

# **The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada**

## **Educating Religious Leaders in the 21st Century: Educational Models and Practices of Theological Education**

### **Introduction**

The findings of four major ATS projects since the adoption of the 1996 standards of accreditation, along with the ubiquitous changes in religious practices and religion's role in the culture, require that theological schools in North America address seriously and comprehensively some fundamental questions:

- What education do religious leaders need?
- What current and possible educational models and practices best meet that need?
- What resources do the schools need to implement new models?
- What role should ATS assume to provide appropriate organizational support for schools to implement models that serve their constituencies more effectively, to become more nimble, and to realign their work better to reflect the changed and changing realities of communities of faith and the social location of religion in North American society?

*“Educational models and practices”* is a phrase that occurs often in this proposal, and it has a broad meaning. It includes educational program design, teaching and learning strategies, curriculum, patterns of educational delivery, location of educational efforts, educational goals, and assessment of learning that, together, comprise the comprehensive array of activities that constitute the educational effort of theological education.

To address these fundamental questions about educational models and practices, the Association proposes to engage in the most comprehensive project it has ever undertaken. The practices of theological education need major review and evaluation. The reality of changed and changing religious practices presents theological schools with questions about value and relevance that they have never had to address before. The scope of the proposed project appears to the Association as exhaustingly ambitious, but ATS is convinced that nothing less will be adequate, because the future of the schools and the Association are both at stake.

### **An overview of changes**

Thirty years ago, a significant majority of all students in ATS schools comprised white males who were pursuing one of a limited number of degrees on main seminary campuses in classes offered during a regular school week. For the most part, graduates pursued predictable forms of congregational ministry upon graduation. The patterns of theological education bore considerable continuity with those that had developed in post-World War II theological education. Most students were enrolled in mainline Protestant schools. Evangelical schools were growing and a number of Roman Catholic schools had joined the Association after Vatican II, but the center of gravity of enrollment in member schools was mainline Protestant. Changes were in the air and around the edges of this settled time, but they seemed distant. Schools were not financially flush, but most had revenue in the excess of expenses, and students had negligible amounts of educational debt. The edges have now overtaken the center, and from a relatively settled cul-de-sac in higher

education, theological schools have adjusted to, or invented, or in many cases come kicking and screaming into, a new educational world.

***Some of the changes reside in the students***

- Women
- Racial/ethnic students
- Age range of students
- Diversity of pathways to ministries
- Vocational aims of students
- Student debt
- From professional education to formational education

***Other changes reside primarily in the schools and their educational practices***

- Many new schools founded since WWII
- Extension sites (growth, and more recently retractions)
- Less residential study
- Online learning
- Diversity and number of programs
- Shift to focus from faculty teaching to student learning
- Diversity and expansion of curricular topics
- Embedded schools
- Financial stress

***The changing nature of religion in North America***

- Protestant shift in the center of numeric gravity from mainline to evangelical.
- Roman Catholic education for lay ministers
- Much less clarity about the value of and need for graduate theological education.
- Declining religious adherence and practice.

***Assessment of these changes***

Many of these changes are significant in and of themselves, but **together they constitute a massive and interconnected set of influences on ATS member schools.** They have happened over time, and like thirty years of aging in a human face, they are most evident in comparing pictures from the two times.

Theological schools are keepers of traditions, and they have a way of encountering change by taking on new forms without abandoning old ones. The result is that, amid these many changes, significant elements of theological education have remained relatively stable. While the curriculum has been revised in most schools more than once during the past thirty years, its structure, basic content, and foundational assumptions continue to be similar to what they were in the 1980s. **The new wine of diverse perspectives and approaches has been poured into the old wineskins of traditional educational models.** The PhD education that prepared faculty who are now entering their last decades of service is quite similar to the PhD education that the most recently appointed faculty have received.

The effects, however, are mounting, perhaps nowhere more significantly than in educational programs and financial stability. As the student bodies of ATS schools have been diversifying, as educational patterns have been multiplying, as the number of schools has been increasing, as schools have been experiencing fundamental changes in the organization and practices of North American Christianity, overall enrollment has been declining. **The result is that increasingly financially stressed schools are providing an even wider range of educational programs in an ever-increasing range of formats for a slowly declining number of students.**

These challenges, and others not elaborated on, call for sustained and comprehensive analysis of graduate theological education and the schools that provide it.

## **Program aims and purposes**

Led by an **Advisory Committee** of representatives from a diverse group of ATS schools, the Educational Models and Practices (EMP) project was implemented in 2015 to *explore* current and developing educational models and practices among the Association's member schools, to *assess* the effectiveness of those models and practices in educating religious leaders for the 21st century, and to *affirm* models found to be effective.

The original project design included six areas of work:

1. Mapping educational program developments in ATS member schools
2. A comparative study of other patterns of graduate professional education
3. A study of the religious workforce (graduates from ATS schools)
4. A study of learning outcomes-based curricular development (combined with area one)
5. Innovation and faculty development grants to schools
6. Redevelopment of the Standards of Accreditation

The Educational Models and Practices project sought involvement of all the member schools of the Association. In fact, more than 90 percent of the 270 member schools have been involved in the project in one way or another. A number of those that have not been involved are schools very new to the Association, joining in 2014 or 2016.

## **Program activities**

### ***Mapping survey***

An initial goal of the project was to “map” the activities of theological schools in North America. The Association collects extensive information about degree programs, extension sites, online offerings, enrollment, and finances, but little is known about a range of activities in the schools, many of them reflecting significant changes in the schools' operations over the past few years. Anecdotal information suggested that the schools were very busy, but exactly what were they doing? Apparently, many schools were developing and implementing similar patterns of work, but it seemed that they could benefit by collaborating with one another rather than each school doing its work in relative isolation.

