

The Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education Project: gathering information

BY STEPHEN R. GRAHAM

Purposes

The ATS project on Educational Models and Practices (EMP), 2015–18, followed an extensive period of reflection on the role of ATS and how the Association could best support its member schools. The largest ATS project to that time, EMP ultimately involved more than 90 percent of ATS member schools and more than 1,200 participants from those schools.

The project was built upon the emphasis in the 1996 *Standards of Accreditation* on the assessment of student learning outcomes. Also foundational were projects on the relationship between theological schools and communities of faith, ministry in multifaith societies, the vocation of faculty, and the financial challenges faced by schools.¹ The EMP addressed a question similar to the one that prompted the organization to develop an accrediting function in 1936: “Is theological education providing the patterns of education that fit the needs and realities of congregations?” More specifically, the project addressed these questions: What education do religious leaders need? What educational models are theological schools currently using? What are common elements of good educational models and practices? Which educational models and practices enable theological schools both to fulfill their missions and to sustain economic vitality? What resources do schools need to implement new models?

Given these questions facing the schools, what should be the role of ATS? How should ATS provide appropriate organizational support, help schools become more



nimble, and realign their work to reflect changed and changing realities of communities of faith and the social location of religion in North American society? ATS leadership recognized that the stakes were high, impacting both “the future of the schools and the Association.”

Changes

The proposal named significant recent changes in three areas: among students, with schools and their educational practices, and emerging patterns of religion in North America.

Students seeking theological studies had changed, including:

- Growing percentages of women and racial/ethnic students;
- Students under age 30 and over age 50 together had become a majority;
- Less frequent patterns of denominational support and employment;
- Multiplication of vocational aims;
- Greatly increased levels of educational debt;
- Facility with emerging technologies of communication and education.

The schools were also changing, both as a body and individually:

- Newly formed schools, many not associated with a single denomination;
- More “extension sites” (now called “additional locations”);
- Changes in the experience of residency;
- Growing enrollment in distance education (online) offerings;
- Rapid multiplication of degree programs;
- Emphasis on assessment of student learning;
- Growing range of curricular topics;
- More embedded theological schools;
- Increasing financial stress.

As institutions of the church, theological schools are directly affected by changes in North American religion:

- The center of numeric gravity in Protestantism shifting from mainline to evangelical;
- Reshaping of Roman Catholic formational education for seminarians and new patterns of education for lay ecclesial ministers and permanent deacons;
- Decreasing clarity in North American societies about the value and need for graduate theological education.

This “massive and interconnected set of influences on ATS member schools,” had led to “increasingly financially stressed schools . . . providing an ever-wider range of educational programs in an ever-increasing range of formats,” during a time when the number of students had been steadily declining.²

To name and address the impacts of these changes, the EMP included six primary areas of work, three of which will be described here.

A comprehensive study of educational program developments in ATS member schools

This study included two primary activities: a mapping survey of current educational models; and formation of peer groups for in-depth study of selected models and practices.

Mapping educational models

ATS contacted chief academic officers of all 270 schools, and a remarkable 84 percent submitted completed surveys. The surveys revealed an astonishing number and variety of educational activities and documented fundamental changes in the schools. For example, across the membership, only about one-fourth of students were what had been traditionally called “residential” with another one-fourth being “non-local commuters.” The remaining half commuted from beyond the local area. Not surprisingly, the study confirmed that schools prioritized “intellectual” formation, with “pastoral/professional” formation next in importance. The schools placed significantly less emphasis on “spiritual” and “human” formation.

A survey of program directors confirmed the assumption that schools developed new programming for two primary reasons: a desire to increase enrollment; and to respond to the needs of constituents. Program directors also noted that their most significant challenges were insufficient financial and human resources. Against the common perception, “faculty resistance” was not a major challenge, named by fewer than five percent of respondents, although that number did rise to 13 percent of those schools promoting innovative course delivery, particularly in online programs.

Peer groups

Drawing on the findings from the academic deans’ survey, ATS formed 18 peer groups with more than 300 participants representing 107 different schools for in-depth study of particular educational models and practices. The groups explored and reported on a wide range of programs, from those serving the incarcerated to programs to prepare permanent deacons, from global partnerships to programs designed for underrepresented constituencies. Many common themes emerged from the work of the peer groups, including: an expanded understanding of contributors to the educational processes including faculty and a range of others; a focus on learning outcomes; the need for multifaceted student formation; the importance of institutional and

student contexts, enabling broader access to theological education, enhancing cultural competence, and emphasizing lifelong learning.³ Each peer group reported its findings, including crucial issues and questions, benefits and obstacles in implementing the model, educational effectiveness, and recommended practices. The groups also noted implications, insights, and recommendations that informed the redeveloped *Standards of Accreditation* approved by the membership in 2020.

Each group met twice in person, and some utilized additional video conference meetings. On two occasions, the participants from all the groups gathered in forums to share their findings and discuss issues of common concern. Groups exploring similar topics and models met together, and some groups met with others whose emphases could be seen as incompatible. For example, the group studying formation in online contexts met with the group exploring residential theological education. While poles apart concerning their preferred approach to theological education, both recognized strengths and challenges of each model, learned from the insights of the other group, and together affirmed the necessity of educational quality regardless of educational modality.

