

# A new global direction for ATS: 5 reflections on the Global Survey on Theological Education

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With endorsement by the ATS Board of Directors of a strategic direction in global awareness and engagement, and with the support of an initial planning grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, ATS work in this area is proceeding. The [Global Survey on Theological Education 2011–2013](#) is a rich resource to inform this work. The survey gathered responses from more than 1,650 theological educators and other church leaders from all parts of the world and nearly every Christian tradition.



Western theological education cannot think of its own scholarly work as sufficient at this time without engagement in the scholarship and strategies for theological education in the majority world, nor can it assume that it is a good steward of its significant scholarly resources and educational practices without making them available in appropriate ways in the broader efforts of world Christianity.

Consequently, in December 2013, the ATS Board of Directors voted to endorse a strategic direction in global awareness and engagement. With an initial planning grant funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, ATS will explore the possibilities of pursuing this direction through (1) conversations with member schools already engaged in global partnerships, (2) discussions with international theological educators, (3) conversations about global patterns

of Catholic theological education, and (4) an international gathering of evangelical theological educators.

This work will be informed by The Global Survey on Theological Education, which was conducted as a joint research project by three partners:

- The [Institute for Cross-Cultural Theological Education](#), McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago
- The [Ecumenical Theological Education Programme](#), World Council of Churches, Geneva
- The [Center for the Study of Global Christianity](#), Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Boston

As we formally launch this initiative, we offer five observations about the survey results:

**1** **Theological schools consistently out-perform their resources.**  
An overarching perception these data provide is that theological education around the world shares some common characteristics. Regardless of region or economic capacity of the region, theological schools are stressed financially but are educationally more effective than their stressed finances would lead some to conclude. Further research might help theological educators better understand what accounts for these contradictory perceptions of unstable finances but stable educational effectiveness. It may be that the mission of these schools is so important that they accomplish more than they can afford because of dedicated people who work harder and with more ability than their compensation might suggest. There are obviously serious financial issues, especially in regions where Western style theological schools have been established and the Western money has declined or dissipated altogether.

**2** **The fates of theological schools mirror those of the church constituencies they serve.**  
The North American experience suggests that, because theological schools are artifacts of the vitality of religious participation, theological schools are started and grow where religion is healthy. Where religious communities are stressed or in decline, theological schools are stressed or declining. The growth of evangelical and Pentecostal theological education and the decline of main-line or ecumenical Protestant theological education follow the growth and decline of their respective ecclesial communities. The survey results suggest a not surprisingly similar pattern worldwide.

**3** **Interest in online theological education is widespread.**  
Theological educators are clearly conflicted about online education. The survey results show an almost equal percentage of respondents who are interested in online and extension education as respondents who indicate that campus-based education is the most appropriate form of theological education. Yet online education will continue to grow, and as it does, it will redefine national boundaries and regions. Students from one region will be



able to complete studies at a school in another region without having to relocate. We do not yet know how much of a long-term effect technology will have on theological education providers, but it will no doubt do in theological education what it has done in other areas: significantly destabilize certain patterns while new patterns are developing. What will remain the norm or preferred practice in the future?

## **4 Theological educators need to make learning available to individuals at the times when they are most ready to learn it.**

Theological educators juggle two divergent curricular goals: (1) to educate persons in the traditions and texts of Christianity and (2) to educate persons in the skills, perceptions, and practices that are necessary for leading communities of faith. With only two things to do—albeit very big things—one might think that theological educators would be able to accomplish both. However, theological educators tend to lean into **either** the liberal arts academic traditions of history, theology, and biblical studies, **or** the practical pastoral arts studies related to teaching and preaching, administering congregations, and the care of souls. The result is graduates who know the faith tradition but are less

improve over time. While governments have a role, we agree that real institutional improvement is the result of the careful work of the institutions themselves and accountability to peers who best know how this work is done well.

## **ATS and global engagement**

These survey results provide some very helpful guidance for the Association's strategic direction in global awareness and engagement and determining how North American schools should best serve and learn from world Christianity. Several of the proposals for what regional and global bodies can do fit with ATS capacities, such as helping build capacity of institutions—at least in educational and organizational practices—and supporting the availability of resources.

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*News of the recently endorsed ATS strategic direction in global awareness and engagement will be warmly received by majority world theological educators.*

~David Esterline

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skilled as congregational leaders **or** who are skilled leaders but do not know the tradition as well as they should. The global survey suggests that—as in North America—most schools do better at teaching the tradition than helping students develop the skills necessary to do the work of leading congregations, and other North American research suggests that students prefer courses in Bible and theology to courses in the pastoral arts. As soon as they graduate or begin working in a church, however, they develop far greater interest in how to administer.

## **5 The global consensus seems to be that institutions can build their capacity by institutional self-study and accreditation.**

We were heartened by this global consensus, since these activities are central to the work of the organization with which we work, and we have argued across the years that accreditation has a dual function. Self-study and accreditation should ensure that schools are operating at least at a basic level of capacity and effectiveness and that they should

attain a more precise estimate of effectiveness. The survey results suggest several important issues for future study, including (1) reasons for certain trends and developments in theological education, (2) ideas that might inform reimagining the nature of theological education in different parts of the world, and (3) priorities for improving and making more relevant the theological curricula of schools.

It is also reassuring to note that the majority of respondents to the survey identified “integrity of senior leaders” as the most critical factor in determining quality in theological education, far above “evidence that graduates have achieved the learning.” ATS has long understood that good leadership, especially senior leadership, is crucial to theological education. While the survey does not clearly state what “integrity” means, this may be an area of research worth pursuing and, in the context of growing bureaucratization of quality assurance mechanisms in North America, something that we need to revisit.



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