

ATS development officers discuss ensuring sustainability in an age of uncertainty

By MARY H. YOUNG

The annual ATS Development Officers' Conference was held in Jacksonville, Florida, February 18–19, and included 28 first-time attendees.

The oldest of the leadership education peer administrator groups, this year marked the 38th meeting for development officers that gathered those serving in institutional advancement, alumni/ae relations, planned giving, annual fund giving, donor relations, marketing, and communications.

The offerings for both new and seasoned development and communication officers included several plenaries and a variety of workshops related to fundraising, development of donor bases, digital marketing, capital campaign initiatives, the nuts and bolts of development, and reimagining development during seasons of change.

On the opening day, four ATS staff members shared important aspects of the work the Association is doing with member schools. Frank M. Yamada, executive director, spoke of the context of change in theological schools and provided an environmental scan of our schools with data related to student enrollment, faculty composition, race and ethnicity, gender, school type, revenue, and ecclesial family designations. He named three items as trends and current realities that have significant impact on the work development officers lead in member schools: (1) shifting organizational and financial models, (2) changing educational models and delivery, and (3) demographic changes among students.



Debbie Creamer, senior director of accreditation, spoke about the redevelopment of the ATS Standards and Procedures, providing an overview of key differences between the current and the proposed new *Standards* and *Procedures*. Creamer reminded participants that the *Standards* are “written by the membership, approved by the membership, and for the sake of the membership.” After a discussion of where the task force was in the redevelopment process and what the drafts look like so far, Creamer engaged attendees in a time of conversation about what they thought and invited them to continue their feedback at redevelopment@ats.edu.

Lisa Kern, manager of member engagement, and Mary H. Young, director of leadership education, ended the morning with an interactive session about Engage ATS—a new online community created for those who work at member schools. They invited attendees to broaden and deepen their community of interaction by engaging in peer learning, sharing resources, and building a network of accrued wisdom around their work. Kern and Young allotted time at the end of their session for participants

to post in the [Development Officers community](#) on the Engage ATS site to continue networking with one another once they return to their schools.

“Fundraising is a series of happy surprises interspersed with occasional disappointments,” said David Heetland, senior vice president for planned giving at Garret-Evangelical Theological Seminary. He led a plenary reflecting on his 37 years of fundraising and referenced tips from his newly published book, *Happy Surprises: Help Others Discover the Joy of Giving*. Among those tips were three keys to successful fundraising that development officers must employ in their work: (1) passion (it must come from the heart), (2) persistence (keep telling the story of your institution), and (3) patience (sometimes results take a long time, but don’t give up hope).

Another plenary featured three presidents and their development officers as a case study panel. They identified the contexts of their institutions, offered case studies about their collaborative practices, shared good principles that are helping to sustain their work, and named particular challenges they are navigating. The teams spoke of the need to establish a positive institutional presence with donors when the institution is experiencing change, articulating a philosophy of teamwork that identifies recruitment as everybody’s business, and attending to donor relationships that are not logged in the institution’s database.

Development officers from the teams responded with the following advice when asked about tools and strategies employed in their relationships with their presidents: (1) get to know your president by listening, observing, reading written work, and studying the leader, (2) engage in open communication with no blind spots, (3) practice an open door policy—come with recommendations for solutions to a problem—and review challenges from multiple perspectives, (4) use the gift of discernment—if something doesn’t seem right, talk about it, and (5) if you

have information, share it with your president, and if you need information, ask for it!

In the concluding session, Heetland—who is consulting with ATS research staff on a study of chief development officers in member schools—shared some preliminary findings from the study. He indicated that when responding on the survey to “*If ATS were to offer programming and resources focusing on the following skills, I would be interested in participating,*” development officers listed “fundraising,” “strategic planning,” “change management,” “grant writing,” and “conflict management” as the top five areas of interest for skill development. To the statement

“I would be more apt to participate in ATS programming for my current role if it...,” respondents answered:

- featured experts from outside theological education [35%]
- featured presenters from schools like my own [26%]
- was presented in cohorts comprised of persons from similar schools [23%]

ATS plans to use feedback from the survey to better understand the current status of the development professional’s role in theological education as well as to further identify the needs that should be addressed when updating future leadership education programming for this area of work.

Prior to the conference, attendees were asked to provide a question or pose a topic of concern they wanted to share with their colleagues. The Development Officers’ Steering Committee identified five major areas of interest based on the responses: (1) time and resource management, (2) donor-based activities, (3) leadership and board engagement, (4) the future of theological education, and (5) communication and marketing in a digital age. During this final session, participants were grouped by affinity designations related to school type or ecclesial family.



Veteran development professional David Heetland shares tips for successful fundraising.

They were asked to choose one of those five areas and to share particular strategies with one another that they are finding helpful at their institutions in that area. They were also asked to discuss in what ways the preliminary findings from the ATS research study held true for them and their work.

If you missed the conference or want to learn more, please visit the [library](#) in the [Development Officers community](#) on Engage ATS to access materials from plenaries and workshops or to watch a short video that captured some moments from the event.



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