

Creativity in the midst of crisis— ATS executive director shares update

By FRANK M. YAMADA

As we enter almost a full of year of living through the COVID-19 pandemic, I have good news to share about The Association of Theological Schools (ATS). These past eleven months have been challenging but in the middle of those challenges, ATS schools have met them with resiliency, adaptability, and creativity. Schools made rapid pivots that enabled their educational missions to continue in one of the most challenging environments.

In the spring, ATS schools responded to pandemic realities through the movement to emergency remote deliveries. Needless to say, schools that had already invested in comprehensive distance learning were better positioned to adapt at the early stages of the pandemic. During that time, schools were also thinking about how to host remote commencements and online recruiting for the fall, and they were developing scenarios and safety protocols to keep their faculty, staff, and students safe and healthy.

In the late spring and early summer months, schools planned for the intermediate term with an unprecedented fall academic year becoming the focus. Faculty were investing more intentionally in online teaching, and administrators were developing campus plans for an uncertain fall. Concerns in the spring of 2020 about a possible decline in enrollment did not materialize for most schools. In fact, as Chris Meinzer summarizes in his [current *Colloquy Online* article](#), more than 54% of ATS schools had enrollment increases and 46% had enrollment decreases for fall 2020. This reverses a trend in which about only 45% of schools saw increases over the last decade.

On the financial front, many schools took advantage of federal relief programs that supported the payrolls



of schools and organizations. The net effect was that schools were able to navigate the short-term effects of the pandemic, even while the long-term effects of COVID-19 remain unknown.

Another theme we have been hearing from schools is related to how these past months—as difficult as they have been—have actually provided opportunities for schools to think more innovatively and creatively about their missions. Schools have become much more open to innovation and, in the process, have found remarkable sparks of creativity in the middle of this global health crisis. This is good news, as the long-term issues ATS schools had been facing before the pandemic have not gone away and require schools to be thinking intentionally and creatively about changes toward a more viable future.

We, at the Association, have experienced this dynamic as a staff. There is no denying that the pandemic has been

difficult for all of us. ATS/COA staff have been working remotely since March. In the middle of this difficulty, the staff have responded with remarkable adaptability and creativity in support of member schools and the leaders that serve in the schools. These adaptations include:

- The development of just-in-time convenings, articles, research, webinars, and resources to support schools when they were making dramatic shifts for the short- and long-terms.
- The move of ATS and COA board meetings to completely online, synchronous, and asynchronous formats. Within those meetings in the spring and summer of 2020, the Board of Commissioners adopted guidelines that provided temporary flexibilities for online educational delivery and authorizations for virtual visits during the health crisis. The Board of Directors approved an emergency COVID-19 initiative to enable staff to generate support and resources to schools during the pandemic, including the migration and the design of programs and initiatives to remote, synchronous, and asynchronous engagements.
- The conversion of a 400–450 in-person, onsite, conference style ATS Biennial Meeting to a series of online engagements that included asynchronous mini-courses on timely topics, a webinar and open forum on racial justice, an open forum on the new *Standards of Accreditation*, and a series of synchronous meetings in which the member schools voted 198–1 to approve the new *Standards* (without any amendments).



[Click the video for a holiday greeting from Frank]

- The redesigning of the Association’s and the Commission’s fall programming to completely remote asynchronous and synchronous spaces. Programs that were hosted and designed for online engagements include, but are not limited to: the ATS Self-Study Workshop; the Roundtable Seminar for New Faculty; the 2020 ATS Financial Officers’ Learning Experience; the Women in Leadership Mentoring gatherings; the ATS School for New Deans; and two webinars—*Realities of Radical Change* and *Habits of Sabbath for the Pace of Chaos*—for student personnel administrators.
- On the research and data interpretation front, ATS continues to study and convey the findings of how the professions that sustain the work of theological

schools are changing, while reporting on findings of how schools are responding to COVID-19 realities.

- The creation of an internal Educational Design Lab (EDL) that has used principles in human-centered design to rethink and redesign the education and programming resources that ATS offers to support schools and leaders in schools. The EDL is leading not just a programmatic pivot but a cultural shift in the Association’s education and engagement strategy toward becoming a hybrid learning organization where we learn from, for, and with the membership.

It has been an incredible privilege to work with such a remarkable staff, all who are committed to the mission of ATS—“to promote the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public.” In this time of accelerated change, which the global pandemic has only amplified,

the ATS and COA staff are examples of the remarkable creativity and adaptability that has characterized the member schools' responses to this unprecedented and challenging year.

ATS programming and initiatives will continue to move forward for the remainder of the 2020–2021 academic and program year, building on what we have learned from our experiences in redesigning our fall programs for remote synchronous and asynchronous engagements. Based on the current spike of COVID-19 infections and the tightening of safety protocols and travel restrictions, **ATS will not host in-person, onsite programs or conferences for the 2020–2021 program and academic year, including the spring 2021 events.** The scheduled events will be redesigned as online engagements. This decision was made in the interest of the health and safety of both the school personnel who attend these gatherings and the ATS staff. Staff will continue to work with the EDL to craft experiences for the different programs and services that support theological schools in order to promote the best ways for the membership to learn from, for, and with one another.

On the accrediting side, the United States Department of Education (USDE) has extended the December 31, 2020 deadline for the current guidelines that allow for virtual visits for “the duration of the national emergency

declaration and 180 days following the date on which the COVID-19 national emergency declaration is rescinded.” This means that the USDE will allow for accrediting agencies to conduct virtual visits through the 2020–2021 academic year.

The Board of Commissioners will revisit the currently approved guidelines for the Commission on Accrediting for virtual visits and temporary approvals of distance education at its next meeting. Because of this news, which was made public on December 11, 2020, accrediting staff are in communication with their schools for visits scheduled for the spring of 2021 and plans are being made to conduct those visits remotely.

Colleagues, this is an extraordinary time of both challenge and opportunity, of crisis and creativity within theological schools. Within the Jewish and Christian traditions, it is often in times of crisis that human creativity and ingenuity flourish. In fact, “in the beginning” (*Bereishith*, in Hebrew), creation emerges in the midst of chaos. It is fair to say that the past several months have felt like treading water in the chaotic depths; but there is creativity and hope to be found in the middle of these turbulent waters. May that continue to be the case for the schools in which you serve in the middle of this holiday season.



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