In the fall 2015, the Association developed and implemented an extensive mapping survey to gather information about these activities. As the survey instrument was developed, it became clear that a more sophisticated and complex approach than initially imagined was needed. Deborah Gin, ATS Director of Research and Faculty Development, and Stephen Graham drafted the survey and worked with former ATS Executive Director Daniel Aleshire and consultant Barbara Wheeler to finalize it. Because of its expansion, the survey team decided to segment the survey into three parts. The mapping survey took longer to implement than originally anticipated, but the data will reflect much greater depth and breadth than would have been the case with the original plan.

Part one was a mapping survey sent to chief academic officers of all ATS schools. The Association received completed surveys from 226 (84%) of the 270 member schools. The collection of schools responding to the survey closely matches the overall profile of the membership, representing the United States and Canada, the three ecclesial families, schools of all sizes, and embedded and free-standing schools.

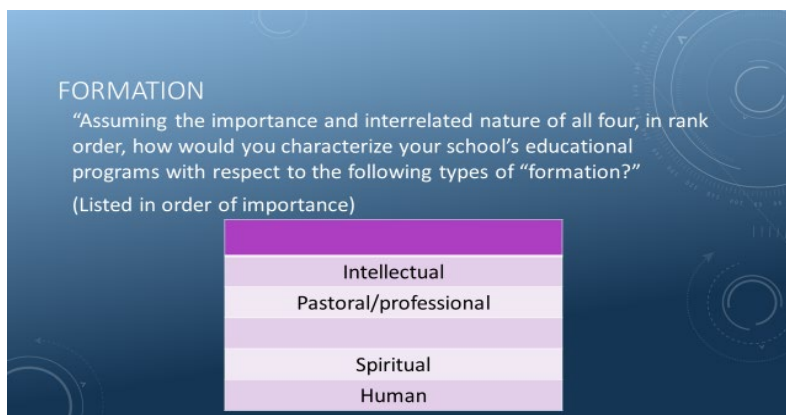
The survey of deans asked for general information about the activities of the schools in three broad areas:

- characteristics of the school,
- activities and initiatives, and
- sources and processes of innovation.

For many years, it had become apparent that the residential character of theological education was changing. Historically, the Standards of Accreditation had assumed a residential model and the quality of other models of theological education was measured in comparison to that delivered “in residence.” The deans reported that, indeed, residency has changed dramatically in many schools. Thirty-five schools (15% of those responding), reported that “most” or “all” of their students take courses online. Students’ location in relation to the school’s campus also indicates a change concerning residential study. According to the average reported by deans, twenty-seven percent of students live “on or adjacent to” campus. Forty-seven percent are “local commuters” and the remaining twenty-six percent are “long distance commuters.” Schools have already begun to adapt to this changed circumstance, including over two dozen approved petitions for schools to offer reduced or no required residency for professional master’s degrees, pointing toward the need for the Association to recognize this change in accreditation expectations its future work of leadership development.

Student Residence	Average Percentage
Live on/adjacent to campus	27%
Local commuter	47%
Non-local commuter	26%

The academic deans also provided information about their perceptions of their schools' "formational" characters. The question used the four "dimensions" of formation in the Roman Catholic Program of Priestly Formation that are characteristic of most schools, though some use different terminology. The highest rated area of formation was "intellectual" with "pastoral" close behind. Rated significantly less important were "spiritual" and "human" formation. This information is not surprising, but it does illustrate the primarily "academic" self-perception of the schools. Intellectual formation is crucial to effective religious leadership, but many schools are also realizing that the long standing emphasis on that area of formation is insufficient for the needs of their students and the communities they will serve, particularly at a time when the other areas of formation are not as effectively served as they once were by the larger ecology of institutions of which theological schools are a part.



The deans also were asked about their schools' activities and initiatives in the following areas:

1. Course delivery methods
2. Class schedule or calendar modifications
3. Educational partnerships with other organizations
4. Tuition and fee structures
5. Programs serving particular constituencies
6. Other curricular innovations.

For the 232 schools that responded to the survey there were an aggregate total of over 2,500 activities. Some schools were involved in an astonishing array of activities and, on average, each school was pursuing about a dozen different activities. Most of these efforts are good and productive, but they are mostly what Ronald Heifetz calls "technical" changes, and each requires institutional resources, including funds, administrative adaptation, and faculty time and effort. It may be that expending the resources in this way keeps schools from having the resources needed to explore the *adaptive* changes that are needed, to use Heifetz's contrasting term.

An example of activity is modification of class scheduling to meet the needs of the changing student body. Most schools have added the schedule adaptations *without* eliminating other patterns.

SCHEDULING:  
“CURRENTLY DOING . . .”

	Some	Exclusively
Evening	154	31
Intensive	154	22
Block	120	54
Weekend	96	10
Year Round	80	18



A significant area of activity among the schools is establishing partnerships with a wide range of institutions. Not surprisingly, nearly 75% had “educational” partnerships with churches and denominations. Nearly half are in partnership with colleges and universities and the chart below indicates a range of other partnerships. Of particular significance are “international” partnerships. Sixty-three schools (27% of respondents), report existing partnerships with global partners and another fifty schools (22%), are “about to implement” or “seriously considering” such partnerships, together nearly half of the schools. Given the growth of Christianity around the world, these partnerships are extremely important as opportunities for schools both to learn from and share resources with partners from around the world.

EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS


Church/denomination	172
College/university	107
Other theological school	79
Institute/center	70
International partner	63
Other religious tradition	42



Eighty-five schools (37%) responded that they had developed and implemented programs for particular constituencies, for example, racial/ethnic groups, students with distinctive vocations, or programs directed toward certain ministry emphases. Of the eighty-five nearly forty percent had developed programs for Hispanic/Latino(a) students and over twenty percent currently offer programs specifically designed to serve Asian/Asian North American and African-American/Black students.

