

# ATS receives Lilly Endowment Inc. grant for *Putting Story to Work* project

By *MARISSA DECHANT*

*The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has received a five-year grant for the Communications Capacity Building Initiative in Religion, funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. The Association's specific grant project, Putting Story to Work, aims to enhance communication practices among its own staff and membership by collecting and telling stories with data.*



The project's purpose is to build capacities toward putting story to work for greater insights in two related ways:

- ♦ **Gathering stories of lived experience**  
to develop practices for collecting stories from members about their relationships to ATS, to one another, and to the ecosystem of theological education, and to host processes for collaboratively gaining insights from these stories to inform strategic initiatives at both the local and industry scale.
- ♦ **Telling stories with data**  
to develop responsive, sustainable, and collaborative communication practices to tell useful stories with ATS data, combining narrative and quantitative data across organizations to provide richer actionable insights for shared constituencies.

The grant project is being led by Michael Hemenway, ATS director of design and data science, in collaboration with Frank Yamada, ATS executive director, and the ATS design and engagement team. ATS will also work in partnership with the In Trust Center for Theological Schools.

"The *Putting Story to Work* project will provide wonderful opportunities for ATS to learn more from its membership about how the landscape of theological education is changing in different contexts," said Hemenway.

"Through learning from these stories, it is my hope that ATS can gain increased clarity on its value proposition to its members and be prepared to adapt to the emerging needs arising in these times of transition and transformation," he said.

*Putting Story to Work* will focus its work on three main areas:

**1** an active sensemaking project to gather stories from across the ATS membership regarding lived experience in theological education to provide insights for ATS and its members and partners;

**2** the development of a strategic communications planning process that will regularly be aligned with the ATS core values, required capacities, and changing needs of ATS members and partners; and

**3** piloting a collaborative data pipeline with the In Trust Center to tell more integrated and richer stories with shared data for the benefit of ecosystem partners.

Desired outcomes include (1) enhanced storytelling with data, (2) increased member engagement, (3) improved transparency and accountability in communication practices, and (4) the possibility for greater interconnection between the Association and its ecology partners.

“In *Putting Story to Work*, we seek to leverage the power of story to communicate the deep value of theological education by collaborating with the storytellers, member schools, and the broader ecology of theological education,” Yamada said. “We are excited to think of the possibilities for cooperation and learning that this process can develop for the membership and the communities that they serve.”



*Marissa Dechant is Communications Coordinator at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.*