

ATS schools share learnings from multiracial context project

By MARY H. YOUNG

In October 2018, ATS launched a multi-year project focused on cultivating educational capacity through its Committee on Race and Ethnicity (CORE) initiative. Originally designed for two years, the project was extended to three years due to programming adjustments caused by COVID-19.

The project involved working with an identified group of member schools on educational effectiveness with racial/ethnic students. These schools further developed their capacities to educate racial/ethnic students more effectively and/or improved educational practices with white students to better prepare them for ministry in a multiracial culture.

A design for celebration and learning

In October 2021, these same school leaders committed to participating in a virtual conference—*Ministry in a Multiracial Culture: Expanding Conversations, Sharing Strategies, and Celebrating Good Practices*—where they could share their learnings and where participants could engage the application of those learnings for their own schools. A total of 18 schools actively participated in the project, and the following member schools sent representatives to lead discussion sessions at the dissemination conference:

- Ambrose Seminary of Ambrose University
- Bethany Theological Seminary
- Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
- Columbia Theological Seminary
- Denver Seminary
- Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary of Fresno Pacific University



- Hood Theological Seminary
- Houston Graduate School of Theology
- Logos Evangelical Seminary
- Lutheran Theological Seminary (SK)
- M. Christopher White School of Divinity of Gardner-Webb University
- Memphis Theological Seminary
- Pacific School of Religion
- Wesley Seminary at Indiana Wesleyan University

Opening webinar

Hosffman Ospino, associate professor of Hispanic ministry and religious education chair at Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, set the context for the event in an opening webinar called, “Educating Students to do Ministry in a Racially Just and Culturally Diverse World: Institutional Opportunities and Challenges.”

He reflected on the historical origins of racial challenges in North America and indicated that Black and brown individuals and communities navigate reality from positions of disadvantage. In considering the role of theological schools in this reality, he named six practical commitments regarding race and ethnicity to which theological institutions should commit:

1. Choose institutional diversification (embracing it as gift and not problem)
2. Foster intercultural competence
3. Have clear criteria about how to assess
4. Be intentional about diversifying the faculty and staff
5. Create an environment that is at home with its “diversity”
6. Ensure that cultural diversity permeates the ethos of the institution

Small group engagement

Through small group engagement, participants were able to speak directly with school leaders, gain insights from their work, learn from their “good” and “not so good” practices, and discern how they might use these practices in their own contexts. Conference participants were invited to read the reports from participating schools and, when registering, submit questions in preparation for the synchronous Zoom sessions with those school leaders. The leaders scheduled to present also invited questions and conversation prior to the event through their posts on [Engage ATS](#). During the conference, groups were organized around the following discussion topics representing the three-year strategies on which participating member schools worked:

- Creative Designs for Faculty Development and Intercultural Training
- Creating Safe Spaces for Courageous Conversations

- Effectively Assessing the Intercultural Competence of Faculty, Staff, and Students
- Reframing Teaching and Learning: Curriculum Development and Cross-Cultural Training
- Intentional Designs for the Intersection of Race and Ethnicity and Student Formation Initiatives
- Engaging DEI Initiatives that Evoke Programmatic and Policy Changes
- Engendering Hospitality in the Seminary Context

When asked what they found most helpful about the conference, participants indicated the value of the “library of reports and the opportunity for schools to highlight what they learned.” They also indicated the beauty of having “the resources written by each school made available asynchronously” in preparation for “the live interactions with presenters.”

“There was a wide variety of voices and projects,” said another participant. “Speakers sharing their syllabi book lists was amazing, and I’ve already purchased some new reading materials.” While the basic design for the experience was helpful to leaders with busy schedules, participants also expressed their desire for more time for in-depth conversations around the small group topics.

Closing webinar

Reflecting on the topic, “Educating Students to do Ministry in a Racially Just and Culturally Diverse World: Building Institutional Capacity for Sustained Change and Progress,” Teresa L. Smallwood, associate director of the Public Theology and Racial Justice Collaborative at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, talked about Vanderbilt’s Public Theology and Racial Justice Collaborative as an example for sustained momentum in the work of racial justice. Mentioning a series of virtual mobile summer institutes, she spoke on the collaborative’s involvement of students, ministry leaders, pastors, theological faculty, Vanderbilt alums, and others who helped to make the case that it was serious about doing

something to combat racial injustice. The work of the collaborative has led to the organization of the James Lawson Institute for the Research and Study of Nonviolent Movements at Vanderbilt. “When you commit to the work—the money will come,” said Smallwood, reflecting on the importance of starting a vision, moving the vision forward with what the community needs, and allowing the community to invest in the vision.

What we are learning through the work of CORE

The current racial climate in the US and racial/ethnic challenges in the Canadian context suggests that now, more than ever, the CORE initiative is an important part of the Association’s missional focus. Demographic changes and larger trends in theological education contribute to the need for education around issues of cross-cultural training and global awareness. Here are some takeaways from the October conference:

- School leaders benefit from sharing conversations with one another around targeted issues related to race and ethnicity.
- Schools understand the complex nature of racial advocacy work and agree that it must be ongoing and continually evaluated.
- Comprehensive impact at the institutional level occurs with the investment of all stakeholders.

- While institutional cultures vary greatly, the sharing of good practices is a great way to begin deeper and mega-level examination of critical race issues.
- Schools recognize that training and capacity building is best done among all institutional constituencies, including faculty, staff, and students.
- Schools can benefit greatly from using the services of external resource facilitators to guide them in examining and creating their own practices and policies around race and ethnicity.

Join the conversation

Beyond the conference, the school leaders who participated in the project have committed to an evaluative process with a doctoral colleague who will lead them in deeper learning about their experiences and the possible ways their work can continue to be illustrative for other ATS schools.

Continue the conversations and resource sharing by visiting the Community on Race and Ethnicity on Engage ATS. There, you will find resources in the community library—including the reports from the participating schools—posted reflections related to the various topics, and opportunities to expand the learning by contributing your own thoughts to ongoing and new discussion threads.



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