PROGRAMS FOR PARTICULAR CONSTITUENCIES

	Of those responding "currently doing"
Hispanic/Latino(a)	38%
Asian/Asian North American	22%
African American/Black	21%
Native American/First Nations	7%
"Diversity"	12%



The survey verified the level and types of activity pursued by the schools. At the same time, many schools struggle to adapt to having fewer resources at hand.

The survey of academic deans also asked about the initiation and development of innovative activities. The survey indicated that activities were most commonly initiated by administration, but that development and implementation of the activities fell to faculty.

The second part of the mapping survey asked program directors to provide in-depth information about particular initiatives, including why the schools pursued these programs, whom they sought to serve, how effective the programs had been (or not), challenges faced, and positive outcomes. This phase of the survey was implemented late in 2015, with data received and analyzed in 2016.<sup>1</sup>

### *Purposes*

The survey asked *why* the schools are doing what they are doing to pursue particular developments of educational models and practices. Not surprisingly, schools' responses emphasized the need to increase enrollment and attend to the needs of constituencies. Across a wide range of program types, "to recruit students" and "reach a new constituency" consistently appeared as the most frequent responses. Given recent demographic and enrollment trends, it is understandable that most ATS schools desire to increase enrollments, both to fulfill their missions and to generate revenue as they pursue greater financial stability.

### *Effectiveness*

The survey asked program directors to assess the effectiveness of their programs with respect to eight possible areas of impact:

1. Improved school's financial picture
2. Lowered costs to students
3. Enrollment growth
4. Greater access for prospective students

<sup>1</sup> Overall, the sample of respondents was satisfactory in number and strongly representative of the ATS community of schools.

5. Strengthened school's reputation or increased awareness of school
6. Clarification of school's mission/identity/charism
7. Enhanced student learning (educational effectiveness)
8. Facilitated faculty's teaching

Two educational practices stood out as most effectively *enhancing student learning*: contextual education and team teaching. Respondents believed that *their schools' reputations were enhanced* and their *missions and identities were strengthened* through partnerships with institutes and international partners, through the development of integrative courses, and through continuing education programming. The program directors attributed *enrollment growth* to implementation of a range of programs including fully online degree programs, fully funded degree programs, programs for particular constituencies, and competency-based education. These programs also were effective in *providing students greater access* to theological studies.

The survey revealed no “standout” program for *improving the schools' financial picture*. Effective approaches included curriculum developments such as specialized degrees and integrative courses, fully online degree programs, fully funded degree programs, contextual education, academic calendars enabling year-round study, programs designed for particular constituencies such as chaplains and permanent deacons, and subsidies from local congregations. This finding reinforces the recognition that there is not a “silver bullet” solution to the financial challenges of theological schools. Schools have implemented a broad range of educational models and practices that attend to financial concerns, but to date no single approach has emerged that fully addresses the challenge and it is unlikely that one will emerge.

While it is important to think about understandings of “effectiveness” that strike a balance between missional values and institutional finances, in general there appears to be a heavier emphasis among the schools, at least according to program directors, on fulfilling their missions than on the financial implications of educational activities and programs. That is, effectiveness was regularly rated more highly for missional aspects of programming than for the impact of the activity or program on the school's financial situation, the effect of cost to students, or, more particularly, the impact on levels of student educational debt. Certainly schools must attend to mission, including strengthening their reputations and public perceptions, but schools must also find ways to address institutional and student financial stresses.

According to the respondents, three programs that attend to both mission and finance most effectively are competency-based education, contextual education, and curricular innovations using integrative courses. Interestingly, each of these educational forms implies closer relations between schools and communities of faith, and perhaps a blurring of disciplinary boundaries within schools, both of which are desired by participants in many of the project's peer groups.

### *Challenges*

The survey asked program directors about the challenges their schools faced as they developed and implemented programs. The survey listed nine potential challenges:

1. Insufficient financial resources to make needed changes
2. Insufficient staff/human resources to invest in this program



3. Lack of technological or physical resources
4. Lack of clear understanding of what is needed among target constituencies
5. Lack of adequate enrollment
6. Lack of adequate student preparation prior to admission
7. Lack of sufficient planning
8. Inability/unwillingness of faculty to be agile/adaptive
9. Restrictions in the Standards of Accreditation

Program directors consistently named insufficient human and financial resources (24 percent and 16 percent, respectively) as the most significant challenges faced by their programs. Another 10 percent named lack of adequate technical resources as a challenge. These are obviously related to one another and confirm the financial and resource challenges faced by schools across the Association. Twelve percent noted “lack of clear understanding of what is needed among target constituencies” as a significant challenge, and another 9 percent named “lack of enrollment.” These are particularly notable when related to the most common purposes of innovative programming, to increase enrollment and to meet the needs of students and educational partners. Activity is widespread, but objectives may not always be clear. The project’s study of the work being done by graduates (see below), provides some insights about the religious workforce, helping schools understand better their “target constituencies.”

Somewhat surprisingly, given widespread understandings and anecdote-based assumptions, in most program areas respondents did *not* regard faculty resistance to change nor the ATS Standards of Accreditation as significant impediments to their work of innovation, with both being named by fewer than 5 percent of the respondents. Because the responses came from program directors about programs already underway, they may not have viewed the Standards as much of a hindrance as those seeking to implement new programs. The only place “inability/unwillingness of faculty to be agile/adaptive” and “restrictions in the standards of accreditation,” *did* appear as a significant challenge (named by 13 percent of respondents) was when discussing course delivery, particularly in online programs.

When categorized according to ecclesial family of the school, the top challenges remain remarkably consistent. Given their more entrepreneurial character, though, evangelical Protestant schools found the Standards of Accreditation somewhat more restrictive than did either mainline Protestant or Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools. Roman Catholic/Orthodox schools were less challenged by understanding their target audiences but more challenged by a lack of sufficient technological resources. Table 1 lists challenges from most- to least-named by the three ecclesial families of ATS schools with significant differences in bold type.

