

Global engagement: 10 critical lessons learned by theological educators

BY ELIZA SMITH BROWN

With the continuing shift in the center of gravity for Christianity to the majority world, the ATS Board of Directors has named Global Awareness and Engagement as one of its strategic priorities for the coming years. To begin broadening the conversation and inform proposals for future work in this area, ATS convened a group of 16 theological educators in Pittsburgh earlier this year to share what they have been doing on their campuses and abroad as well as some of the lessons they have learned so far. The participants represented a cross section of mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, and Roman Catholic member schools.

The range of activities reported is broad, from courses and formalized institutes on seminary campuses, to endowed faculty chairs, to travel and exchange programs for faculty and students, to extension sites, to conferences, to collaborations with institutions, communities of faith, and accreditors worldwide. Emerging from those initiatives are some common issues, challenges, and aspirations that might guide future forays into global engagement:

1

Commitment to global engagement begins at home.

While it can be easier to engage with theological educators abroad, it is just as important to engage with multicultural constituents in the seminary's own campus and context.

Local relationships can be complicated by a history of past injustices that must be overcome in order for participants to gain credibility. Seminaries should not underestimate the convening power they have that can positively influence other community constituents and national organizations.



2 **Global relationships don't happen overnight.** They are built on trust, which must be built over time, and they sometimes develop organically and relationally.

3 **Global relationships with other institutions must be clearly defined up front.** Available resources, expectations, leadership, agendas, and lines of accountability should be developed through initial conversations that lead to a Memorandum of Understanding or other mutual agreement.

4 **Mutual does not necessarily mean symmetrical.** Participants in collaborative ventures bring different resources to the table. ATS member schools this year reported \$1.8 billion in expenditures, assets that are unparalleled elsewhere. Global collaborators can bring other significant resources to the table, such as indigenous scholarship, traditions, networks, and leadership. Theological reflection on the value of these resources might help to balance the asymmetry and honor the contributions of all participants, but in any case, the asymmetries should be named and acknowledged.

5 **Indigenous leadership is a critical component in international engagements.** North American theological educators have as much to learn as they have to teach. By empowering and respecting the leadership in places of engagement, they will maximize the benefits of the experience for all involved.

6 **The devil is in the details.** The most wisely conceived program can be derailed by messy details related to implementation, such as visa problems, credit transfer discrepancies, disparate degree and accrediting standards, financial aid issues, and challenges of communication and technology. ATS hopes to assemble a resource bank that will help schools anticipate and address the logistical and protocol details in advance.

7 **Travel and exchange programs will have greater impact when they include students as well as faculty.** Faculty development through teaching and study abroad is valuable, but it can only go so far. It is also important to note that sometimes faculty teaching abroad (at no cost to the host institution) can actually displace indigenous faculty, limiting their development.

8 **Global initiatives should be engaged with humility and grace.** Many of the initiatives represent new approaches that may or may not work. Schools need to understand that these are journeys, that additional lessons will be learned along the way, and that they need to allow room for failure and forgiveness.

9 **Global initiatives are best engaged in the context of good assessment.** Initiatives that are folded into a school's overall program of assessment will benefit from the cyclical process of evaluation and improvement that will contribute to their ultimate success.

10 Schools engaging in global initiatives should remain true to their missions. While these experiences can reshape the theological ethos of the participants, schools need to remember why they are committing time and other resources to them and how they will ultimately support their institutional visions and goals.



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Participants in the 2015 Conversation

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Timothy Laboe, *Sacred Heart Major Seminary*

Gee Lowe, *China Evangelical Seminary North America*

Molly Marshall, *Central Baptist Theological Seminary*

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