Participants in the peer groups were enthusiastic about the task and eager to share their learning. In his summative reflections at the April 2017 peer group forum, ATS Executive Director Daniel Aleshire noted in an apt phrase, “My hunch is that the energy has been as high as it has been because we have been engaged in the practical theology of theological education.” The work of the EMP peer groups demonstrated the potential impact of such work through an association of schools, committed to a common goal and working together to promote quality theological education through a remarkably diverse set of forms, contexts, and approaches. Three seasoned theological educators spoke from the perspective of their own long service about what, in the midst of all the changes, must be preserved. What are the core values, principles, and practices that must not change? Representing the diversity of schools in the Association, their insights coalesced around the primary goals of theological education: the

church rooted in relationships, especially the relationship with Christ; the mission to serve the world, not to serve the church or school; acting in mercy and love; the enduring presence of faith in the midst of change; and the shared theological conviction about God’s engagement in the world and humanity’s role in it.

Aleshire summed up the meeting and its theological essence. “I have concluded that what gives a practice a ‘theological’ character is its end rather than its form or content. I was moved by the three presentations yesterday about what we need to make sure was never left behind as theological schools explore new pedagogical options . . . I was moved both by the insightfulness of the talks, but also that they defined the end to which theological education practices are oriented: gospel, mercy, contextual faithfulness, rescue and restoration, hope, among others. These ends transform otherwise neutral practices into theological events.”⁴

Other graduate professional educators

Finally, the project gathered information from conversations with a group of graduate professional educators from the disciplines of medical humanities, social work, business, medicine, law, graduate humanities, and education. The group shared insights and discussed a number of common values and challenges. Despite the obvious differences among the professions, there was remarkable agreement about fundamental issues they all faced. Enrollment decline, student debt, institutional financial challenges, tensions between educational institutions and the professions, and the need for human formation of students were concerns across the disciplines. All agreed with the need for the professions to find new and creative ways to contribute to the common good and the importance of quality education to achieve that goal.⁵

Study of the workforce (ATS graduates)

The EMP also researched the religious workforce comprised of recent degree program graduates of ATS member schools. ATS surveyed 940 graduates from 42 schools representing the classes of 2011 and 2015. The

2017 Workforce Mapping Survey revealed that just more than 40 percent of graduates were serving in familiar ministry roles within congregations, while the remaining almost 60 percent were serving in a wide variety of institutions and settings.⁶ The study also explored the competencies upon which graduates drew to perform their current work.⁷ The survey revealed that more than 40 percent of respondents said that their current position did not require an ecclesial credential, and more than a third of the positions did not require a master's degree.⁸

The Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education project contributed directly to the redevelopment of the Commission on Accrediting's *Standards of Accreditation and Policies and Procedures*. It also provided baselines of research upon which the Association continues to build and an unprecedented examination and evaluation of what ATS schools were doing to meet the needs of their constituencies.⁹

¹See, for example, project reports in *Theological Education*. Volume 32, number 2, (Spring 1996), "Quality and Accreditation: Final Report on the Redeveloped Accrediting Standards," volume 44, number 1, 2008, "Faculty Vocation and Governance Project," volume 44, number 2, 2009, "Theological Education and the Church," volume 47, number 1, 2012, "Christian Hospitality and Pastoral Practices in a Multifaith Society," and volume 50, number 1, 2015, "Economic Equilibrium in Theological Schools."

²"Educating Religious Leaders in the Twenty-First Century: Educational Models and Practices of Theological Education," A Proposal Submitted to Lilly Endowment Inc., August 2014, p. 7. ATS archives.

³Summary reports and reflections on the work of the 18 peer groups were written by Tom Tanner, "Reflections on Key Themes and Principles from ATS Peer Groups For the Redevelopment of the ATS Standards and Procedures," and Stephen R. Graham, "Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education: Summary Reflections on Final Peer Group Reports."

⁴"Reflections at the Conclusion of the Peer Group Consultations," April 2017, ATS archives.

⁵A summary article on the group's work appeared in *Colloquy* and accounts of the group's April 2018 and October 2018 meetings are found on the ATS website.

⁶Jo Ann Deasy, "Where are graduates serving? New insights from the Educational Models Alums Workforce Survey," *Colloquy*, April 2018, p. 1.

⁷Deborah H. C. Gin, "Mapping the workforce: what competencies do ATS alums need?" *Colloquy*, September 2018, pp. 1-4.

⁸The full report on competencies is available on the ATS website. Data from 2017 were also analyzed and presented in *Colloquy*, October 2020 by Judith C. P. Lin and Deborah H. C. Gin as "What do alums wish they had learned in seminary?" See also, Deborah H. C. Gin, "Mapping the Workforce of ATS Grads: Have Jobs and Needs Changed?" *Colloquy*, September 2024.

⁹A future article will describe in more detail the transition from the project to the standards redevelopment process and the grants awarded to schools through the EMP for innovation and faculty development projects.



Stephen R. Graham is strategic director of context and continuity; director of accreditation at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.