**Table 1**

Evangelical	Mainline	Roman Catholic/Orthodox
Human Resources	Human Resources	Human Resources
Financial Resources	<b>Understanding Target</b>	<b>Technological Resources</b>
<b>Understanding Target</b>	Financial Resources	Financial Resources
Enrollment	Enrollment	Enrollment
Faculty Resistance	<b>Technological Resources</b>	<b>Understanding Target</b>
<b>Accrediting Standards</b>	Faculty Resistance	Faculty Resistance
<b>Technological Resources</b>	Sufficient Planning	Student Preparation
Student Preparation	Student Preparation	Sufficient Planning
Sufficient Planning	<b>Accrediting Standards</b>	<b>Accrediting Standards</b>

The survey also revealed some variation in perception of challenges according to school size. Lack of sufficient human resources was named as the top challenge for schools of all sizes, but the challenge of low enrollment increased in significance as the size of the school decreased. Conversely, smaller schools experienced less faculty resistance than schools of other sizes. The largest schools experienced greater faculty resistance and slightly less confidence about clearly understanding their target audiences. Table 2 records challenges by school size in the order in which they were listed greatest to least by the respondents from those schools.

**Table 2**

Small (Headcount <75)	Mid (76-150)	Large (151-300)	Largest (301+)
Human Resources	Human Resources	Human Resources	Human Resources
<b>Enrollment</b>	Financial Resources	Financial Resources	<b>Understanding Target</b>
Understanding Target	<b>Enrollment</b>	Understanding Target	<b>Faculty Resistance</b>
Financial Resources	Understanding Target	<b>Enrollment</b>	Financial Resources
Technological Resources	Technological Resources	Technological Resources	Technological Resources
Sufficient Planning	<b>Faculty Resistance</b>	<b>Faculty Resistance</b>	<b>Enrollment</b>
Accrediting Standards	Sufficient Planning	Student Preparation	Student Preparation
Student Preparation	Student Preparation	Sufficient Planning	Accrediting Standards
<b>Faculty Resistance</b>	Accrediting Standards	Accrediting Standards	Sufficient Planning

### ***Peer groups***

Eighteen peer groups of schools completed their work and submitted final reports in 2017. The reports were collected into a nearly 200-page publication that has been distributed to the 250 participants in the peer groups, members of the ATS Board of Directors and the Board of Commissioners, and participants at various Leadership Education events. The reports are also available on the ATS website. In addition, Tom Tanner, Director of Accreditation, and Stephen Graham, Senior Director of Programs and Services and leader of the EMP, have written summaries of key themes from the reports.

From the conversations of the peer groups, several themes emerged that informed the redevelopment process as the Standards expanded in scope to encompass a broader range of quality educational models and practices.

### **Student learning and formation**

Schools are placing greater emphasis on the broad scope of student formation and the balance between the different dimensions of learning and formation, all the while allowing each school to emphasize dimensions according to its distinctive mission.

### **Intellectual *and* vocational formation**

Schools' missions reflect different emphases while pursuing the shared mission of preparing religious leaders. Some schools emphasize vocational training, for example, while some fulfill their missions with a focus more strongly on academic formation.

### **Regular faculty *and* other educators**

It is becoming clearer that schools rely on a broadening body of educators and formators in their preparation of students for religious leadership. In addition to the more traditional "core" faculty roles of PhDs trained in particular disciplines, a range of educators including pastoral mentors, spiritual directors, vocational experts, and student services personnel, are being recruited, trained, and recognized for their contributions to the task.

### **Residential *and* distributed education**

Many schools will continue an emphasis on a residential model of theological education that has served effectively for many years. At the same time, schools with other constituencies and different missions have developed a range of distributed models. Participants agreed that the Association should continue to demand highest quality theological education regardless of modality, assess it effectively, and recognize it where it exists. The new Standards have removed priority of any particular educational model and emphasize the importance of each school demonstrating the effectiveness of its chosen models in attaining its learning outcomes.

### **Traditional markers for admission *and* assessment of prior learning**

While a baccalaureate degree has been a fundamental criterion for admission to master's degree programs, and the MDiv for admission to DMin, schools are broadening their perspectives to recognize less traditional markers of learning, abilities, and dispositions *brought* to theological study by students.

### **Traditional patterns *and* stackable credentials, modules**

Many schools continue to utilize traditional academic calendars and class scheduling—semester-long courses, sequenced and integrated to form a coherent curriculum. A number of schools, however, are experimenting with smaller educational units to meet the needs of particular groups of students. Some are exploring "stackable credentials," that is, credits that lead to certificates or degrees that can be "stacked" to advance to higher-level degrees as the student's circumstances and need allow. Such programs provide greater flexibility allowing students to build upon previous work to earn additional credentials, while recognizing the need for some students to pause study on occasion due to life circumstances, earning a credential for work already completed.

### **Time, credit hours *and* mastery, CBTE**

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>, the credit hour has been recognized as “coin of the realm.” Some schools are exploring alternative ways of recognizing “mastery,” such as direct assessment in Competency-based Theological Education, with focus on how competency is attained.

### **Accrued wisdom *and* new voices**

While building on the wisdom of experienced and consistently involved schools and persons, the Educational Models and Practices project has helped enable “new voices” to come to the table, including schools and individuals that have not regularly given input in the past.

### **Benefits for students *and* institutional sustainability**

Most of the programming developed by schools works to accommodate students. Most of it places additional strain on the resources of schools. Both are important, and schools must find the appropriate balance given their mission and resources.

### **Urgency *and* patience**

The new Standards recognize both the urgency felt by some schools to be nimble in developing programs and approaches, some of them designed to help students complete their work as quickly as possible, and the importance of taking time for student formation and assessment of readiness for service.

