

ATS announces new organizational and educational models initiative

BY *STEPHEN R. GRAHAM*

Following the Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education project, and building on the work of that grant and recent ATS programs on the Economic Challenges Facing Future Ministers and Economic Equilibrium and Theological Schools, the Association will begin work on a large-scale four-year project this fall—Organizational and Educational Models in Theological Education: Supporting the 21st Century Missions of Theological Schools.

Funded by a Lilly Endowment grant of nearly \$6 million, the project includes work in four areas identified through extensive conversations with constituents, participants in the Educational Models and Practices project, that project's advisory committee, and the ATS Board of Directors.

1. Organizational Models. Perhaps the most urgent challenge faced by ATS schools is to develop and implement organizational structures, patterns, and processes that use resources most effectively to fulfill the schools' educational missions. The project will gather information, identify and wrestle with fundamental questions, explore sustainable financial models, and produce analytical tools to help schools align educational and organizational models for a sustainable futures.

2. Adaptive Educational Work. Having learned so much through the Educational Models and Practices project



about ATS schools and their work—particularly the creative educational approaches the schools are taking to fulfill their missions—the grant will allow the Association to help schools take advantage of that learning. The program will enable additional exploration of promising educational models and practices. It will also provide grant funding to help schools make necessary adaptive changes in their educational models and practices, equipping them to form students as effective religious leaders for multiple contexts and constituencies.

3. Faculty Development. Research will explore how faculty work has changed in recent years and how it might change in the future. Given those changes, the project will help schools to support their faculties in the midst of dramatic changes in organizational and educational models and practices, and offer an expanded understanding of the roles and work of faculty, particularly related to their basic work of guiding student learning and formation.

4. Formation of Students. Educators across many sectors of graduate higher education have come to recognize the

importance of multiple aspects of student learning and development. Among theological schools, this recognition often identifies intellectual, vocational, personal, and spiritual dimensions of learning and formation. The project will facilitate multiple means of conversation to explore broadly formative theological education for students in the midst of dramatic cultural shifts, changing understandings of ministry in both congregational and non-congregational forms, and theological, cultural, institutional, and missional diversities among schools.

Though distinguished for the purposes of study and focused engagement, these four areas of work are part of a unified whole, interrelated in the ultimate fulfillment of theological schools' primary missions, the effective education and formation of religious leaders to serve in communities of faith, and a variety of other realms of service.

- *Student learning and formation* to be persons of wisdom, knowledge, skill, character, and spiritual depth is fundamental to the work of the schools, and at the heart of their educational missions.
- The educational missions are primarily facilitated by *faculty and other educators*, whose training and ongoing development equips them to guide the formation of students, both now and in the future.
- Schools use a range of *educational models* and practices to bring the educational mission to fruition.
- Institutions shaped according to a variety of *organizational models* exist to provide the structures and systems necessary to support the educational work of schools.

Arguably, the hardest work facing theological schools today—adaptive change in organizational, financial, and business models—may be the most pressing issue faced by many schools as they seek to fulfill their missions. Likewise, the greatest threat to fulfilling some schools' ultimate missions to form religious leaders may be the schools' difficulty to make the organizational changes necessary to sustain their work.

Clearly, the four emphases of this project cannot be separated from one another, and all schools should address them in a holistic, integrated way within their institutions. Distinguishing them by areas of particular focus, however, will allow personnel from the schools with particular areas of expertise to address the areas they identify as most institutionally urgent while recognizing the interrelated character of all areas.

The project will adopt three general strategies within each area of work.

Research

- The project will build on findings from the Educational Models and Practices project as well as other ATS projects,
- gather learning from previous research and research currently underway in other agencies, and
- launch studies to inform the Association and provide a foundation for additional work.

Study and Resource Groups

- Within each area of work, study and resource groups of personnel from the schools, as well as selected consultants and area experts, will focus attention on particular topics. Each group will tackle a particular topic within the area of work, investigate and analyze information about the topic, and report findings including, in some cases, creating resources for use by schools across the Association.

Grants

- In each of the four areas of work, the Association will request proposals for small grants to assist schools in their work with a focus in that particular area and appropriate attention to the other areas. A total of \$2.4 million will enable as many as 120 grants, including, in some cases, initial grants with the possibility of additional follow-up grants.
- Requests for proposals will emphasize integration of the proposed project with the school's core mission and broader work, connections with

constituents, partnerships with those within and outside theological education, and learning for both the individual schools and for the broader Association.

- The current plan calls for the first requests for proposals to be announced in the fall 2020, with subsequent RFPs coming in 2021 and 2022.

Ultimately, this project—in harmony with the Association’s mission, *to promote the improvement and*

enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public—seeks to help schools fulfill their distinctive missions to educate and form leaders for effective service in congregations, communities of faith, and a broad array of ministries, organizations, and communities.

Stay tuned for more details as the project unfolds!



Stephen R. Graham is Senior Director of Programs and Services at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.