

Educational Models and Practices Project: grants for innovation and faculty development

BY STEPHEN R. GRAHAM

The grants

To support member schools in their adaptations to changing circumstances and to glean learning toward redeveloping the Standards of Accreditation, the Educational Models and Practices Project (EMP) provided grant funding in two categories. Schools applied for grants of up to \$50,000 to support innovative projects to facilitate curricular and institutional adaptations to changing circumstances, and up to \$15,000 for faculty development to enhance adaptation to new educational models and practices.

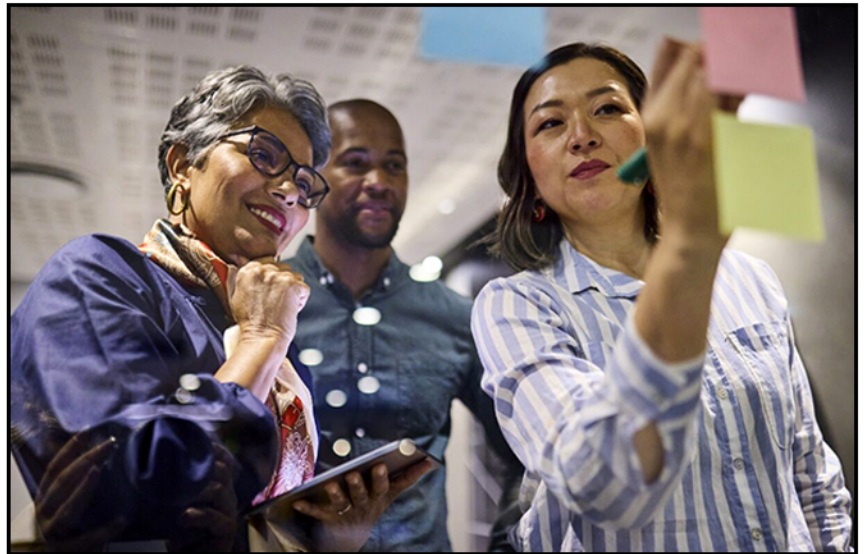
Initial funding of \$2.25 million from Lilly Endowment Inc., plus a supplemental grant from the Endowment of \$1.2 million, enabled The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) to make 58 innovation grants and 44 grants for faculty development during the 2017–18 academic year.

The innovation grant request for proposals named three criteria for selection, favoring projects that:

- Were truly innovative
- Gave evidence of collaboration, both within the school and with constituencies
- Would provide learning about educational models and practices for the broader membership

The innovation grants fell into 10 general categories:

- Global programs and partnerships
- New academic programs



- Multicultural awareness and adaptations
- Digitally assisted learning
- Contextual adaptations
- Formation of students and faculty
- Collaborations with educational partners
- Competency-based theological education
- Justice emphases
- Programs to serve Spanish-speaking students

The faculty development grant request for proposals named four criteria for selection, favoring projects that:

- Gave evidence of cooperation between faculty, administration, and staff in program design
- Included plans to make faculty development an ongoing institutional priority
- Demonstrated the fit between the school's mission and the expertise and practices of faculty
- Provided learning about educational models and practices for the broader membership

Faculty development grants covered seven general categories, overlapping somewhat with the innovation grant categories:

- Teaching and learning
- Competency-based theological education
- Church connections
- Cultural awareness
- Curriculum development
- Formation of students and faculty
- Online teaching and learning¹

The project hosted online meetings at the beginning of the grant year and in-person forums for the recipients of faculty development grants in June 2018 and April 2019, and recipients of the innovation grants in September 2018.

Summary reports on learning from the grants shared with the ATS Board of Commissioners in 2017 and 2018 noted emerging trends and themes providing important input for the Board and the task force assigned to redevelop the *Standards and Policies and Procedures*.

