profile Report (IPPR) to each member school. Future access will be enhanced through interactive, web-based, data visualization services.

Barbara Wheeler, who for more than two decades led the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, advised this group to maintain “a determination to study everything.”

“Scan the horizon 360 degrees,” she said, “both institutional and educational elements. Theological education is better understood if you look at all the interlocking pieces.”

Wheeler urged the research team to combine quantitative research with qualitative research, looking for the narratives that lie behind the statistical patterns.

“Data tell us what is happening,” she said. “They don't tell us why.” She also warned about the biases that can influence research, making it is easy to be influenced by findings that confirm our convictions. She recommended

two built-in safeguards: (1) use more than one method to study a topic and (2) use more than one researcher, preferably with different perspectives.

In the afternoon, the group turned to “blue sky” thinking, asking, “If ATS had endless time, resources, and power, what should it study, and why?” The discussion prompted a variety of ideas:

- Where are students coming from? Can we track the long, slow nurture of faith and community?
- How does the religious landscape—and the ways religious communities congregate—vary among different regions of the United States and Canada? Can we create composite sketches of these regions? How do the feeder systems vary? What are the expectations for religious leaders in various parts of North America? How do workplace realities differ?
- What added value do well-led congregational census studies contribute to their communities?
- Do we need to study the religious public in a more broadly defined way? Where does religious leadership begin and end? Where does theological education begin and end?

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- How can the research look beyond what the schools think they want or need?
- What is the market for a model that produces spiritually mature persons to exercise theological vocation by serving in leadership capacities outside congregations? What would that training look like?
- What is the relationship between pastors, congregations, and money? What are the psychological and

theological underpinnings that have shifted and are affecting our perceptions of who should be paying for what?

- What financial/business models might be applicable in this knowledge/freelance/virtual economy?
- What schools are looking for mergers? What are the indicators that might predict the probability or success of such partnerships? What are the healthy ways to facilitate them?
- How are issues of gender equality affecting the work of theological education and the leadership of communities of faith?
- How does theological student debt compare with that in higher education as a whole or with that of the general population?

“Deciding which of these topics will be addressed ultimately is part of the committee’s task,” said Gin. “They will have to prioritize the research agenda according to the overall ATS mission and work plan, the availability of funding, and the ever-changing needs of the member schools.”

Among the other issues discussed by the committee were: (1) the possibility of using adjunct writers to mine the data beyond what current staff and consultant researchers can do; (2) the need to extend theological research into the public square, securing attention that will draw people back to the more in-depth research; (3) methods for disaggregating data to address research queries related to particular constituencies, such as Canadian schools or schools related to particular denominations or ecclesial families, while maintaining the strict ATS policy for confidentiality of institutional data; and (4) how to maximize access to the data and the research results through various dissemination strategies, including interactive online tools.

The group will have three other meetings during this biennium, during which it will dig deeper into these questions, prioritize areas for research, and strategize

about how to fund and staff its research inquiries for the future.

As ATS builds its research function, others are watching. In a review of ATS resources a few years ago, the analyst for the United States Department of Education called the ATS database one of the best educational databases it has seen. As the meeting drew toward a close, Barbara Wheeler observed, “ATS has the potential to be the segment of higher education that knows more about itself than any other.”

ATS Research Advisory Committee

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Mark Chaves, Duke University Divinity School, Durham, NC

Michael Emerson, North Park University, Chicago, IL

Stephen Lewis, President, Forum for Theological Exploration, ex-officio

Stuart MacDonald, Knox College, Toronto, ON

Sara Wenger Shenk, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN

Scott Thumma, Hartford Seminary, Hartford, CT

Alicia Vargas, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary of California Lutheran University, Berkeley, CA

Barbara G. Wheeler, formerly of the Auburn Center for the Study of Theological Education, ATS research consultant

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