

ATS Women in Leadership Mentoring Program holds virtual launch

BY MARY H. YOUNG

As many institutions make adjustments in scheduled programming due to COVID-19, organizations like ATS are also making those adjustments, while at the same time finding innovative ways to connect persons in virtual spaces for hybrid leadership education support and training. Such was the case with the new Women in Leadership (WIL) Mentoring Program—originally scheduled for March in Jacksonville, Florida.



Leadership education as “hybrid” learning

While the “in person” gathering for the meeting has been rescheduled for October, the program had a virtual launch on Wednesday, March 25, hosting an opening webinar and a series of subsequent Zoom conversations on March 25 and 26, to convene mentors, mentees, ATS staff, and program facilitators. These smaller initial meetings were designed for introductions and getting acquainted, sharing of program specifics, reflection on the webinar content, and discussion of mentoring program expectations.

The mentoring program is a three-year initiative supported by the Association’s Lilly Endowment-funded Leadership Education program. Titled “Mentoring the Next Generation of Leaders,” this program is designed to nurture a cadre of next generation gifted women leaders who will serve theological institutions in a variety of leadership capacities. Ten experienced women leaders are providing mentorship for 30 mentees serving in varied leadership positions at member schools. The mentees in

the program have leadership aspirations along six vocational paths:

- C-Suite/presidents/CEOs
- academic administration/deans
- vice presidents for enrollment management/deans of students
- senior advancement officers
- assistant and associate deans
- administrative faculty/program directors

Providing program content in creative ways

Deborah H.C. Gin, ATS director of research and faculty development, led the opening interactive webinar titled “Getting There: Advancing Women in Leadership.” Sharing data from ATS WIL research, Gin talked about the current status of women in senior leadership in ATS schools, and engaged the participants around structural realities that contribute to healthy leadership environments for women. She spoke of four such key realities: the benefit of having advocates, having ample opportunity to lead, possessing a critical awareness about how

sexism operates, and building cultural and intellectual capital.

During the session, participants engaged in polling activities related to webinar content and asked questions through the Q&A and chat functions of the Zoom platform. This pedagogical process created an influx of synchronous conversation and attendee engagement with the content. Incorporating periodic reflection breaks, the staff addressed questions from the group and elaborated on concepts mentioned in the webinar.

Following the morning of the webinar and continuing through the next day, a one-hour meeting was held with mentors and mentees in each of the six vocational paths. These sessions provided quality time for video connections that included virtual introductions around current work portfolios, research interests, professional development aspirations, and vocational discernment. Additionally, the women had the opportunity to name and elaborate in their small groups on their experiences with the four realities mentioned in the webinar. Though these were only brief encounters, the meetings set a critical foundation for the work each small group would commit to for the three-year program.

Mentoring teams will work together for three years, through Zoom meetings, face-to-face gatherings, [Engage ATS](#), and other forms of communication to stay connected. Regular conversation between mentors and ATS staff, reports every six months from mentors and mentees, and a formative review of individual growth plans will allow for program monitoring, adjustments, and learning. Teams will attend a concluding conference in the final year to report on program impact, share best mentoring practices, contribute content to broaden the field of literature about mentoring in theological education,

and recommend mentoring models for ATS member schools.

Some virtual best practices

Some pedagogical practices were incorporated that proved to be effective for the goals of the virtual gathering and for the intent of the mentoring program:

- Be clear about the purpose of the gathering and practice good stewardship of your time.
- Acknowledge and affirm the sacrifices that persons are making to connect virtually, and assure them that personal disruptions are understood.
- Give persons a few minutes to say what and how they are feeling, and assure them that they are not alone in this new way of meeting and connecting. We found this particularly helpful in our small group meetings.
- Design your time with the learners in ways that include multiple opportunities for engagement such as using the polling, Q&A, and chat functions within Zoom. This worked very well with the webinar. (Other technologies may provide alternate ways to engage learners.)
- Create an atmosphere, as may be needed, for persons to be transparent about what they share, and allow affirmation and confirmation from other members of the group.
- Clearly communicate next steps in the process and identify what participants can expect as follow-up materials or actions.

Takeaways

ATS staff members involved with the WIL mentoring program left the virtual launch inspired by the magnitude of work the leaders (both mentors and mentees) provide to ATS member institutions, the selfless contributions they are making to theological education as a profession, the joy and passion they find in their work, and the sheer hope and optimism they express for the enterprise.



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