

ATS Women in Leadership program hosts fall 2021 summit

By MARY H. YOUNG

In October, the ATS Women in Leadership (WIL) initiative sponsored a virtual summit event called Learning Together, Growing Together, and Building Capacity for Leadership in ATS Schools. The two-week event focused on helping women build leadership skill capacities in decision making, grant writing, networking/building social capital, change management, and strategic planning.

Designed to intentionally provide engagement opportunities for women across the spectrum of work at member schools, the experience included both synchronous Zoom gatherings and asynchronous engagement in Canvas.

The event opened with a webinar led by Deborah H. C. Gin, director of research and faculty development at ATS. She spoke about the 2017 ATS research project that provided an opportunity for women to rate their comfort levels with an array of leadership skills, noting that the skills listed above—along with others—were those that emerged as areas where women desired greater levels of capacity.

During the first week, small caucus groups met to discuss the connections between their current leadership and these skills. There were a variety of small group meetings facilitated by school leaders and ATS staff:

- Women New in Their Roles at Theological Schools (*Margaret Mwenda, Calvin Theological Seminary*)
- Women Administrators (*Jo Ann Deasy, ATS*)



- African American Women's Caucus (*Charisse Gillett, Lexington Theological Seminary*)
- Asian Women's Caucus (*Boyoung Lee, Iliff School of Theology*)
- Hispanic Women's Caucus (*Loida Martell, Lexington Theological Seminary*)
- Women in Freestanding Schools (*Jessie Swigart, Covenant Theological Seminary*)
- Women in Embedded Schools (*Mary Young, ATS*)
- Women in Catholic Schools (*Barbara Reed, Catholic Theological Union*)
- Women Deans and Presidents (*Anna Robbins, Acadia Divinity School*)

Reflections from small group meetings

The feedback from the design of the small caucus group meetings suggested that women appreciated the opportunity to gather in these learning groups with others of like mind and/or affiliation.

When asked what they found most helpful about the summit, respondents said:

- “Having a space to meet with other women leaders, particularly those who are new in their roles (as I am), and also to have conversations with others across departments—I am in the library so it was great to talk to women leaders in other types of roles.”
- “I loved networking and hearing ideas for growth. The breakout groups were my favorite part for discussion and processing.”
- “Hearing others' stories and learning from their experiences as well as a space to share my own; there is little opportunity for this kind of conversation elsewhere.”
- “The smaller group conversations centered common roles and/or affinities. These allowed for more engagement that offered key ideas and learnings for us to walk away with while generating good connections.”

Some would have preferred more time in their small groups as one participant said, “Having more time to talk with folks in your place/space/identity would be helpful.” Several participants spoke about the challenge of attending virtual conferences, given current remote work designs. “I love how accessible a virtual conference is, but it makes it harder to carve out time to fully engage,” said one attendee. “Because I was still at work, it was easy to get pulled away. It was a wonderful conference as far as virtual conferences go.”

The second week focused on content in the Canvas site where participants had the opportunity to engage the five different skill-based modules that incorporated case studies, proficiency rating scales, “feeling” word clouds,

and a grant proposal data gathering research activity. Each of the skill modules was designed to include an overview and presentation on the skill, skill-building exercises, resources for further study, and a discussion activity to gauge proficiency.

One area of skill building focused on change management. With the acknowledgment that theological school leaders do their work in an environment of constant change—necessitating the need to be nimble, adaptable, visionary, and creative in their leadership abilities—participants' responses on how they were feeling about change formed the word cloud below on the Canvas site.



While the cloud speaks to the impact that change often has on individual leaders and, in this case, women leaders—with such words as “wearing thin” and “exhausted”—the resulting cloud also conveys hope and optimism with words like “determined,” “reflective,” “opportunity,” and “theological.”

“What I see could become depressing, but my eye keeps focusing on the word ‘opportunity’—and I try to grasp how to seize that as inspiration,” said one participant. The work of women across ATS member schools can be characteristic of seized opportunities to make an impact in significant ways and to help carve out a sustainable future for theological education.

A closing webinar was held at the end of the two-week period, providing an opportunity for participants to talk with two leaders who provided content on the Canvas

site. Courtney Wiley-Harris, vice president of institutional advancement at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, discussed networking/building social capital as a critical skill for women at ATS schools. Denise Janssen, associate professor of Christian education and interim assistant dean at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology of Virginia Union University, spoke about grant writing as a useful skill for theological school leadership. Both spoke about some of the ways they had built their own leadership capacities for these two skills, how the skills had served them in their current leadership roles, and how they envision the value of these skills for women serving theological schools now and in the future. They also emphasized the interconnectedness of both grant writing and building social capital in their own work, suggesting that many women—who may not have formal training in a given skill area—will develop that skill in the course of their work and vocational experiences.

Takeaways

When asked what they will take away, attendees responded with several practical strategies for living into the impact from the event:

- “The value of so-called ‘soft skills’ in administrative work and using those to my best advantage.”
- “I will encourage my colleagues to utilize the resources at ATS more.”
- “I think the tools of change management and strategic planning are helpful, but honestly, I just felt inspired and encouraged after the closing



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plenary that this is an important time for women in leadership in theological education!”

- “As a result of this conference, I am specifically carving out time for strategic planning and visioning within my area of the seminary. We do this well as an institution but, personally, I get so consumed by the day-to-day that I don’t do this for my own area as well. I’ve scheduled a brainstorming lunch with a colleague in a different area of the seminary, and I’m looking at scheduling a visioning retreat with two of my female colleagues in leadership in other areas of the seminary.”
- “I think I would encourage more female leaders to prioritize getting to know the ATS network and, in particular, make use of the powerful data that’s made available to tell our story (from the research).”

Keeping the learning and engagement going

Those who missed the gathering can email [Carola Molin-ares](mailto:Carola.Molina@ats.edu) and request to join the WIL Canvas site to connect with other women at ATS member schools, access webinar recordings and activities for the skill-based learning modules, learn about the WIL program, gain and share resources, and contribute to the professional development of other women leaders. The site will remain open for ongoing learning and engagement, and as an asynchronous space for upcoming ATS WIL events.