While not surprising, it is worthy of note that the peer group reports emphasize a number of characteristics that have been included as priorities within the redeveloped Standards, including:

- **An emphasis on educational quality**, with schools accountable to each other to maintain highest quality;
- allowing schools flexibility to provide greater **access** to students, including work to address costs and debt loads;
- a greater emphasis on **formation** of students;
- **collaborations** with a wide range of partners, global and local, including affiliations and mergers;
- a broadened understanding of **faculty and others involved in the educational work of schools**, and recognizing the importance of faculty development and formation;
- a more comprehensive understanding of **diversity**, including expectations for global awareness and cultural competence for graduates, also across institutions, including administrations, faculties, staffs, students, and boards; and
- the importance of shaping every aspect of the institution to fulfill the schools’ **missions**.

### ***Innovation and faculty development grants***

Over 100 schools received the 58 innovation grants and the 44 faculty development grants awarded through the EMP, with final reports submitted in March 2019.

### ***Innovation Grants***

The fifty-eight innovation grants addressed issues in ten broad categories: 1) global experience and partnerships, 2) innovative academic programs, 3) multi-cultural and interfaith explorations, 4) online and digital innovations, 5) contextual education, 6) formation of students and faculty, 7)

collaborations with partners beyond theological education, 8) competency-based theological education, 9) theological education and the criminal justice system, and 10) programs for Spanish-speaking constituencies.

Drawing on learning from the grant projects, more than 80 participants from grant recipient schools and members of the ATS staff gathered for a two-day Innovation Grants Forum in September 2018, to share their findings and learn from one another.

Goals for the Forum were:

1. To share learning from the innovation grant projects;
2. To gather learning for the broader Association;
3. To explore the idea and practice of innovation within theological schools; and
4. To think together about the role of ATS in supporting innovation.

Preliminary grant reports from the 58 grantee schools were distributed prior to the Forum so participants could gain a general understanding of other schools' projects and plan for desired conversations at the event. Discussions were structured between schools with similar projects and between personnel exercising similar roles across institutions. Report backs from those conversations gave distinctive insights into both learning from the projects and the processes utilized within particular schools. The Forum also utilized a series of "mini workshops," 30-minute sessions for brief presentation and conversation about particular projects. Having four sessions of the mini workshops allowed participants both to present their work and also to attend discussions of a number of other projects. Throughout the Forum, selected participants gave 10-minute presentations on "Lessons I Have Learned: Innovation in a Theological School," sharing particular insights that had emerged from their work.

Many of the projects, of course, bridged a number of the categories. For example, Barry University Department of Theology and Philosophy explored the use of various digital media with Spanish-speaking lay leaders in Cuba, facilitated by graduate theological students from Barry, within the Cuban context. Saint Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology utilized digital portfolios, in collaboration with field education supervisors, to promote and assess student formation. New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary has hosted a program of theological studies at Angola Prison since 1995 and used their innovation grant to expand their partnership with the institution to offer stackable credentials for inmates, including a bachelor's degree, leadership certificates, and a Master of Arts degree. Explorations are underway possibly to develop online programming and a Master of Divinity degree, perhaps utilizing aspects of competency-based theological education, and tailored to the distinctive needs of the prison culture. Wartburg Theological Seminary worked to integrate all their Master of Divinity students into a single, integrated teaching and learning community, across a range of delivery methods and student locations, and, in so doing, discovered the essential foundation of relationships with educational collaborators; mentors, field educators, congregations, and synods.

It is abundantly clear that these schools, and scores of others, are hard at work to address current and future needs of theological education with creativity, dedication, wisdom, and a strong desire to offer high quality and effective programming.

A few themes emerged across a number of the projects.

### **Technologies**

Most theological schools are finding ways to utilize emerging technologies in support of their educational missions. At the same time, a number of projects emphasized that while technologies can provide remarkable assistance and reach, they must always be regarded as tools to serve and never allowed to dominate educational purpose.

### **Diversities**

The number and scope of diversities between and within the schools are remarkable, and each school must identify and carefully attend to them, adapting their programming and structures in ways appropriate to serve constituencies within the school's mission.

### **Student context**

Many projects were intended to help schools connect with students "where they are," in terms of geographic location, language and culture, and formational needs, and to utilize educational resources from within the context.

### **Student formation**

The broad theme of the formation of students emerged again and again through the EMP project and within the innovation grants. Some asked whether and how their programs may be *malforming* students by institutional expectations, patterns, and practices. Others sought to be more attentive and just by recognizing what students *bring* to their theological studies through their experience, knowledge, and insight, rather than simply focusing on what students *need* from the school.

### **Faculty**

The evolving roles and work of faculty consistently appeared in reports and conversations, both within the "faculty development" grants and in the grants awarded in the "innovation" category. Many noted the central role of faculty within institutions, all the while recognizing that role as changing in fundamental ways. It may be that the burdens of adapting to the broad changes appearing in the world, North American societies, the church, and in higher education fall most heavily on faculty, requiring dramatic change in their work, roles, and identities.

### **Institutions**

Some projects and discussions reflected on the changing nature of institutions and their work. Rather than being the primary *source* of knowledge, some are adapting to new work of being an "exchange point" helping students discern and adapt to new realities. Many schools are finding the need to be more flexible, nimble, and, as one project put it, needing faculty to "build muscles," enabling them to be more tolerant of a level of "chaos" in the educational process, especially as related to working with educational and contextual partners. Some recognized that it is hard to know where innovation will take their institutions, where it will end, and how much there is to be learned through failures. Finally, it became clear through the conversations how important it has become for schools to develop inter-cultural competencies across their institutions, including faculty, staff, administration, board, and students.

While each school learned important lessons through their grant projects, and that learning is being shared with the broader ATS community, it is significant to note how many grant reports spoke about the grant's impact toward institutional cultural change and the intention to continue and/or build upon activities enabled by the grant.