Reflections on learning

Rather than limiting the variety of acceptable models and emphases, reports from the grants recommended that the *Standards* encompass a broader range of quality educational models and practices while not privileging certain ones. These “both/and” recommendations included:

Emphasis on both intellectual *and* vocational formation

While all professional programs include both, depending on each school’s distinctive mission there is greater emphasis on academic training at some schools, while others emphasize vocational formation more strongly.

Regular faculty *and* other educators

- The higher education norm has been to focus on PhD credentialed faculty trained in particular disciplines. Schools increasingly utilize an expanding range of educators including pastoral mentors, spiritual directors, vocational experts, and other personnel.

Residential *and* distributed educational models

- Many schools will continue to utilize a more traditional residential model while others have developed a range of distributed models. Regardless of modality, both should demonstrate educational quality and effectiveness.

Traditional markers for admission *and* assessment of prior learning

- Given the different backgrounds being brought by applicants for graduate theological studies, more fully developed and consistent processes to assess prior learning could complement and enhance use of traditional degree markers for admission.

Time, credit hours *and* mastery, CBTE

- Assessment of learning outcomes should allow both measures of time and the mastery of competencies.

Traditional patterns *and* stackable credentials, modules

- Traditional programs have utilized term-long courses that are sequenced and integrated. Many programs now utilize intensives and hybrids, and some in higher education are developing smaller units that may be stitched together by students and combined toward credentials.

Congregational ministry *and* other vocations

- Between 50 and 60 percent of master’s graduates are heading toward congregational ministry of various kinds, while others are preparing to serve in a range of other positions.

Graduate degrees *and* the Bachelor of Divinity and certificates

- Often raised was the question of whether the Association and Commission on Accrediting (COA) should expand their scope to include a broader range of programs than exclusively graduate-level education.

Benefits for students *and* institutional sustainability

- Most of the programming developed by schools seeks to accommodate students and often does so effectively. Most of this programming, however, places additional strain on the resources of schools requiring enhanced attention to questions of financial sustainability.

Concluding thoughts

This work of innovation is a sign of health, possibility, hope, and confidence. Relatively small grants gave schools an opportunity to explore possibilities, and in doing so, to begin thinking of themselves and their schools in new ways. Some schools spoke of developing a “culture of

innovation.” Others noted increased confidence that they could meet the challenges that have come and will come. Many recognized the importance of building and engaging the seminary community and getting buy-in from faculty. In some cases, the exercise has led to new and unexpected ideas and results beyond those intended by the project. Most of the reports emphasized that the effort to fulfill the school’s mission drives innovation.

Across the project, a few recurring themes emerged.

- Faculty play a key role, and it is an evolving role.
- The inherently *relational* character of theological education informs the use of technologies.
- Schools need sustainable, financial business models.
- People of skill, energy, dedication, and determination are hard at work in the schools, both doing the work of educating and developing new approaches.
- “Innovations” include both development of new applications and rediscovery of old patterns. For example:
 - Schools are reconnecting with traditional partners: denominations, congregations, and other schools.
 - They are engaging with new partners: both ministry sites and non-ecclesial entities.
 - Faculty work emphasizes mentoring, apprenticeships, relationships, integration (reintegration) of theological disciplines, forming communities, and

engaging existing communities for more effective education.

- New patterns include a range of technology-assisted learning as well as competency-based and “competency-oriented” education.

Andrew Walls, author of *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, has noted that the Christian faith remained vital as it migrated across cultures through its ability to maintain what was essential while adapting to new contexts. That dynamic is important to remember in this time of rapid change and adaptation.

To speak personally, I move between two perspectives: first, given certain concerning trends in North American religious adherence and practice, the challenges faced by ATS member schools are truly daunting; and second, deep gratitude and appreciation for the tremendous resources these schools have been given and the outstanding people at work to address challenges and seize opportunities.

Ultimately, the schools are populated and led by people of hope. They demand clarity and honesty about realities, they seek to be faithful, they are creative, and they trust in God.

¹Selections of grant recipients were made by subcommittees of the project’s advisory committee. Final school reports from the [innovation](#) and [faculty development](#) grant projects are available on the ATS website.



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