### **Relationships**

The enterprise of theological education has been and continues to be fundamentally about relationships, even in the midst of dramatic changes and new modalities. Building and maintaining relationships, both within the school and with outside partners, remains critical for effective formation of religious leaders. Participants noted the importance of moving beyond “us vs. them” thinking: faculty vs. administration, academy vs. church, school vs. denomination, theological schools vs. those in other disciplines, and opposition and conflicts between different groups of students, faculty, or constituents. One school noted that in its project to create digital networks for learning, even in highest levels of use of technologies, “it’s about people,” not platforms or products.

### **Humility**

A number of those reporting on their projects noted the need for humility, especially in terms of learning *from* as well as learning *for* constituents. Those whose projects sought deeper engagement with denominational, congregational, and global partners, and constituencies from cultures different from the school’s dominant culture, noted the necessity of becoming the “junior partner” in collaborations, seeking less to offer their existing programming and goals, and more to finding ways to adapt in order to serve. Some noted the importance of faculty learning alongside students and relinquishing some control over the educational enterprise.

### **Patience**

Similarly, working with educational partners normally required patience from the personnel in the theological school. As one put it, “our schedule is not necessarily their schedule,” often requiring adaptation to different rhythms of calendar and urgency. Many realized that their projects would take longer than anticipated due to many factors, including changes in personnel.

It was very impressive to see and hear the energetic interactions of participants in the Forum. Schools are engaging challenges and opportunities and finding wisdom and insight among their peers, both those doing similar work and those who are much different.

### **Faculty Development Grants**

The project hosted its final event, a Faculty Development Forum, in April 2019. Goals of the meeting were to:

1. share ideas about the faculty development grant projects and gather learning for the broader Association,
2. plan for sustaining programs of faculty development within schools,
3. explore the implications of Standards redevelopment for faculty, and
4. think together about the role of ATS in supporting faculty development.

Sixty-five participants gathered to share learning from the grant projects, including representatives from forty of the forty-four recipient schools, plus seventeen mid-career faculty who stayed from their conference earlier in the week to attend the Faculty Development Forum. The Forum included twenty-four “mini workshops” to present and discuss grant projects. Participants also gathered for conversations in groups, formed according to roles participants played in their schools, to discuss the work of sustaining faculty development, the process of redevelopment of the Standards of Accreditation, and possible avenues for ATS to support faculty development in the future.

The Faculty Development Grants fall into seven distinctive categories: 1) teaching and learning, 2) competency-based theological education, 3) engagement with church and contexts, 4) cultural awareness, 5) curriculum development, 6) formation of students and faculty, and 7) online teaching and learning.

From the final Faculty Development Grant reports and the Forum conversations, a number of trends and insights within four broad categories are emerging.

#### *Faculty role*

1. While sometimes faculty buy-in is a challenge, a number of schools found that faculty are willing to engage substantive and important issues if they are presented with clarity and valid rationale. Focus is essential, because faculty have limited time and competing priorities.
2. Not every skill for ministry can or should be learned from faculty with terminal degrees.

#### *Faculty work*

1. ATS faculty are often called upon to adapt their work practices in ways for which their formal training and past curriculum practices have not prepared them, including more diverse students (in almost every way), new pedagogies, educational models, scheduling, administrative work, student formation, teaching more part-time and “in ministry” students, interdisciplinary pressures, and a range of collaborations.
2. Rapid changes in teaching and learning have made it difficult to ascertain what good teaching is, and how to assess and support faculty in developing their teaching.
3. Participants urged colleagues to use the diversity present in the classroom. “Having such a diversity of students and traditions in the room together creates a new hermeneutic that builds a new community.”
4. Reports on formation projects noted that faculty themselves must be appropriately formed if they are to facilitate and mentor student formation.

#### *Faculty development*

1. Setting aside faculty time is perhaps the biggest obstacle to implementing faculty development activities.
2. Conversations and learning in one area of focus often brought benefits to other areas. Work in pedagogy for online teaching and learning, for example, frequently led to improvements in face-to-face teaching. In some cases, programming developed for students in hybrid courses and programs, was discovered to be desired by and effective with more traditional students.



3. A number of projects reported that getting away from campus for two- or three-day retreats was particularly effective for focus and community building.
4. It is important to develop a *culture* of ongoing faculty development.
5. Schools must find ways to meet the challenge of faculty development for adjunct faculty.
6. The ATS Standards should reflect the growing need for faculty development and the diversifying of faculty roles and work.
7. Faculty development activities often led to discovering the gifts and skills of colleagues, both faculty and staff.
8. There can be great value in including voices of those outside theological education who are deeply invested in similar goals.

*Faculty as individuals and a community*

1. Faculty development must address emotional and affective issues as well as faculty work and role. Faculty often experience a significant reality of loss in the midst of changes, and a few of the project reports noted that faculty are lonely within the “solitary calling” of academia.
2. The magnitude of change in the past decade has impacted the vocational identity of the faculty. In the midst of fragmenting disciplines and divisions in society, many reports noted the importance of faculty having time to get to know one another and capture a vision for their common vocation. One school put it this way. “Building/solidifying our own community is foundational to building it in online courses.”
3. There is a great deal to be learned *within* institutions between peers. On the other hand, many schools found great benefit through employing consultants to address a range of issues, both those from within the theological education community and those from outside, e.g., higher education, business, etc.
4. Although theological education is its own unique form of education, there are many things to be learned from professional education in other fields.
5. Some schools noted the benefit of renewed connection with congregational and denominational constituents through their grant projects.

Analysis of the final reports submitted by faculty development grant recipients concludes that nearly 600 faculty members, roughly 18 percent of all full-time faculty members across the Association, were directly involved at one level or another in the 44 faculty development projects.

***Study of the religious workforce (graduates from ATS schools)***

In December 2016, the Association launched its study of the religious workforce. The study included a survey of two graduating classes from a representative sample of 42 ATS schools. Personnel from the schools distributed surveys to graduates of the classes of 2011 and 2015. Utilizing as its foundation the ATS Alumni/ae Questionnaire, which already includes a number of questions relevant to the educational models and practices project, the survey added questions about the work the graduates are currently doing, the academic and ecclesial credentials required for employment, competencies required for their position, the “fit” between their theological education and their employment, data about compensation, additional information about opportunities for employment within the organization, and questions related to financing their theological education.

The survey asked participants for their current job title. Categorizing those responses revealed that about a quarter serve as “pastor” (including titles such as “priest,” “lead pastor,” “senior pastor,” etc.), 14 percent “other ministry staff,” and 8 percent “associate pastor.” Roughly half of the graduates of those two classes, therefore, are clearly serving in congregational settings. Another 8 percent were categorized as “pastoral care and counseling,” and nearly 10 percent “teacher.” Strikingly, nearly one in five of the job titles fit within the general category of “administration.” Of those, 42 percent are administrators of one kind or another in educational institutions, 21 percent are administrators in “faith-related” organizations, and 11 percent serve in each of “community service” and “denominational” administration.

The sense shared by many schools and graduates that administrative work is an important aspect of religious leadership and a needed part of the training provided by theological schools is confirmed by these findings.

Participants were also asked to name the academic and ecclesial credentials required by their employers. Fifty-seven percent responded that their employment required a master’s degree, with just over one-fourth of the respondents reporting that their employment required the Master of Divinity degree. Somewhat surprisingly, over one-third of the respondents reported that their employment did not require a master’s degree (15 percent, “no degree required,” 20 percent, “bachelor’s degree” required). These data need additional analysis, but it is important for schools to understand better the roles being filled by a significant number of graduates that do not require the credential they are providing. Work is underway to analyze the range of responses to the requirement of ecclesial credentials.

Additional analysis of survey responses reveal that, of the “skills/knowledge/dispositions” required to do the current work of the respondents,

- the broad category of “administrative work” encompasses the most common group of skills;
- respondents also commonly draw on spiritual disciplines, both as personal practices and the virtues nurtured by them; and
- they regularly utilize group “relational skills,” including active listening, communication skills, interpersonal competency, conflict resolution, intercultural competency, intrapersonal competency, the ability to have difficult conversations, and the ability to negotiate organizational politics.

Preaching, theology, and Bible appear on the list of “skills/knowledge/dispositions,” as might be expected, but it is striking how often the graduates reported leaning on competencies that are less frequently imagined as central to graduate theological education.

- For more analysis of the survey, see: Deborah H. C. Gin, “[Mapping the workforce: what competencies do ATS alums need?](#)” *Colloquy Online*, September 2018.

### ***Graduate Professional Educators Study Group***

A significant question posed in the ATS project on Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education was what theological educators could learn from the experiences of other disciplines of graduate professional education. What might conversations with a range of graduate

professional educators reveal about educational models and practices that could be of benefit to leaders of theological schools?

ATS gathered an extraordinary group of experienced and reflective educators from the disciplines of medical humanities, social work, business, medicine, law, graduate humanities, and education, for two separate day-and-a-half long conversations. Each participant prepared written reflections for advance reading and spoke about the challenges and opportunities emerging within their disciplines, changes among students and faculty, developments in business models, understandings of professional identity, signature pedagogies, and experiences of accreditation. Engaging the educators from these disciplines were members of the Educational Models and Practices advisory committee, and staff from Lilly Endowment and ATS. Participants were eager to engage one another, found the conversations mutually beneficial, and explored possibilities for continuing the conversation.

The goal of the first meeting was *descriptive*, intended to develop a clear picture of the challenges and opportunities graduate programs are facing across the disciplines. The second meeting focused on strategies and the future of the disciplines. In preparation for the second meeting, the group read selections from the Carnegie Foundation's "Educating for the Professions" studies, published between 2005 and 2010.

Members of the Graduate Professional Educators Study Group presented their current challenges, such as student debt, often coupled with low starting salaries, lifestyle expectations, vocational choices, and post-graduation pathways. They also addressed questions of professional identity and the formal and informal influences within schools. What is the "hidden" curriculum? What behaviors are modeled by faculty? Do our professions still have a sense of higher calling? What codes of ethics are upheld? How are graduate schools involved in formation, identity, and vocation?

Through the conversations, certain overarching themes emerged.

### **Common challenges**

Graduate professional educators across the disciplines face many common challenges, including enrollment declines, student debt, institutional financial demands, alternative paths to credentials, shaping professional identity, and the need for personal formation of students.

### **Signature pedagogies**

While core courses are often taught in classroom lectures, onsite experience is gaining an increasingly important role in shaping graduate students as professionals. Clinicals, bedside rounds, legal residencies, adult learning strategies, field education, and experiential learning are crucial signature pedagogies in graduate professional education.

### **Professional identity**

Graduate professional programs seek to form the professional identities of their students, not only in skill, but also in character, utilizing modeling, reflective writing, peer feedback, and learning environments that play an increasingly important role. An ongoing conversation addresses the distinctive understandings of "formation" in theological schools and the differences between those

understandings and the formation of professional identity in other professions. The value society places on professional expertise has diminished with the democratization of knowledge, yet what graduate schools offer society goes beyond simple knowledge or information. Students come to graduate schools not only to learn, but also to live. Students are attracted to schools by relationships. Students expect to make lifelong friends and professional colleagues. Even though many schools are moving into online education, formation of students remains crucial.

### **Faculty**

Adjuncts, often practitioners in the field, play a crucial role in educating students in the professions. Like many theological schools, the universities in which professional schools are normally hosted often privilege research, yet applied learning is essential to graduate professional education. In some schools there is a clear hierarchy with faculty research most strongly affirmed. Yet applied learning is essential to graduate professional education. The clinical, experiential role has risen in importance in many professional curricula, and schools need clearer professional pathways for their clinical faculty. All schools wrestle with the implications of the democratization of knowledge and its impact on faculty (and graduate) expertise.

### **Accreditation**

Accreditation provides data and narratives that administrators and faculty can use as vehicles for institutional change. Accreditation should be flexible enough, however, to allow graduate schools to innovate and respond to changing student needs and emerging markets, so that schools can experiment, within reason, as long as the product is still excellent. Most of the educators spoke of the arduous task of accreditation with many accountable to multiple accrediting agencies.

### **The common good**

The professions are interested in the public good in ways that transcend the separate disciplines. The professions are united by interest in the greater good for all people. Society has changed, for example, with the democratization of knowledge. Given the scope of change, what role do the professions continue to play in society, in holding the social fabric together? Educators in the professions benefit from collaborative conversations about the meaning and purposes of their work and that of their graduates. Educators have a civic responsibility together to build the common good, and there are benefits to cross-disciplinary conversations about formation in the professions.

### **Adapting to change**

Revenue is driving changes in enrollment and tuition. Title II funds (for teacher training), international enrollment, and out-of-state enrollment are all part of the funding model for many graduate programs. Among the 18 peer groups in the ATS Educational Models and Practices project, a dominant theme was partnerships, which can bring new ways to fulfill a school's mission. In the U.S., higher education is at risk of receding, while globally, there is remarkable expansion of demand for higher education. Schools are navigating the need to add elements to the curriculum and the necessity to streamline the educational process. For-profit educational entities are innovating, and their voices are important to hear. Other educators can learn from them.

### **Recommendations for theological education**

Theological degree programs would benefit from early field education that integrates theory and practice from the outset. Theological education is well-positioned to be a thought leader about the

public good, provisionally and aspirationally, partnering with the professions to consider how the professions can work toward the public good.

### **Reflections on future steps**

How might the professions convene, and contribute to, conversations about the common good in public discourse? Could ATS gather a diverse group of people as part of discourse on the common good, bringing people together in a community to discuss values we all share, regardless of differences. An ecumenical organization, like ATS, which regularly convenes diverse voices to pursue shared goals, may have the capacity to bring people together in conversations that address the common good.

- For a brief summary, see: Stephen Graham and Shannon Mary Sims, “[Seeking the Common Good: What We Can Learn from Other Professional Disciplines](#),” *Colloquy Online*, February 2019.
- Shannon Mary Sims served as recorder and author of full reports for the [April 2018](#) and [October 2018](#) meetings.

### ***Redevelopment of the Accrediting Standards and Procedures***

One of the six goals of the Educational Models and Practices (EMP) project was to inform the proposed process to redevelop the accrediting standards and procedures. That process, approved by the Commission on Accrediting membership at the Biennial Meeting in 2018, moved forward during the following two years. It has been regularly noted by those leading the redevelopment process that the work simply could not have gone forward, especially with the aggressive time frame set for the redevelopment, without the four years of work done in the EMP. The previous comprehensive redevelopment took four years, 1992–1996, and it is safe to say that the work of redevelopment was significantly more complex this time, given the greater diversity of schools, personnel, and programs, as well as the larger number of members of the Association and the Commission. The “head start” facilitated by the extensive conversations, studies, and analysis, brought by the EMP was simply crucial to the process of redevelopment. Throughout the EMP, the goal of possibly redeveloping the Standards and Procedures was consistently named across the Association, and it was consistently affirmed by project participants as an important goal. Participants in the EMP project did their work with an eye toward implications for the redevelopment process and reports from the work included reflections on those implications.

The work of peer groups, for example, is cited in six explanatory annotations in the draft Standards. Related to Standard 3, the notes cite EMP participants’ desires related to academic rigor, cultural competency, global engagement, peer groups studying student learning and formation, the desire for neutrality toward educational modalities, and degree programs that connect bachelor’s and master’s degrees. Related to Standard 5, the peer groups expressed clear desires related to admission to the DMin degree and elimination of the 15% limit on those admitted without a bachelor’s degree. All of these recommendations have been included in the drafted Standards and Procedures.

In sum, the goal of the EMP project contributing to the process to redevelop the accrediting Standards and Procedures has been fully met, and the [new Standards](#) were approved by the ATS Biennial Meeting in 2020 by a vote (virtual!) of 198-1.

## Conclusion

The Educational Models and Practices project has affirmed the need and desire within the membership to engage a process of redevelopment of the accrediting standards and procedures and has contributed significant findings and insight to that project. In order to ensure continuity between the EMP and the process of redevelopment, EMP project director Stephen Graham has served on the redevelopment task force. Findings from the EMP have been shared with members of the task force through various means, as well as with members of the Board of Commissioners and the general membership.

The changes encountered by theological schools in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have required extensive adaptation by schools in their educational approaches. The challenges faced by schools are numerous and profound. At the same time, the situation also presents opportunities for schools to re-evaluate their missions, their approaches to theological education, and the constituencies they can serve.

The Association expresses its profound gratitude to the Lilly Endowment for its faithful and generous support of its present and future work.

The ATS website has pages dedicated to the project and has regularly featured information about it. Many [articles about the project](#) have been published in the ATS digital newsletter *Colloquy Online*.

The *ATS 2018 Annual Report: Legacy and Innovation: ATS 1918-2018*, highlighted the project, especially noting activities at the Centennial Biennial Meeting in June. The report pictured the eight students who gave their testimonies about how their schools' different educational models had provided them with the opportunity to fulfill their educational and ministerial goals, and featured the Innovation Expo that showcased the learning of 50 member schools.